



# HEARTLESS

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The Lunar Chronicles

A decorative white thorny vine graphic with several leaves and a single rose bud, framing the central text on a dark background.

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*For Mom*

*I pictured to myself the Queen of Hearts  
as a sort of embodiment of ungovernable passion—  
a blind and aimless Fury.*

—LEWIS CARROLL

## 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 center. 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 color 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 rumors 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 toward him he receded farther and farther 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 onto 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 labor.”

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.”