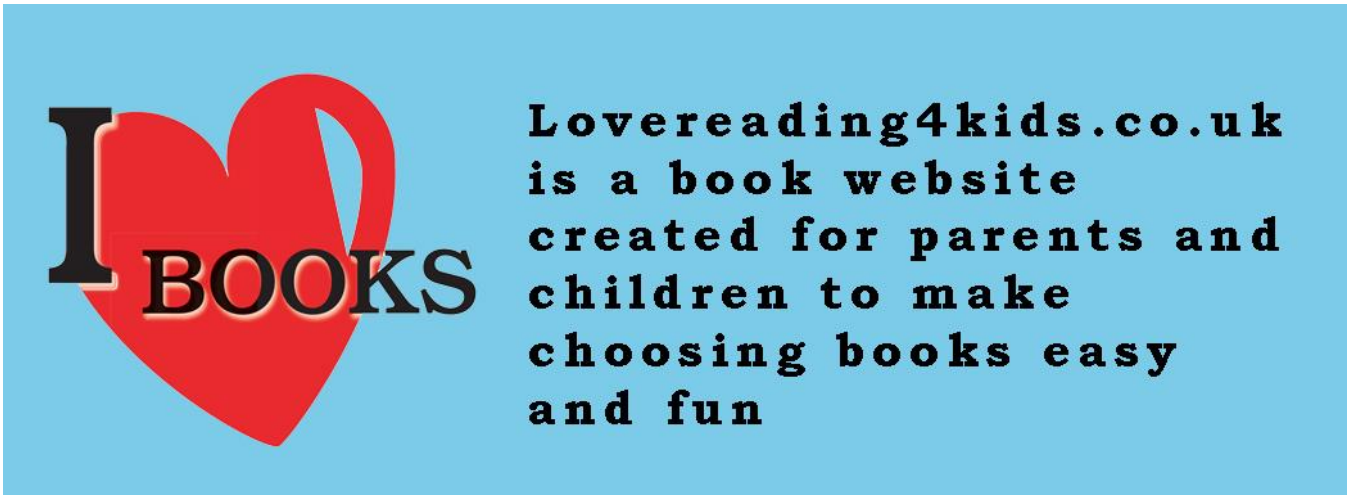


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Heartless

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CHAPTER 1

THREE LUSCIOUS LEMON TARTS glistened up at Catherine. She reached her towel-wrapped hands into the oven, ignoring the heat that enveloped her arms and pressed against her cheeks, and lifted the tray from the hearth. The tarts' sunshine filling quivered, as if glad to be freed from the stone chamber.

Cath held the tray with the same reverence one might reserve for the King's crown. She refused to take her eyes from the tarts as she padded across the kitchen floor until the tray's edge landed on the baker's table with a satisfying thump. The tarts trembled for a moment more before falling still, flawless and gleaming.

Setting the towels aside, she picked through the curled, sugared lemon peels laid out on parchment and arranged them like rose blossoms on the tarts, settling each strip into the still-warm centre. The aromas of sweet citrus and buttery, flaky crust curled beneath her nose.

She stepped back to admire her work.

The tarts had taken her all morning. Five hours of weighing the butter and sugar and flour, of mixing and kneading and rolling the dough, of whisking and simmering and straining the egg yolks and lemon juice until they were thick and creamy and the colour of buttercups. She had glazed the crust and crimped the edges like a lace doily. She had boiled and candied the delicate strips of lemon peel and ground sugar crystals into a fine powder for garnish. Her fingers itched to dust the tart edges now, but she refrained. They

had to cool first, or else the sugar would melt into unattractive puddles on the surface.

These tarts encompassed everything she had learned from the tattered recipe books on the kitchen shelf. There was not a hurried moment nor a careless touch nor a lesser ingredient in those fluted pans. She had been meticulous at every step. She had baked her very heart into them.

Her inspection lingered, her eyes scanning every inch, every roll of the crust, every shining surface.

Finally, she allowed herself a smile.

Before her sat three perfect lemon tarts, and everyone in Hearts – from the dodo birds to the King himself – would have to recognize that she was the best baker in the kingdom. Even her own mother would be forced to admit that it was so.

Her anxiety released, she bounced on her toes and squealed into her clasped hands.

'You are my crowning joy,' she proclaimed, spreading her arms wide over the tarts, as if bestowing a knighthood upon them. 'Now I bid you to go into the world with your lemony scrumptiousness and bring forth smiles from every mouth you grace with your presence.'

'Speaking to the food again, Lady Catherine?'

'Ah-ah, not just any food, Cheshire.' She lifted a finger without glancing back. 'Might I introduce to you the most wondrous lemon tarts ever to be baked within the great Kingdom of Hearts!'

A striped tail curled around her right shoulder. A furry, whiskered head appeared on her left. Cheshire purred thoughtfully, the sound vibrating down her spine. 'Astounding,' he said, in that tone he had that always left Cath unsure whether he was mocking her. 'But where's the fish?'

Cath kissed the sugar crystals from her fingers and shook her head. 'No fish.'

'No fish? Whatever is the point?'

'The point is *perfection.*' Her stomach tingled every time she thought of it.

Cheshire vanished from her shoulders and reappeared on the baking table, one clawed paw hovering over the tarts. Cath jumped forward to shoo him back. 'Don't you dare! They're for the King's party, you goose.'

Cheshire's whiskers twitched. 'The King? Again?'

Stool legs screeched against the floor as Cath dragged a seat closer to the table and perched on top of it. 'I thought I'd save one for him and the others can be served at the feasting table. It makes His Majesty so happy, you know, when I bake him things. And a happy king—'

'Makes for a happy kingdom.' Cheshire yawned without bothering to cover his mouth and, grimacing, Cath held her hands in between him and the tarts to protect from any distasteful tuna breath.

'A happy king also makes for a most excellent testimonial. Imagine if he were to declare me the official tart baker of the kingdom! People will line up for miles to taste them.'

'They smell tart.'

'They *are* tarts.' Cath turned one of the fluted pans so the blossom of the lemon-peel rose was aligned with the others. She was always mindful of how her treats were displayed. Mary Ann said her pastries were even more beautiful than those made by the royal pastry chefs.

And after tonight, her desserts would not only be known as more beautiful, they would be known as superior in every way. Such praise was exactly what she and Mary Ann needed to launch their bakery. After so many years of planning, she could feel the dream morphing into a reality.

'Are lemons in season this time of year?' asked Cheshire,

watching Cath as she swept up the leftover lemon peels and tied them in cheesecloth. The gardeners could use them to keep pests away.

'Not exactly,' she said, smiling to herself. Her thoughts stole back to that morning. Pale light filtering through her lace curtains. Waking up to the smell of citrus in the air.

Part of her wanted to keep the memory tucked like a secret against her chest, but Cheshire would find out soon enough. A tree sprouting up in one's bedroom overnight was a difficult secret to keep. Cath was surprised the rumours hadn't yet spread, given Cheshire's knack for gossip-gathering. Perhaps he'd been too busy snoozing all morning. Or, more likely, having his belly rubbed by the maids.

'They're from a dream,' she confessed, carrying the tarts to the pie-safe where they could finish cooling.

Cheshire sat back on his haunches. 'A dream?' His mouth split open into a wide, toothy grin. 'Do tell.'

'And have half the kingdom knowing about it by nightfall? Absolutely not. I had a dream and then I woke up and there was a lemon tree growing in my bedroom. That is all you need to know.'

She slammed the pie-safe shut with finality, as much to silence herself as to prevent further questions. The truth was, the dream had been clinging to her skin from the moment she'd woken up, haunting and tantalizing her. She wanted to talk about it, almost as much as she wanted to keep it locked up and all to herself.

It had been a hazy, beautiful dream, and in it there had been a hazy, beautiful boy. He was dressed all in black and standing in an orchard of lemon trees, and she had the distinct sensation that he had something that belonged to her. She didn't know what it was, only that she wanted it back, but every time she took a step towards him he receded further and further away.

A shiver slipped down the back of her dress. She could still feel the curiosity that tugged at her chest, the need to chase after him.

But mostly it was his eyes that haunted her. Yellow and shining, sweet and tart. His eyes had been bright like lemons ready to fall from a tree.

She shook away the wispy memories and turned back to Cheshire. 'By the time I woke up, a branch from the tree had already pulled one of the bedposts full off. Of course, Mama made the gardeners take it down before it did any more damage, but I was able to sneak away some lemons first.'

'I wondered what the hullabaloo was about this morning.' Cheshire's tail flicked against the butcher block. 'Are you sure the lemons are safe for consumption? If they sprouted from a dream, they could be, you know, *that* kind of food.'

Cath's attention drifted back to the closed pie-safe, the tarts hidden behind its wire mesh. 'You're worried that the King might become shorter if he eats one?'

Cheshire snorted. 'On the contrary, I'm worried that I will turn into a house should *I* eat one. I've been minding my figure, you know.'

Giggling, Cath leaned over the table and scratched him beneath his chin. 'You're perfect no matter your size, Cheshire. But the lemons are safe – I bit one before I started baking.' Her cheeks puckered at the sour memory.

Cheshire had started to purr, already ignoring her. Cath cupped her chin with her free hand while Cheshire flopped deliriously on to one side and her strokes moved down to his belly. 'Besides, if you ever did eat some bad food, I could still find a use for you. I've always wanted a cat-drawn carriage.'

Cheshire opened one eye, his pupil slitted and unamused.

'I would dangle balls of yarn and fish bones out in front to keep you moving.'

He stopped purring long enough to say, 'You are not as cute as you think you are, Lady Pinkerton.'

Cath tapped Cheshire once on the nose and pulled away. 'You

could do your disappearing trick and then everyone would think, *My, my, look at the glorious bulbous head pulling that carriage down the street!*'

Cheshire was fully glaring at her now. 'I am a proud feline, not a beast of labour.'

He disappeared with a huff.

'Don't be cross. I'm only teasing.' Catherine untied her apron and draped it on a hook on the wall, revealing a perfect apron-shaped silhouette on her dress, outlined in flour and bits of dried dough.

'By-the-bye.' His voice drifted back to her. 'Your mother is looking for you.'

'What for? I've been down here all morning.'

'Yes, and now you're going to be late. Unless you're going as a lemon tart yourself, you'd better get on with it.'

'Late?' Catherine glanced at the cuckoo clock on the wall. It was still early afternoon, plenty of time to—

Her pulse skipped as she heard a faint wheezing coming from inside the clock. 'Oh! Cuckoo, did you doze off again?' She smacked her palm against the clock's side and the door sprang open, revealing a tiny red bird, fast asleep. 'Cuckoo!'

The bird startled awake with a mad flap of his wings. 'Oh my, oh heavens,' he squawked, rubbing his eyes with the tips of his wings. 'What time is it?'

'Whatever are you asking me for, you doltish bird?' With a harried groan, Catherine ran from the kitchen, crashing into Mary Ann on the stairwell.

'Cath – Lady Catherine! I was coming to . . . the Marchioness is—'

'I know, I know, the ball. I lost track of time.'

Mary Ann gave her a fast head-to-toe glance and grabbed her wrist. 'Best get you cleaned up before she sees you and calls for both of our heads.'



CHAPTER 2

MARY ANN CHECKED that the Marchioness wasn't around the corner before ushering Cath into the bedroom and shutting the door.

The other maid, Abigail, was there already, dressed identical to Mary Ann in a demure black dress and white apron, attempting to swat a rocking-horsefly out of the open window with a broom. Every time she missed, it would nicker and whip its mane to either side, before flying back up towards the ceiling. 'These pests will be the death of me!' Abigail growled to Mary Ann, swiping the sweat from her brow. Then, realizing that Catherine was there too, she dropped into a lopsided curtsy.

Catherine stiffened. 'Abigail—!'

Her warning was too late. A pair of tiny rockers clomped over the back of Abigail's bonnet before the horse darted back up towards the ceiling.

'Why, you obnoxious little pony!' Abigail screeched, swinging her broom.

Cringing, Mary Ann dragged Catherine into the dressing room and shut the door. Water had already been drawn in a pitcher on the washing stand. 'There isn't time for a bath, but let's not tell your mother that,' she said, fiddling with the back of Catherine's muslin dress while Cath dipped a washcloth into the pitcher. She furiously scrubbed the flour from her face. How had she managed to get it behind her ears?

'I thought you were going into town today,' she said, letting Mary Ann peel off her dress and chemise.

'I did, but it was fabulously dull. All anyone wanted to talk about was the ball, as if the King doesn't have a party every other day.' Taking the washcloth, Mary Ann scrubbed Catherine's arms until her flesh was pink, then spritzed her with rose water to cover up the lingering aroma of pastry dough and oven fires. 'There was a lot of talk about a new court joker who will be making his debut tonight. Jack was bragging about how he's going to steal his hat and smash the bells as a sort of initiation.'

'That seems very childish.'

'I agree. Jack is such a knave.' Mary Ann helped Catherine into a new chemise, before pushing her down on to a stool and running a brush through her dark hair. 'I did hear one bit of interesting news though. The cobbler is retiring and will be leaving his storefront empty by the end of this month.' With a twist, a dish full of pins, and a touch of beeswax, a lovely chignon rested at the nape of Catherine's neck, and her face was haloed by a cluster of jovial curls.

'The cobbler? On Main Street?'

'The very one.' Mary Ann spun Cath around, her voice dropping to a whisper. 'When I heard it, I immediately thought what a fine location it would be. For us.'

Cath's eyes widened. 'Sweet hearts, you're right. Right next to that toy shop—'

'And just down the hill from that quaint white chapel. Think of all the wedding cakes you'd be making.'

'Oh! We could do a series of different-flavoured crumbles for our grand opening, in honour of the shoemaker. We'll start with the classics – blueberry crumble, peach crumble – but then, imagine the possibilities. A lavender-nectarine crumble one day, and the next, a banana-butterscotch crumble, topped with biscuit crumble and—'

'Stop it!' Mary Ann laughed. 'I haven't had supper yet.'

'We should go look at it, don't you think? Before word gets out?'

'I thought so too. Maybe tomorrow. But your mother . . .'

'I'll tell her we're going shopping for new ribbons. She won't mind.' Cath swayed on the balls of her feet. 'By the time she finds out about the bakery, we'll be able to show her what a tremendous business opportunity it is and even she won't be able to deny it.'

Mary Ann's smile turned tight. 'I don't think it's the business opportunity she's bound to disapprove of.'

Cath flitted away her concern, although she knew Mary Ann was right. Her mother would never approve of her only daughter, the heir to Rock Turtle Cove, going into the men's world of business, especially with a humble servant like Mary Ann as her partner. Besides, baking was a job fit for servants, her mother would say. And she would loathe the idea that Cath planned on using her own marriage dowry in order to open the business herself.

But she and Mary Ann had been dreaming of it for so long, she sometimes forgot that it wasn't yet reality. Her pastries and desserts were already becoming renowned throughout the kingdom, and the King himself was her grandest fan, which might have been the only reason her mother tolerated her hobby at all.

'Her approval won't matter,' Cath said, trying to convince herself as much as Mary Ann. The idea of her mother being angry over this decision, or worse, disowning her, made her stomach curdle. But it wouldn't come to that. She hoped.

She lifted her chin. 'We're going forward with or without my parents' approval. We are going to have the best bakery in all of Hearts. Why, even the White Queen will travel here when she hears word of our decadent chocolate tortes and blissfully crumbly currant scones.'

Mary Ann bunched her lips to one side, doubtful.

'That reminds me,' Cath continued. 'I have three tarts cooling

in the pie-safe right now. Could you bring them tonight? Oh, but they still need a dusting of icing sugar. I left some on the table. Just a teeny, tiny bit.' She pinched her fingers in example.

'Of course I can bring them. What kind of tarts?'

'Lemon.'

A teasing smile crept up Mary Ann's face. 'From your tree?'

'You heard about it?'

'I saw Mr Gardiner planting it under your window this morning and had to ask where it came from. All that hacking they had to do to get it unwound from your bedposts, and yet it seemed no worse for wear.'

Catherine wrung her hands, not sure why talking about her dream tree made her self-conscious. 'Well, yes, that's where I got my lemons, and I'm certain these tarts are my best yet. By tomorrow morning, all of Hearts will be talking about them and longing to know when they can buy our desserts for themselves.'

'Don't be silly, Cath.' Mary Ann pulled a corset over Cath's head. 'They've been asking that since you made those ginger biscuits last year.'

Cath wrinkled her nose. 'Don't remind me. I overcooked them, remember? Too crisp on the edges.'

'You're too harsh a critic.'

'I want to be the best.'

Mary Ann settled her hands on Cath's shoulders. 'You are the best. And I've calculated the numbers again – with the expected costs attached to Mr Caterpillar's shop, monthly expenses, and the cost of ingredients, all measured against our planned daily output and pricing. Adjusted to allow some room for error, I still think we would be profitable in under a year.'

Cath clapped her hands over her ears. 'You take all the fun out of it with your numbers and mathematics. You know how they make my head spin.'

Mary Ann sniffed and turned away, opening the wardrobe. 'You have no trouble converting tablespoons into cups. It's not all that different.'

'It *is* different, which is why I need you on this venture. My brilliant, oh-so-logical business partner.'

She could almost feel Mary Ann's eyes roll. 'I'd like to get that in writing, Lady Catherine. Now, I seem to recall we had chosen the white gown for tonight?'

'Whichever you think.' Stifling the fantasy of their future bakery, Cath set to clipping a set of pearls to her earlobes.

'So?' Mary Ann asked as she pulled a pair of drawers and a petticoat from the wardrobe, then urged Cath to turn around so she could adjust the corset laces. 'Was it a good dream?'

Cath was surprised to find that she still had pastry dough beneath her fingernails. Picking at it gave her a good excuse to keep her head lowered, hiding the blush that crept up her throat. 'Nothing too special,' she said, thinking of lemon-yellow eyes.

She gasped as the corset tightened unexpectedly, squeezing her rib cage. 'I can tell when you're lying,' said Mary Ann.

'Oh, fine. Yes, it was a good dream. But they're all magical, aren't they?'

'I wouldn't know. I've never had one. Though Abigail told me that once she dreamed about a big glowing crescent shape hovering in the sky . . . and the next morning Cheshire showed up, all grinning teeth hovering in the air and begging for a saucer of milk. Years later and we still can't seem to get rid of him.'

Cath grunted. 'I'm fond of Cheshire, yet I can't help but hope that my dream might portend something a bit more magical than that.'

'Even if it doesn't, at least you got some good lemons out of it.'

'True. I shall be satisfied.' Though she wasn't. Not nearly.

'Catherine!' The door swung open and the Marchioness floated

in, her eyes saucer-wide and her face purple-red despite having been recently powdered. Catherine's mother lived her life in a state of constant bewilderment. 'There you are, my dear darling! What are you – not even dressed yet?'

'Oh, Mama, Mary Ann was just helping me—'

'Abigail, stop playing with that broom and get in here! We need your help! Mary Ann, what is she wearing?'

'My lady, we thought the white gown that she—'

'Absolutely not! Red! You will wear the red dress.' Her mother swung open the wardrobe doors and pulled out a full gown overflowing with heavy red velvet, an enormous bustle, and a neckline that was sure to leave little unexposed. 'Yes, perfect.'

'Oh, Mama. Not that dress. It's too small!'

Her mother picked a waxy green leaf off the bed and draped the dress across the covers. 'No, no, no, not too small for my precious little sweetling. This is going to be a very special night, Catherine, and it's imperative that you look your best.'

Cath traded a glance with Mary Ann, who shrugged.

'But it's just another ball. Why don't I—'

'Tut-tut, child.' Her mother scurried across the room and framed Cath's face in both hands. Though her mother was bony as a bird, there was no sense of delicacy as she pinched and squeezed Cath's face. 'You are in for such a delight this evening, my pretty girl.' Her eyes glimmered in a way that made Catherine suspicious, before she barked, '*Now turn around!*'

Catherine jumped and spun to face the window.

Her mother, who had become the Marchioness when she married, had that effect on everyone. She was often a warm, loving woman, and Cath's father, the Marquis, doted on her incessantly, but Cath was all too familiar with her mood swings. All cooing and delighted one moment and screaming at the top of her lungs the next. Despite her tiny stature, she had a booming voice and a par-

ticular glare that could make even a lion's heart shrivel beneath it.

Cath thought by now she would have been used to her mother's temperament, but the frequent changes still took her by surprise.

'Mary Ann, tighten her corset.'

'But, my lady, I just—'

'Tighter, Mary Ann. This dress won't fit without a twenty-two-inch waist, although just once I'd like to see you down to twenty. You have your father's unfortunate bones, you know, and we must be vigilant if we're to keep from having his figure too. Abigail, be a dear and bring me the ruby set from my jewellery cabinet.'

'The ruby set?' Catherine whined as Mary Ann undid the corset laces. 'But those earrings are so heavy.'

'Don't be such a jellyfish. It's only for one night. Tighter!'

Catherine pinched her face together as Mary Ann tugged on the corset strings. She exhaled as much air as she could and gripped the side of the vanity, willing away the sparkles dancing before her eyes.

'Mother, I can't breathe.'

'Well then, next time, I hope you'll think twice before taking a second helping of dessert like you did last night. You can't eat like a piglet and dress like a lady. It will be a miracle if this dress fits.'

'We could – wear – the white one?'

Her mother crossed her arms. 'My daughter will be wearing red tonight like a true . . . never you mind that. You'll just have to go without dinner.'

Cath groaned as Mary Ann cinched the corset one more time. Having to suffer through the bindings was bad enough, but going without dinner too? The food was what she looked forward to most during the King's parties, and all she'd eaten that day was a single boiled egg – she'd been too caught up with her baking to think about eating more.

Her stomach growled in its confinement.

'Are you all right?' Mary Ann whispered.

She bobbed her head, not wanting to waste any precious air to speak.

'Dress!'

Before Catherine could catch her breath, she found herself being squashed and wrangled into the red velvet monstrosity. When the maids had finished and Catherine dared to peek into the mirror, she was relieved that, while she may have felt like an encased sausage, she didn't look like one. The bold colour brought out the red in her lips and made her fair skin appear fairer and her dark hair darker. When Abigail settled the enormous necklace on to her collarbone and replaced her pearls with dangling rubies, Catherine felt, momentarily, like a true lady of the court, all glamour and mystery.

'Marvellous!' The Marchioness clasped Catherine's hand in both of hers, that peculiar, misty-eyed look returning. 'I'm so proud of you.'

Catherine frowned. 'You are?'

'Oh, don't start fishing now.' Her mother clucked her tongue, patting the back of Cath's hand once before dropping it.

Catherine eyed her reflection again. The mystique was quickly fading, leaving her feeling exposed. She would have preferred a nice, roomy day dress, covered in flour or not. 'Mama, I'll be overdressed. No one else will be so done up.'

Her mother sniffed. 'Precisely. You look exceptional!' She wiped away a tear. 'I could scatter to pieces.'

Despite all her discomfort, all her reservations, Cath couldn't deny a hot spark behind her sternum. Her mother's voice was a constant nag in her head, telling her to put down the fork, to stand up straight, to smile, *but not that much!* She knew her mother wanted the best for her, but it was oh so lovely to hear compliments for once.

With one last dreamy sigh, the Marchioness mentioned checking on Cath's father before she fluttered out of the room, dragging Abigail along with her. As the door to her chambers closed, Cath yearned to fall on to her bed with the exhaustion that came from being in her mother's presence, but she was sure she would rip an important seam if she did.

'Do I look as ridiculous as I feel?'

Mary Ann shook her head. 'You look ravishing.'

'Is it absurd to look ravishing at this silly ball? Everyone will think I'm being presumptuous.'

Mary Ann pressed her lips in apology. 'It is a bit of butter upon bacon.'

'Oh, please, I'm hungry enough as it is.' Cath twisted inside the corset, trying to pry up some of the boning that dug into her ribs, but it wouldn't budge. 'I need a chocolate.'

'I'm sorry, Cath, but I don't think that dress could fit a single bite. Come along. I'll help you into your shoes.'