

## A Bittersweet Kiss

Hannah Richardson (2022)

Mara Willows tossed her favourite flower journal onto the bed. ‘Ugh. It doesn’t even look nice,’ she said with a groan. She looked at the bouquet in front of her. She only had a few hours left to finish making Lilly’s gift before they would meet in the village. As Mara adjusted a rose, there was a sharp knock on the door.

‘Come in, Derek,’ Mara said, as the rattling of his armour disturbed her quiet.

‘Good afternoon, your majesty,’ Derek said with a mock dramatic bow. ‘It seems the king requires you in the library.’

Mara let out a chuckle. ‘Please stop that,’ she said, before following Derek to the other side of the castle.

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‘Three days?’ Mara asked, gazing at the bookshelves and wooden tables. She hadn’t been in the castle library since winter. ‘How am I supposed to find that out in three days?’

‘My men are falling ill at an alarming rate, and we must find out why.’ The king was relaxed, sitting at a table. ‘And as king, it is my duty to pass that job onto someone else, like you.’

Mara sighed, accepting her fate. She supposed that, as the king’s daughter, tasks like this were expected of her. She reached for a book on the shelf that looked interesting, noticing a small flower drawn on the spine. She stepped back, remembering her plans with Lilly.

‘Oh drat!’ Mara said, racing towards the door of the library.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’ the king asked, standing up.

Mara didn’t respond; in her mind, she was already with her sweet Lilly in the village.

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Mara sat on the grass next to Lilly Austen, who crossed her legs in a shy manner. Mara smiled, admiring her girlfriend’s appearance.

‘Why were you late?’ Lilly asked, eating a biscuit.

‘Just lost track of time,’ Mara replied. She didn’t want to make the conversation about work, but Lilly had already heard the village banter.

‘Did you hear about the whole people getting sick thing?’

‘Yeah,’ Mara responded, stiffening.

*I should figure something out soon, she thought.*

‘I bet they were poisoned,’ Lily said, leaning towards Mara. ‘Lots of quacks and witches around here, eh? Maybe one of them is doing it.’

Mara grimaced. *Poisoned. That could be true.* ‘I guess after two years of dating my smarts have rubbed off on you,’ Mara said, chuckling.

‘Oh, shut up,’ Lilly said, kissing her.

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As the midday warmth was setting in, Mara walked to the castle gardens, which was her favourite spot in the whole kingdom. She had many fond memories of this place, including sneaking in Lilly and sharing her passion of flowers with her girlfriend.

She sat on the steps, giving her a good view of the stone pathways, flowing along a small maze of hedges and the many plants, trees, and rose bushes in the garden. Mara felt less stressed about the problem in the village. Until she turned to see Derek, beside her on the steps.

‘Do you have any suspects to interrogate for your mission?’ her best friend asked.

‘How did you know about that?’ Mara asked. She’d thought it was just the king and her in the library.

‘I’m the head guard, remember? I know everything that goes on here.’

‘Of course. No, I don’t, though I believe the townsfolk are being poisoned.’ Mara stood up. ‘I don’t know what I should do to find out more.’

‘I do.’ Derek helped Mara up, and soon enough, they were in the village.

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For half the day, Mara and Derek interviewed the sick residents. Each said that their mouth tasted bitter, and something about a herb. Mara walked beside Derek, glancing at the bakery sign as they walked in. Her hunch was correct. Now they only needed a culprit.

‘Hello, your highness,’ Mr Austen bowed. ‘Lilly is at the bookstore,’ he said, assuming she was searching for her.

‘Don’t worry, Mr Austen,’ Mara replied. ‘We’re here for lunch.’

Mara and Derek took their food outside and sat down.

‘Maybe people are being poisoned by this bakery,’ Derek said, taking a bite from his sandwich, ‘I mean, this is the only bakery in town.’

Mara was shocked. ‘That’s not possible. Mr Austen is nice.’

‘But it could be one of the workers, maybe someone who helps out,’ Derek said, standing up to leave. ‘You never know.’

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Mara grabbed a stone from the riverbed and showed Lilly. She tossed it onto the river's edge, adding to their collection.

'My dad told me you were at the bakery earlier today,' Lilly said, fishing in the river for more interesting rocks.

'Yeah,' Mara replied. She shouldn't assume the worst, but she was suspicious of Lilly. *She collects all kinds of plants and herbs. What if she'd made the poison?*

As they searched the river, Mara glanced at Lilly's bag, sitting on the river's edge. The curiosity was killing her. Lilly said that she'd seen a cool rock downstream and walked away.

Mara walked to the river's edge and reached into Lilly's bag to see its contents. She looked in horror as she pulled out a small bottle of strangely coloured herbs. Her breath quickened, heart thudding, as she placed the bottle in her own bag.

*This is the poison. Lilly is the culprit.*

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The joyful nature and warmth of the picnic spot couldn't cheer up Mara, as she waited for Lilly on the last day of her mission. Despair filled her, knowing this was her last date with her girlfriend.

They talked about the weather, their current reads, the pretty flowers they'd seen, and everything that made them smile. Mara's heart ached, but she knew her decision was right. She took the bottle from her bag and put the poison in her mouth, not swallowing.

'What're you doing?' Lilly asked.

Mara leaned in and kissed Lilly. Her eyes prickled with tears, as Lilly broke from the kiss, and spat out the poison, as did Mara.

'This is the poison the village has been talking about,' She looked terrified. 'Why would you—' she started, turning away with a sob.

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Mara cried on the steps near the garden, ignoring the freezing cold. She'd never felt more alone and hated herself for not trusting Lilly.

From behind, she heard the rattling of armour and quiet footsteps. Though it was dark, she knew who it was. Mara hugged Derek, still crying as she told him about Lilly. Her cries were interrupted by laughter. She looked at Derek and saw a grin on his face.

'You really are stupid, aren't you?' he said, still laughing 'You'll believe anything I say, no matter how dumb.'

'What do you mean?' Mara asked, backing away.

‘All I had to do was frame Lilly to distract you from the real culprit,’ he said, walking towards Mara.

‘Why?’ she asked, walking further into the garden. ‘I thought you served the king.’

‘I hate the king. My family lives in poverty because of him just because I have two dads. I want him dead. You, however, can have a girlfriend because you’re royalty. I poisoned people as a distraction, so I could kill your idiot father.’

As Mara backed deeper into the garden, she tripped on a flower bed and fell on her back.

‘But I guess I’ll have to settle for his daughter instead,’ Derek said, pinning Mara down and opening a bottle of the poison.

Mara tried to escape Derek, as he poured the poison into her mouth. As she struggled not to swallow the poison, Derek yelped in pain, then Lilly was in front of her.

‘Lilly!’ Mara spat out the poison ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I came to ruin your flowers as revenge,’ she confessed. ‘Then I saw you two and knew something was up.’

Mara smiled, but it faded once she saw Derek running away. Wait!’ she yelled, but he’d already disappeared.

Lilly and Mara ran to the king to tell him what Mara had discovered.