



CHARMING
AND THE
*Cherry
Blossom*

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Enchanted

“This is me praying that this was the very first page
Not where the story line ends.”

Performed & Written by Taylor Swift

Once upon a time, there was a princess who glowed from the inside out, like a lantern glowing in the night sky. The soft white halo surrounding her struck fear in the hearts of her parents, the courtiers, and the servants. It was whispered about in the hallways upon her birth, and the murmurs carried like a flame burning a forest. The rumors spread from the stone walls of the castle, into the village, and out into the nearby fields before reaching the ears of the priests. Both the religious leaders and the people of the kingdom were afraid of the shimmering light. Afraid of the baby. For her own safety, the king and queen arranged for a giantess to take the princess to the faraway mountains until either the radiant glow faded or they called for her.





Elle

STANDING IN THE MIDDLE of the cherry blossoms felt like dancing in pure joy, as if my heart and my soul couldn't take in even one more inch of happiness.

The early morning sunlight was shimmering through the cherry trees and spreading its rays through the branches. It sparkled off the soft pink-and-white petals as if bouncing off of rose crystal. The strong breeze wafting in from the Potomac River caused the buds to drift down in waves of pastel colors where they were joined with ones swirling upward from the ground.

I closed my eyes and spun with the smile on my face growing. I gathered the blossoms on my hands and clothes much like catching the first tentative snowflakes of winter, the airy drops melting into your skin. The velvety petals didn't melt away. They lingered on my skin, sticking to me, silky and smooth, and embracing me in their heady floral scent.

I inhaled deeply before exhaling and grounding myself to the energy of the life that was teeming around me, both seen and unseen. I let the power of the earth fill me, the force below the surface recharging me like a phone on its charger. I was overwhelmed with gratitude for the moment.

A soft snicker of laughter tugged my eyes open.

Two blonde heads were bent close together, and their

gaze darted away from me.

I knew them.

Or I should say I knew their names and the nature of their scorn for me. I knew they sat near the front of our oceanography class. I knew they were a floor down from me in the dorms. But I didn't really know them, because I didn't know many people at Bonnin University beyond the professors.

Even though their disdain and the solitude over the last few months could have dragged me down, I wouldn't let it. I shoved aside their negativity, allowing only my pure connection I felt with the world around me to remain, knowing what I put out into the universe would come back to me, eventually. I shut my eyes again, coating my fingers with the petals and then twining them through the deep-brown strands of my two low ponytails.

I let the sunshine and the wind center me once more before I opened my chestnut eyes back to the scene in front of me. Beyond the twirl of falling flowers, students plodded along. Pace fast. Heads down. Coffee cups in hand as they scurried to their first class of the day. Bags heavy on their shoulders. The weight of expectations pressing them down.

I was grateful I didn't have that burden to bear.

Mina only wished for me to follow whatever path my feet set me on. The smile on my face was genuine, and my heart was full as I picked up my small bag. It had a notebook, my phone, a sea of colorful pens, and my ID. The entire thing weighed less than two pounds compared to the heavy backpack the guy storming past me was hauling with him. He kicked more of the petals in the air as he went, not even seeing them as they landed on his shoes and his pants, journeying with him. Hopefully, they would bring luck to his day.

I was certain they would bring it to mine.

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my canvas jacket to take away the chill working into them. The drawstring at the hem dangled and swayed, and my lips curved upward even farther at the sight of a pink petal stuck on the knot.

I shuffled my feet, hoping to bring more of the blossoms with me as I headed to the metal-and-glass building. Once known for its liberal arts programs, Bonnin had entered the twenty-first century determined to stretch its might into the sciences, to change our world with more than philosophy. These days, students came from all over the globe to enroll in the university's technological and environmental programs.

The original brick-and-ivy buildings now stood shoulder to shoulder with the modern marvels built beside them. Old and new blending together. I loved how Bonnin was merging the two. No matter what degree you were getting, you were required to take classes in other fields. The administration wanted students who were balanced and whole, not siloed into one way of thinking.

It was why Mina had loved teaching here. She strived for balance in our lives as well. As a child, I'd loved sitting in on her classes, listening to the students debate not only with each other but with my mother. The discussions were always fact-based and calm, just like Mina herself. The classes I attended these days didn't always embrace the Socratic teaching style Mina had favored, and it made me miss her with an ache that almost threw out the entire joy of the morning.

Instead of letting the negative emotion overtake me, I pulled out my phone.

ME: The air is full of cherry blossoms.

The response came back almost immediately.

MINA: The sun just lit up the kitchen.

ME: I miss you today.

MINA: I miss you always. Are you on your way to oceanography?

ME: Yes.

MINA: And are you still having dinner with Albert on Sunday?

ME: Yes.

Albert was the Dean of the Archaeology Department. He'd taken my mother's spot when she'd stepped down and moved us to Pisac in Peru where she could dig her hands in the earth again. We'd lived in Peru for four years before I'd left her behind to come back to Virginia. For the eight months I'd been at Bonnin, Albert had invited me to have dinner every Sunday with him, his husband, and their five toy Doberman pinschers. It felt both strange and comforting to join them in the house that had once been my childhood home before Mom had sold it to them.

As I entered the science building, a guy walking backward crashed into me, and my phone went skidding across the hallway. It smacked into the baseboard with a loud crack that caused my first real grimace of the morning.

When he turned with eyes wide and apologetic, my frown completely disappeared, and awe took over. He was perfect. As if he could have jumped to life from the pages of a book. His face was square, but his chin jutted downward ever so slightly, as if accenting the lines with a dramatic statement—an exclamation mark at the end of a short

sentence. The brown of his irises was as dark as mine, but a black circle surrounded his, making them look like a reverse eclipse. His face was smooth and tan compared to my fair skin, and the mass of wild curls dancing away from his face was brown lit with fiery tones. The tantalizing loose spirals were neither short nor long, landing somewhere in between.

He was so beautiful it seized my chest. Another glorious image filling my day like the tornado of cherry blossoms.

While I stood there, frozen, he moved into action, striding across the hall.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, retrieving my phone and bringing it back, thick eyebrows burrowing.

When he handed it to me, our skin touched, and a well of emotions bubbled from him to me along with the flash of an image too quick for me to retain. Both were enough for me to sense that he carried a different kind of weight on his shoulders than our fellow students. While there was an aura of cheerfulness surrounding him, there was also a shadow lingering at the back. It wasn’t large enough to invade the sense of peace emanating from him or to keep the smile from his face, though.

“I think it’s broken,” he said. The depth of his baritone added to the intense awareness of him that was filling me. The entire tenor was a soothing balm. “I wasn’t watching where I was going. Can I fix it for you?”

My smile returned, causing my cheeks to push up into my eyes. “You have a spare screen in your possession?”

His eyes widened, and then he chuckled. “No. I meant can I maybe give you some money to help replace it? I have no idea how to fix it. Technology and I barely function on a daily basis as it is. There’s no way I could take your phone apart safely.”

When he spoke, there was a focus on each word as if

every one of them meant something. No drawl or slur. The syllables clear and concise.

I had a hard time drawing my eyes from his face down to my phone and our fingers that were no longer touching but still mere millimeters apart. I could touch him if I wanted. The sudden desire to do so was a much bigger surprise than the cracked glass. It hit me in the chest, causing my heart to beat wildly.

I pulled the phone completely away from him, eyeing the break on the screen. It ran down the middle, from top to bottom, an almost mirror image of the nearby Potomac River winding from Washington D.C. to almost Quantico. In the middle of the line—as if it was marking the location of Bonnin along the river—sat my last response to Mom’s question.

As I was eyeing it, my alarm buzzed, singing out the lyrics of “*Africa Landó*” in the hallway that was getting quieter and quieter. Doors were shutting. Students were disappearing into seats.

I was a minute away from officially being late to class. I hit the side button to turn it off, and when I looked back up at my phone destroyer/rescuer, he was smiling. It lifted his full lips, causing a partial dimple to appear and crinkling the corners of his eyes in the very best way.

“Is that Novalima?” he asked incredulously.

I smiled back, equally amazed he’d identified the band no one in the U.S. seemed to know. “I can’t believe you recognized them.”

“My parents are from Brazil,” he said. “My mom listened to a lot of Brazilian and Latin rock bands while I was growing up. To be fair, she listened to a lot of rock bands period, but Novalima was one of her favorites.”

My heart pattered fiercely again, feeling seen by someone

my own age for the first time in months.

“You have...” He stuck out a hand and pulled several of the cherry blossoms from one of my ponytails. “Were you lying on the ground or something?”

There was no scorn in his voice. No judgment. Only a sparkle of something in his eye that might be interest.

I looked at the pink and white blooms covering his long fingers.

“It was for luck,” I said before I could stop myself. I tried harder these days to hold back the things that other students considered odd. Things that would only make the whispers seem true.

The laugh that burst from him was joyful instead of mocking as he said, “I don’t think that worked out the way it was supposed to.”

He was looking at my broken phone.

My eyes met his again, and the scent of the cherry trees seemed heavier.

“Maybe it did,” I breathed out. Because I’d had this moment with him. Felt connected to someone instead of just the earth and the trees and the sky.

His smile wavered as my meaning hit him.

He was the first one to break our stare, glancing both ways down the now empty hallway. “I have to go. My boss is going to kill me if I’m late again, but...” He pulled something from the stack of papers in his hand and gave it to me. “If you show up here with the cost of the repair, I’ll pay for it.”

I looked down at the flyer. It was for a free yoga session in the quad on Sunday. Attending it would mean skipping or postponing dinner with Albert and Drake. Attending it would mean surrounding myself with people in a way I

rarely did these days unless I was in class or grabbing food in the cafeteria.

He walked backward toward the door, moving away from me, and I realized I didn't even know his name.

"You're going to show, right?" he asked with that contagious smile he'd sent in my direction several times in our brief encounter.

"You're going to crash into someone again," I called after him as he almost ran into a door that was opening.

He saw it out of the corner of his eye and barely sidestepped it.

"Tell me you're going to come," he said. There was a lure to his voice, calling me.

"Maybe," I said.

He shook his head as if he was sad, but his lips were turned up.

"Make it *my* lucky day," he said.

Squish, squish, squish went my heart. When was the last time anyone had thought it was lucky for me to show up? When was the last time someone wanted me to be with them? Someone who was not Mina or her group of friends, that is. I couldn't remember.

"Geez, watch where you're going!" a girl walking into the building said as my phone destroyer/rescuer ran into her at the entrance. He put his hand to his heart and looked from me to her and back to me again.

"Sorry, was getting the life knocked out of me."

I shook my head, but my lips couldn't stop their upward curl.

I thought he knew the truth even though he left without waiting for me to give him an answer. I couldn't imagine not finding my way to the quad come Sunday.



Elle

I CLOSED THE PSYCHOLOGY book and stretched, my gaze going out the window to the sky changing colors. Storm clouds were blowing onto the horizon, puffy with gray undertones that the sun turned pink and peach and purple.

I reached for my favorite pens, the Velvetina brand I'd come to adore, and started layering the colors on a blank piece of three-hole-punched paper. No shape. No form. Just a kaleidoscope of ink. Another round of joy in my day. More colors.

I tugged on my ponytail and drew out a petal that remained. There weren't many left after traipsing around campus, taking notes, going to the lab, and hitting up the Berry Treat café for a sandwich before coming back to the dorms.

I opened my desk drawer and pulled off a piece of tape from the dispenser. I centered the cherry blossom on the wave of colors and taped it down. The clear plastic made the petal shine even more. At the bottom of the page, I wrote in swirling petal-shaped letters, "My Lucky Blossom Day." I opened a three-ring binder I kept on my desk and added it to the stack already there.

The page before it had the bright greens of new grass with a blurry image of a butterfly dangling over it. That day

was the first one I'd felt the seeds of new beginnings rushing over the earth, sending the winter silence away. It was also the day I'd gotten my first A on my oceanography test.

As the rings on the binder clanged shut, there came a knock on my door, the two sounds bouncing off of each other in a way that startled me.

I waited, thinking whoever it was would realize they had the wrong door. No one came to my room by choice, and I didn't have a roommate. She'd moved out the third week of school and hadn't been replaced.

The knock repeated.

I got up, looked through the peephole, and saw a man in a suit. I didn't know who he was. I didn't know how he'd even gotten past security to enter the dorms, but he was out of place because of his age as much as his apparel. He certainly didn't fit with the college kids scattered along the hallway.

"Yes?" I called through the door.

"Ellery Dioli?" he asked.

"Yes," I repeated.

"My name is Jack Jackson. I'm the lawyer for your father's estate. I need to speak with you."

All of those words seemed to mash together in my brain, not making sense.

There was his name, which seemed like a nursery rhyme, and the words "your father," which were never spoken to me. But also the words "estate" as if he'd passed away and left something for me. For the daughter he'd never—to my knowledge—even met.

The only males in my life were the laughing crew who followed Mina around, sitting her in the middle like she was a queen. The way she should be adored. Some had been

boyfriends. Some were colleagues. Some were friends who were almost family, like Albert and Drake.

My silence must have gotten to him, because he spoke again. "I'm sliding my card under the door."

I looked down, and indeed, a card slid under the space, hitting my bare foot. The cardboard poked into the curve of my big toe, letting me know I wasn't dreaming. That this was real.

I bent, picked it up, and then stood back up to read it to myself: "Jack Jackson, LL.M., Soleil Entertainment."

When I still hadn't respond after several more seconds, he spoke through the door again. "I know you don't know me, but your father was a patron of the university, and the administration can vouch for me. Can we meet downstairs? Or in the Dean's office, if that makes you more comfortable?"

I desperately wanted my phone. I wanted to be able to send a text to Mina and ask her if my father knew this man. If my father was a patron of Bonnin U. If my father had been alive but was now dead. Instead, my phone was downtown at a tech repair shop. The owner had promised I could pick it up first thing in the morning.

I'd thought I could easily live one night without it.

A cherry blossom tumbled from my hair onto the card.

So many signs that I wasn't sure which one to read first.

Life. Death. Luck. Love. Change.

It was the change that settled over me the strongest.

"Miss Dioli, it's very important we talk."

"How did you even know where to find me?" I asked.

"Your father has always known where you were."

Pressure squeezed my chest, knotting it in a way I tried to keep out of my life. It was always better to let anxiety and

heartache escape rather than harbor them deep within your veins.

How could my father have *always* known where I was without me ever knowing him?

"I didn't think we should talk over the phone. I thought it might be too much of a shock," he said quietly on the other side.

He understood, then—this man named Jack Jackson—that I'd never known my father.

"I'll go down to the lobby. Maybe you can call your mother, and get confirmation, and then meet me there?"

I couldn't call her, but he didn't need to know that.

"She knows you?" I asked, surprised.

"She probably remembers me, but just tell her Danon sent me to find you."

"Like the yogurt?" I couldn't help the quirk that hit my lips.

He chuckled. "With one less 'n', but similar."

Then, I heard his footsteps as they walked away.

If I had a friend in the dorms, I could borrow their phone to send Mom a message. If I had an old-fashioned landline in my room, like Albert and Drake did in their house, I could even call her. I debated heading out the side door of the dorms and walking the five miles to Albert's house just to see if he could confirm what this man was telling me. But I didn't think Jack Jackson would wait the hours it would take for me to do that.

Instead, I hung the lanyard with my keycard around my neck, slid my feet into my fuzzy otter slippers with thick soles, and left my room. The door shut behind me with a loud click.

I decided against the elevator. The hum of the machinery

would only weave into my veins when I needed them clear. The stairs allowed me to listen to my heartbeat pounding through my veins. They allowed me to hear the bass of dance music reverberating along the cement walls and the echo of laughter.

When I got to the door on the ground floor, I looked through the glass for a second and saw Jack Jackson was perched on one of the armchairs in the middle of the lobby. His hair was mostly white with a few streaks of what must once have been brown. It was thick, no sign of early balding, and he wore it longer than most men his age.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and exhaled it before reaching for the handle.

I was shaking.

Such an odd reaction.

As if fear was trying to crawl up my back. Apprehension. Worry. Things I normally released so they wouldn't clog my soul.

My slippers allowed me to approach silently.

"Jack Jackson," I said quietly.

He jerked his eyes up from the ground. They were a blue that seemed faded, as if maybe life had taken something from them along the way.

As his gaze drifted over me, I didn't react. The judgment would come, or not, regardless of whatever I said or did. My jeans were torn at the knees, like other students, but I'd embroidered images along almost every curve. Animals and flowers. I needed to add a cherry blossom soon. The tunic shirt I wore was sheer and full of floral vines in vibrant colors over a long-sleeved T-shirt dyed in shades of purple.

I was too much pattern. Too much color. But I loved every inch of it.

“Miss Dioli,” he said, eyes wide. “You look like your mother.”

It was the last thing I expected to hear, and my smile was real when it hit my lips. “Yes and no, but thank you.”

My mother was stunning. Tan skin, dark-brown hair, dark-brown eyes, elegant brows, and full, perfectly shaped lips. When I was little, her hair had been as long as mine, but these days, she wore it near her chin. It was almost always pushed back behind her ear on one side while the other was a mass of waves that veered out from her face.

Even though I was only half Italian, it still showed in my lips, and chin, and hair. I loved the connection to my mom and her people. It felt like a string tethering me back to the beginning of the universe. The things about me that were different from her—my much lighter skin and slimmer frame—I was sure had come from my father’s DNA, and I didn’t know how to feel about those because I knew nothing of him or his family.

Jack Jackson motioned to the seat opposite him, and I sat, tucking one leg underneath me so the otter face of my slipper was smiling against my thigh. Jack Jackson’s eyes lingered on the slipper.

“I take it you didn’t know Danon Germain was your father?” he asked.

My yogurt comment had already given the fact away, but I shook my head.

“Do you know the name at all?”

“No,” I told him honestly.

He looked up at the ceiling, and I followed his eyes there. A stray gold balloon was caught in the rafters. I wondered what it had seen during the day. Laughter. Arguing. Tears. What scene lingered in its memory the most? Mine had been filled with cherry blossoms and twinkling brown eyes.

When my gaze returned to his, he was looking at me again. He sighed. "Danon was the sole owner and CEO of Soleil Entertainment before he sold it off to Image Fist Studios a few months ago."

"Okay?" I said because I wasn't sure what any of it meant.

"You've never heard of Soleil, either?"

I shook my head.

"It's distributed some of the biggest motion pictures of the last thirty years. Everyone who's anyone wanted Soleil behind the scenes of their production."

"If it was such a success, why did he sell it off?"

"He knew he was dying and didn't want it to be a burden to you."

The words were not said harshly even though they could have been interpreted that way. Death. Loss. Like the cherry blossoms that would be gone in a blink of an eye. Was I supposed to feel sorrow for a man I hadn't known? Grief over death was so temporary anyway. The dead became part of the world around us, so it was hard to mourn them for long. Maybe I had the luxury of feeling this way because I'd not experienced any great loss personally. I'd only seen what was left behind.

"What did he die of?" I asked.

"Lung cancer. He should have given up the damn cigars long ago."

A smell hit me, musky and deep with a hint of char, like applewood in the fireplace. It was accompanied by a memory of a face covered in whiskers, salt-and-pepper colored. An image from somewhere I hadn't known existed in my brain. His face was right next to mine, with a serious smile that didn't quite hit his gray eyes. His look was one of tenderness, regret, encouragement, and failure all rolled

together as a rough finger glided down my cheek.

Had I known him?

That threw my body into more turmoil than the knowledge that he'd died.

Jack Jackson had tears in his eyes. He closed them, swallowed hard, and cleared his throat. He'd loved Danon Germain.

"Your father has left you as the sole heir to his estate—as long as certain conditions are met," he told me.

I just stared, trying to absorb the words.

"I'm not sure I understand what that means," I told him the truth.

"It means... It means you've suddenly become the owner of a large estate, multiple vehicles, a charitable foundation, and financial accounts adding up to something close to the half-a-billion-dollar mark."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. I looked around the space, finally catching on. Someone was pranking me. But who? Mina loved when I laughed, but she was in Peru, and my father was a topic she avoided like the plague. Albert and Drake were teddy bears who wouldn't have a clue on how to pull something of this magnitude off. There was no one here at Bonnin. Not a friend. Barely professors.

I'd spent my high school years online with people who were kind but not exactly going to seek me out to do something like this. My Peruvian friend Miguel, who was also the son of my mother's foreman at the dig site, would have enjoyed every second of a prank like this, but he was obviously not here to do it.

The laughter from my phone destroyer/rescuer this morning echoed through my brain. If I'd had a friend like him here in Cherry Bay, maybe I would have someone whom I could suspect of pranking me. As it was, I couldn't

imagine a soul.

My laughter caused Jack Jackson to squirm, nervous energy filling the space between us.

“I know this must come as a shock,” he said, all seriousness again.

Cherry blossoms had twirled around me this morning. I’d thought they’d bring me luck and had forgotten how much they could bring change. I’d wrapped them around my hair and skin, and instead of just bringing simple pleasures to my day, they’d moved me into an entirely different chapter.

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