



## THE KING OF HEARTS Katy Darby

Once upon a time there was a princess who lived in a castle in a rich land. The principal city, where her father the Emperor had his palace, was twenty days' ride from any of the foreign borders.

It was a great and prosperous country, but the princess's suitors — of whom there were many — did not try to win her for the sake of her wealth, nor even of her beauty, which was legendary. She had eyes green as apples and hair as soft and thick as brown velvet, but she was courted by many princes from many countries because it was rumoured that she would give her heart completely to the successful suitor. In those days it was unheard of for a princess to marry for love, but she was stubborn and romantic and her father had eventually given in to her wishes.

On the eve of her twenty-first birthday he called her into the throne room and asked her finally to choose a suitor. The royal wedding had been proclaimed for the next day and three princes waited in the audience chamber to try to win her hand. She was cursed

if she did not marry by the age of twenty-one, but she set her face and declared that if she could not give her heart to any of them, she would suffer the curse and die alone. The Emperor wept and pleaded with her, but she was determined. She went into the audience chamber to hear their offers.

The first prince was a sultan's son from the lands to the East: he was dressed all in gold and rubies and he had skin the colour of burned gold and hair and eyes as black as the stallion he rode. The second came from the kingdom to the West: he was tall and silent, and his hair was red as embers. The third prince came from the Northern lands, and had eyes blue as glaciers, and his hair was golden as the sunrise. To the South there lay the endless sea: it was there that the princess had resolved to go and drown herself if she could not find a man she could love.

The first prince bowed his black head and looked up at her with the pride of a tiger in his dark eyes.

'My lady,' he said. 'I know of your vow to give your heart to the man you marry. I do not ask for that. I shall give you my own heart, if you will let me, and our two can beat as one in your breast. Such is the strength of my love.'

The princess looked at him, and thought about his offer. She thought how full her slender chest would be with two hearts beating in it, and did not think she could survive such a transformation. Her own heart was trouble enough.

'I could not take your own heart from you and give you nothing in return,' she said, and the Eastern prince turned away, defeated.

Then the flame-haired prince from the Western lands stepped forward.

‘Princess,’ he said. ‘I hear that you will give your heart to any man worthy. I do not ask that. I offer you my heart, my love for yours, as a fair exchange. Such is the harmony of my love.’

The princess wondered how she would feel with a stranger’s heart thudding under her ribs without her own to keep it company.

‘I could not take your heart for mine,’ she said sorrowfully, ‘for then we would never be truly united.’

The Western prince looked up at her as he knelt at her feet, then rose and strode from the audience chamber without a word.

The third prince knelt in his place, and kept his ice-blue eyes fixed on the ground.

‘Princess,’ he said, and his voice was like the cry of seagulls in the high clouds.

‘I have heard tell that you will offer your heart to the man you choose. I ask only for that. I have no heart of my own to offer in exchange. Such is the need of my love.’

The princess gazed down at his golden hair, and thought how sad it was that anybody should have no heart. She felt the tug of her own heart deep in her breast, as though it longed to be free, and she knew that it would be better to give it to this lost man from the North than to still it in the dark depths of the Southern sea.

‘I never said I wanted another’s heart to replace my own,’ she said, and the Emperor her father looked on in horror. ‘I give you mine freely, to make up for what you have never had.’

The Northern prince rose to his feet and looked at her with his frozen blue eyes. She reached into her chest, and with a little tug, her heart was free. She gave it to him, and he slipped it under his tunic, in the place where his heart should have been. She felt the ache of its

absence, but she knew she had done the right thing.

The next day they were married, and the people of the city rejoiced and feasted for three days and nights, happy that their princess had found a husband she could love. At the end of the celebrations, the prince put her on the back of his horse and rode North for thirty days, to the heart of his kingdom and his own people.

When they reached the palace, the King his father greeted them happily.

‘At last, my son, you have what I have. Your mother gave me her heart and I have kept it safe these twenty years. She brought me great joy, and I hope you can at last be as happy as I am.’

The prince smiled, and his golden hair shone in the cold Northern sun. A great shout went up as the people saw him smile for the first time in his life. Now, they thought to themselves, he can feel and love as we do.

The first night there was an enormous banquet for the young prince and his new bride. The King and the prince were merrier than anyone, and they drank and sang and told stories to each other and the various lords and ladies, who laughed loudly enough to shake the rafters and shatter glasses. But the princess could not share in their happiness. She felt lost and alone, and she could still feel the ache where her heart had been. At last the King turned towards her and asked her why she was not laughing.

‘I want to,’ she replied, ‘but I am not used to being heartless. I find it difficult to laugh when my heart is gone.’ She watched her husband as he sat at the other end of the table, smiling and talking, and felt the loss of her heart as she saw that his eyes were now the warm blue of a summer sky.

Then she felt the touch of a hand on her shoulder, light as a bird. She turned round, and saw a pale woman with hair the colour of sun-bleached straw and skin white as the snow in the mountains.

‘This is my wife,’ said the King. ‘Perhaps you would like to talk to her?’

The Queen beckoned to the princess from beyond the circle of light, and she rose and followed the Queen’s pale shadow to the quiet end of the hall. When the Queen sat down the princess saw that she was thin and that the food on her plate was untouched.

‘Why do you not eat?’ she asked curiously.

The Queen sighed.

‘I haven’t the heart,’ she said, ‘I gave it to my husband, and he has almost worn it out. I can only feel it again if I am near him, and even then, so little.’

The princess looked at the undrunk wine in the Queen’s glass and thought of her own heart beating under her husband’s shirt. Now that she had moved away from him she too felt cold and listless.

‘Can you not get it back?’ she enquired.

The Queen looked at her for the first time and the princess noticed that her eyes were the same blue as those of her son, but they were cold as the sea and the wind.

‘A heart cannot be taken back, once given,’ she said. ‘It must be returned freely, or another must be found to replace it.’

The princess thought of the first two princes, who would have given her their hearts, and rued her impulsiveness. And yet she had pitied the prince with the cold blue eyes, the heartless eyes of his mother.

‘I have had many men, lords and nobles, offer me their hearts, for

once I was loved for my beauty,' the Queen continued, 'but I never took them. I could not leave them heartless: I know how terrible it is. And now no one offers any more.'

The princess saw the sadness in the Queen's pale face, and she would have cried, but without her heart she did not know how.

'I'm sorry' was all she said, but she could not feel it in the space where her heart had been.

A year passed and the prince and the King were happy. Summer came to the Northern kingdom and they rode out hunting every day, while the princess and the Queen watched the eagles wheeling on the mountains from the high tower.

'I should like to have the heart of an eagle, if I cannot have my own.' whispered the Queen. The princess shivered at the thought of such a strange heart beating within her, and said nothing. That evening the King and prince returned from the hunt with their kills, and a great feast of deer and pheasant and other animals from the dark forest was prepared. They had also trapped a black wolf from the forest, and had chained it, snarling and prowling, to the wall at one end of the banqueting hall.

The climax of the feast was to be the killing of the wolf. As the King approached the growling beast with a sharp sword in his hand, the prince laid his warm hand over his wife's cold one.

'Watch this,' he whispered, and kissed her. His hot mouth burned her lips, and she felt her own heart jumping in his breast.

Suddenly there was a great roar from the crowd, and the prince leapt to his feet.

At the end of the hall the wolf padded through the King's blood, which cooled on the floor as his heart slowly stopped beating. The

Queen screamed and rushed to her husband's side, feeling the place where his heart was. But she was too late. It had already died within him. She snatched his sword from his dead hand and killed the wolf with a single stroke, slicing its chest open. She reached inside and pulled out its heart, pressing it deep into her own breast.

'If I could not be human, I wanted to be an eagle,' she cried, and her eyes flashed the blue of dangerous rivers and the falling night, 'but if I must be a wolf, so be it.'

And with that she turned and ran from the palace, leaving footprints in her husband's blood over the fields and into the dark forest.

The prince had gone white. The hall was silent. He turned to the princess and she could feel the suspicion and fear in the heart that beat under his robes.

'I will be crowned tomorrow,' he said, and his eyes were the blue of sapphires.

The next day was one of mourning, as the prince, dressed all in black for his dead father and his vanished, wolf-hearted mother, sat on the throne for his coronation. The princess sat beside him and the Queen's crown was set on her head, but she felt nothing. When she looked at her husband she saw only the blood on the floor of the hall and his mother's ice-blue eyes. That night when she came to their bedroom he stopped her at the door.

'I do not trust you,' he said, staring at her in the light of the candle. 'You have no heart. Look what my mother did. I cannot love a heartless woman.'

The princess felt the terror in his breast, her lost heart beating as though it wanted to be free, and wanted to cry but could not.

‘But I gave you my heart,’ she said, ‘I could not give it to you without losing it. I am heartless for your sake.’

‘I know what I was like before I had a heart. I had no feelings, no joy, no love. I was as you are now,’ he said. ‘I did not miss then what I had never had, but that makes it impossible for me to give it back. I could not live without it. I know it must be hard for you, as it was for my mother before you, but a sacrifice must be made. I am sorry.’

Tears stood in his blue eyes, and she felt his heart twist inside him, but all the same he closed the door on her.

A year later, on the anniversary of the new King’s coronation, another great banquet was held. The princess watched the eagles wheeling from the tower where she had been kept since her husband had lost his trust in her, and wondered what had become of the Queen with the wolf’s heart. She wondered what it would be like to have the heart of an eagle.

At the banquet that night, sitting next to her husband, she felt the nearness of the heart in his breast. She only felt it rarely now, when she was close to him, once a week when he came to visit her in the tower. But she also felt something else, like the fluttering of a bird in her belly. She knew what it was, and told her husband.

‘I am going to have a child,’ she said, and his eyes lit up the blue of a candle flame.

‘Wonderful!’ he cried, and his warm fingers closed over her cold ones. ‘An heir! But how do you know?’

‘I can feel its heart beating already,’ she said. ‘It echoes in the place where mine once was.’

She saw his face darken, and he turned away.

‘It cannot be an heir,’ he said. ‘All the sons of our house are born

heartless. It must be a girl.'

The princess did not understand his unhappiness.

'Well then, we shall have a beautiful daughter,' she said.

'No,' said the King, and his heart was heavy. 'I need an heir. Only a son is strong enough to rule.'

The princess felt the pulse of the heartbeat within her, and was secretly sure that her child would be strong.

Nine months later the princess gave birth to a healthy baby girl in the locked tower. Her husband came in, brushing aside maids and midwives, and looked at the child asleep in its cot. He touched its tiny hand, and kissed its sleeping face. He gazed at the princess and she felt the sadness in his breast, more dimly for her heart was almost completely his now, and she could hardly feel it even when he was in the room.

'She is beautiful,' the King said. 'As beautiful as you were, once.' And he turned and closed the door.

That night the princess caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, and was horrified by the change that three short years had worked in her. Her brown velvet hair was as pale as sand and her eyes had changed from the green of apples to the blue of ice. She looked down at the cot, and her sleeping baby daughter who had hair golden as the sunrise and eyes blue as forget-me-nots. She laid her hand on the little chest and felt the tiny heart beating strongly inside. Then she reached deeper inside and plucked out her little daughter's heart, pink and fresh, and placed it in the empty space under her ribs. Suddenly a flood of feeling broke over her like a storm, and she felt the grief and remorse she had lost with her heart to the young prince, three years ago. She realised what she had done, and tore at her breast, but

stopped as she realised she could not bear to lose her heart again. She looked down at the cot, and saw to her astonishment that her tiny daughter was still alive, even at a day old strong enough to survive the loss of her heart.

The princess knelt down, and as the sleeping baby's eyes fluttered open she saw that they were the blue of a cold, deep well. She picked up her child and held it to her breast so that it could hear its mother's new heartbeat. And she thought with a strange pride of her newborn daughter, strong and beautiful and heartless, and of the poor prince who would one day give his heart to her out of pity or duty, or for the sake of her golden hair and ice-blue eyes.

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