



Beyond ^{the} Isle ^{of the} Lost



ALSO BY MELISSA DE LA CRUZ

DESCENDANTS

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Beyond
the Isle of
the Lost

WONDERLAND

A DESCENDANTS NOVEL

MELISSA DE LA CRUZ

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For Mike and Mattie always
and for the
next generation of
Disney Descenders!
-MDLC





chapter

1

Seeing Red

The sun was bright and dazzling in the sky, and the Queen's castle towered, grand and beautiful with its neat, symmetrical turrets, bathed in its signature reddish glow. The castle grounds sparkled like rubies and rustled with the excitement of everyone at the garden party.

Not.

A scene like that, Red imagined, was the exact opposite of the dismal soiree that was unfolding before her. She crossed her studded boots at the ankle, slouching in one of the little wrought-iron chairs in the corner of the garden, twirling a finger around her wavy hair, which was, as you

might have guessed, red. Red was wearing her signature red-and-black leather jacket and matching red-and-black-striped leather pants. Black fingerless gloves and a fishnet tank top completed the look. After all, she wasn't the daughter of the Queen of Hearts for nothing. Yes, *that* Queen of Hearts, the red-gloved, scarlet-wearing, beautifully scary *off with her head* queen whose ball gowns often resembled bloodred roses. Where was the Queen? Red's mother always made a particular show of enjoying today's type of gathering, but she wasn't anywhere near the un-event. And this just wasn't Red's cup of tea.

The event wasn't really supposed to be *anyone's* cup of tea, so to speak, for it was not a party they were having in the garden, but an *un*-party. What is an un-party, you ask? Well, it's simply a party where nobody does anything party-like. There should be gifts—such as the immaculately wrapped packages and glittering bows stacked high on the wrought-iron table—but no one opens them. Red hardly bothered to look at the presents, knowing they would only be thrown away at the event's end.

There should be refreshments—and Red had to concede that the castle chefs had delivered: heaping tables high with frosted tarts, chess pies, a cake with five tiers, and a veritable champagne tower of delicate glasses that sparkled with summer punch.

But no one ate. In fact, some whispered that the food

was poisoned, so it was never touched at all. Scoops of ice cream melted softly into their delicate china bowls.

What garden party would be complete without games for guests to enjoy? But games for an un-party included standing in place for as long as you could and sleeping until someone woke you up rudely. You know: all the crowd favorites.

And in a very fitting fashion for this very un-party-like party, Red was the guest of highest honor and therefore having the least amount of fun. She sat at one end of the table, pretending to participate in a game of stack-teacups-on-top-of-each-other. But in reality, she was playing see-how-long-you-can-stand-the-un-party while people-watching out of the corner of her eye.

Red's fellow partygoers were all residents of Wonderland, royal subjects with neat, orderly schedules and futures in the same reliable line of work: soldier-cards in the Queen's army or nobility in her court. They were gathered to celebrate their un-birthdays, for none of them had a real one. Birthdays were illegal, after all, so the Queen had decreed.

Everyone gathered wore shades of red that were so washed-out they were almost gray. The partygoers weren't like those other children Red had heard of in far-off lands like Auradon, who grew up singing and laughing and running around willy-nilly like little white rabbits. Here, childhood meant regimented days and nights, being quiet at

mealtimes, and only playing between the hours of two and four p.m. Solitaire was the pastime of choice.

But they had gotten used to it, Red supposed, smirking. She had too.

Red had been raised like them, though she would not become a soldier-card like they would. Red's birthright was to rule next to her mother.

Her future and her destiny seemed to be locked up. And now, with the approaching ceremony her mother had arranged, it felt like her royal responsibilities had kicked into overdrive. She knew what was expected of her, but that wasn't what she wanted for herself. What she *wanted* was to be a little naughty—to have a little bit of fun—and so she'd been sneaking out at night, taking things she wasn't supposed to touch—all to defy her mother and, if she was being super honest, get her attention.

Red shifted in her chair, setting one teacup on top of another for the umpteenth time. She caught the eye of a boy in a gray top hat who'd been holding the same pose with a hedgehog in his hand for nearly an hour. He looked annoyed that she was not sitting more still.

But Red couldn't help it. The un-party was as dull as she expected, and every time she thought of ruling the kingdom, she grew restless. Unlimited power, uncontested rule—these were things everyone wanted, at least according to the Queen of Hearts. But were they what Red wanted? She wasn't sure. Sometimes she tried to picture herself as

her mother, throwing dishes at the wall every time she got angry and outlawing whatever odd thing she felt like on a given day.

She never much liked the thought.

A stiff breeze blew one of the presents from the very top of the pile and sent it splashing into the nearby koi pond.

“Good heavens!” cried a girl in a burgundy polka-dot jumper, regaining her composure before continuing her game of moving a chair to one side of the pond and then back again.

Another girl clicked her tongue and resumed counting blades of grass.

Red rolled her eyes.

Then a much louder sound sent ripples through the garden—the blasting of incoming trumpets. All at once, the teenagers’ eyes grew wide with nervousness and they halted their un-games, shifting from one foot to another. For when the Queen came to call, you paid attention.

Red wasn’t *always* completely thrilled by her mother’s interruptions, but the un-party was every bit as dull as it was designed to be. So she was grateful for a change of pace.

She stood with the others, tossing her teacup aside and turning toward the entrance of the opening in the hedge as the Queen of Hearts made her appearance.



chapter

2

The Red Queen Herself

“*A*hem!”

The Queen cleared her throat. She was a beautiful woman, with arched eyebrows and a withering stare. She was wearing an ornate red ball gown with accents of black, white, and, of course, hearts. Her ruby crown sat high on her head, her elegant long red hair as straight and neat as a velvet curtain. Around her neck was a necklace with a shimmering ruby pendant, and the stiff collar of her dress fluted gracefully above her shoulders so that it looked like she was encapsulated by a heart. She was a ferocious and glamorous sight to behold.

But Red thought it was most impressive how her mother didn't even have to raise her voice to indicate the depth of her wrath. The Queen clapped and cleared her throat. Her voice was melodious but cold. "People of Wonderland—may I have your attention, please."

The garden had already been quiet enough to hear a pin drop, and everyone in it had their eyes trained on the Queen—from the boy in the gray top hat, to the girls by the pool, to the many soldier-cards and frog butlers who were doing everything they could (that is to say, nothing) to make the un-party un-interesting. But it was typical for Red's mother to not quite see her subjects clearly, much less empathize with them.

Everyone did their best to focus their attention even harder.

The Queen smiled at her subjects, assuaged. "Red, how are you, dear?" she called, seeing her daughter. "Having a nice time?"

"Not really," Red said, shrugging.

The Queen of Hearts smiled and nodded. "That's good. Must you wear so much leather?" she asked, making a dour face at Red's outfit. "It makes you look like a troublemaker."

Red felt her cheeks get hot, but no one dared look at her.

The Queen continued without apology. "Now. It has come to my attention that we are *severely* lacking several laws—laws that will benefit each and every one of us. As

your ruler, I am sorry to have neglected these important areas of improvement for so long. They simply cannot wait until the next royal decree.”

If the people of Wonderland hadn't been carefully trained, Red knew a groan might have sounded through the garden. Even so, she thought she noticed one of the green frog butlers twitch with annoyance before falling still again.

The soldier-card next to the Queen produced a scroll of parchment and unfurled it for Red's mother to read. He wore the same uniform they all did—a red helmet with a heart on the front and red-and-black leather armor, with a sword at his side. The little diamond on his right breastplate marked his card number. This one was nine.

“You all know, of course, that birthdays are illegal,” the Queen began. “Who needs them? Every year with the silly surprises, the unruly running about—it's all very tedious.”

Everyone nodded and murmured in agreement, like they were supposed to.

“Every year we present a table full of desserts. To show how corruptible they can be!” She eyed the table of desserts sourly. The purpose of its presence was to remind the subjects of what they *didn't* need, as well as to test and strengthen their will. Red knew that it was also a trap. If anyone was caught touching the sweets, they would be severely punished. Red thought it was rather clever, in a way, if a bit sadistic.

“Oh!” the Queen said, visibly shaken. “Is that a cupcake?”

The crowning glory of the dessert table was a tower of pink flamingo feather cupcakes.

Red turned to the royal baker, who was quivering in their boots. “Ma’am . . . Your Majesty, I’m so sorry. . . . I found an old recipe of yours. . . .”

“Get it out of my sight!” the Queen hissed. Then she patted her brow with a red handkerchief.

Red wondered what that was all about. She’d never seen her mother fall apart at the sight of a cupcake before. Then again, she realized she’d never really seen a cupcake before either. She wondered what they tasted like. But perhaps she’d never know, since the baker was taking a tray of them away.

The Queen clapped again, back to looking like herself. “*So!* Birthdays are still illegal. Treats are discouraged! *Especially* cupcakes. What’s more, all laughter should be avoided before noon—it simply is not good for your heart to laugh so early! Perhaps it’s better not to laugh at all! This obviously means that jokes shall only be told every other Saturday, if one feels the absolute need.” But from her tone it was clear that no one should ever feel the need to tell a joke.

The Queen waved her hand and the soldier-card let the scroll re-furl with a *snap*.

“That is all,” she said. “You are welcome!”

All the un-partygoers and castle staff bowed low with choruses of “Thank you, Your Highness” and “Yes, Your Majesty.” The Queen smiled benevolently and nodded, soaking it all in.

Then something caught the corner of Red's eye. There was a younger boy near the dessert table, one she'd seen staring wide-eyed at the treats earlier that afternoon. He was taking advantage of the Queen's distraction to stuff two and then three strawberry tarts into the pockets of his checkered pants.

He looked terrified but very determined. Red smirked, delighted by this little theft. But like all things in Wonderland, misbehavior didn't go unpunished.

"YOU!" The Queen's voice sliced through the crowd. Red wasn't sure how her mother had seen the child from her vantage point, but all at once everyone was staring at the dessert table.

Color draining from his face, the boy dropped the sweets and froze.

"What did I *just say?*" The Queen of Hearts punctuated every word by smacking her hands together, looking unbelievably exasperated with the whole situation.

"Ahm sorfy," the boy squeaked. His mouth was full of tarts.

"Take it away! Take it all away!" the Queen commanded. "Him too—I want him out of my *sight!*"

One of the soldier-cards scooped up the boy and carried him away through a corridor of the hedge maze. Other children might have kicked and protested, but the boy accepted the consequences of his actions and his subsequent fate, hanging limp in the guard's arms.

Two other soldier-cards hefted the entire dessert table and tipped everything into the koi pond. (Luckily, it was an un-koi pond, so there were no fish to be harmed.) Everything happened in quick succession and very efficiently, and in no more than a moment or two the distressing situation was dealt with.

The Queen of Hearts brushed her hands off briskly as though she had touched something unpleasant.

“One more thing,” she said. The Queen now beamed directly at her daughter, and though Red was not afraid of her mother’s dictums—usually just annoyed by them—she felt a ripple of unease in her stomach.

“You are all well familiar with our triumph in the War of the Roses.”

“Indeed,” the un-partygoers murmured dutifully. “The War of the Roses, hear, hear.” It was the first and most important topic taught at Wonderland’s schools: how Wonderland chose not to join the united kingdoms of Auradon and how the Queen raised an army to maintain its freedom, and so Auradon locked up the Rabbit Hole and closed Wonderland off from the rest of the kingdom in fear.

“And I know how much you love the annual Wonderland Tea Ceremony, to be held in two weeks’ time, that commemorates our important history, as well as heralds the royal decree for the upcoming year. We’ve had some noteworthy decrees in years past: The year that raised the stakes on the national croquet league by introducing red-card beheadings.

The one that imprisoned all kittens and puppies until they were properly trained. Or the unforgettable year we banned dancing of any kind,” the Queen of Hearts continued. “But this year, I am happy to announce that the ceremony will be a special one. For it is when my own daughter, Red of Hearts, will be giving the royal decree.”

An obligatory cheer erupted from the garden. Royal subjects rushed forward to congratulate Red, and the soldier-cards shuffled together in a stiff salute.

Red nodded and smiled faintly, but inside it felt like she'd gotten the wind knocked out of her. She always knew she'd take on more regal duties—but this was throwing her in the deep end. The decree at the Wonderland Tea Ceremony was a big one, containing a collection of rules, regulations, and goals for the upcoming year. It set the tone for the kingdom. And now she'd not only be responsible for coming up with those new strict laws, but announcing them in a fancy speech?

Red made her way to her mother, who was applauding daintily in her elbow-length red gloves.

“Are you sure? Already?” Red asked beneath the noise of the crowd.

“Of course, of course!” her mother crowed. “If anything, we've waited *too* long.”

“I just— I know it's such a big responsibility.”

“Don't you worry.” The Queen reached out and pinched Red's cheek, teasing but affectionate, because she knew how

it annoyed Red. “We’ll have more than enough time to prepare. And I’ll be with you every step of the way.”

“Okay.” Red nodded. The thought of the Queen turning the harsh light of her full attention on Red and nitpicking all the while did not exactly comfort Red.

“And once you take this on, you’ll be ready for more royal duties. Before you know it, you’ll be *just* like me. Better than ever before!”

The Queen flashed a wide smile before Red could respond, then clapped and cried, “Guards!”

The soldier-cards fell into two neat and perfect lines behind her, and soon the garden looked just as it had before she’d made her entrance. All the royal subjects turned immediately back to their un-games as mechanically as figures in a cuckoo clock.

All but one, of course. Only Red noticed that the uneaten desserts slowly turned to mush in the pond.



chapter

3



Rebel Rouser

Red had lost all interest in the un-party. She exited through another path in the hedge maze, traveling parallel to the stately castle that sat at its center. The maze was both decorative and strategic—a landscaping feature that mirrored the Queen’s desire for neat beauty as well as her irrationality, and a mechanism that kept intruders out. Many a suspicious character got stranded in the maze’s outer perimeter, which made Red laugh. That was child’s play. The closer you got to the castle, the more complex the pattern became, with dead ends and switchbacks, paths that spiraled in on themselves over and over again. But the citizens of Wonderland knew how

to navigate the hedges, and no one knew them better than Red, who'd spent the majority of her childhood wandering them and figuring out all the shortcuts.

For being the daughter of the Queen of Hearts didn't exactly make Red *popular*. Sure, she had all the influence in the land; she could have snapped her fingers and had companions by her side in a moment. But who wanted that? It was better to be alone and focus on yourself than to be with people who secretly didn't like you—that was what Red's mother said, at least. The Queen of Hearts discouraged friendships, and though sometimes Red wondered what it would be like to have someone around with whom she could talk, *really* talk, she guessed it was for the best. Most of the Wonderland kids were intimidated by Red and her mom. Red didn't exactly blame them.

But she would have appreciated someone to talk to right now. Red wandered the hedges, with nowhere to go and no one to consult about the Queen's pronouncement. In one corner of the maze, there was a gnarled old Tumtum tree that rose above the surface of the hedges and stretched toward the castle's towers. When Red climbed to its highest branch, she could see over the twisting patterns of green, the black-and-white checkerboard of the garden, the gates at the edge of the maze, and on to the rest of Wonderland.

It was her favorite spot, and hers alone.

Now Red looked out over the drab and curious world that would soon be directly affected by her words, her choices,

her actions. It was a city of pink and red buildings, covered in clever shadow decorations of hearts, spades, diamonds, and clubs. This had been home for all of Red's sixteen years of life, but did she really feel any affection toward it? Red wrapped her arm around the Tumtum tree and thought of the strict rules and expressionless soldier-cards, the dull afternoons of garden un-parties and the lack of personality in nearly everyone she met.

Red let out a disappointed sigh as she acknowledged how easy the answer was: no. She couldn't find much in Wonderland to *care* about—at least, not the way she'd experienced it—and the prospect of ruling over it felt equally grim. But perhaps that was the right thing. The Queen of Hearts often said that if you cared about something too much, it would get taken away. Red had learned this the hard way with a few stuffed animals and, later, hobbies over the years. She would never recover her sewing machine from the bottom of the moat, where the Queen had thrown it after outlawing anyone but the kingdom's authorized tailors from making their own clothes.

You'll be just like me, her mother had said. Red pushed her wavy hair away from her face irritably and worked it into a half braid. Red was perhaps the only one in Wonderland not intimidated by the Queen of Hearts, but she didn't understand her mother either. The Queen was aloof and cold. Red tensed every morning at the breakfast table when she heard her mother coming down the stairs, trying to gauge

what kind of mood the Queen was in by the cadence of her footsteps.

Could it be that the power had, well, gone to the Queen's head? Would Red turn out the same way once she was queen? Would this be the beginning of her end? Would she never, ever have any fun?

In the far distance, Red could see the murky shape of the Dismal Mire, with its swampy and moss-covered depths. Beyond that, she knew, was the endless Tulgey Wood, and somewhere even farther lay the closed-up entrance to the Rabbit Hole.

Red had never once been outside Wonderland. Whenever she brought up the idea to her mother, the Queen snorted, rolled her eyes, and said, "I've worked hard to make Wonderland the best of the best. Those other piddly kingdoms—just a mess of people running willy-nilly, shouting their opinions and complaining about this, that, and the other. Just dreadful." She shook her head as always and pursed her lips. "Here, people are so calm and well-behaved. Why would you go anywhere else?"

But Red couldn't help wondering. What could it be like to visit other parts of the world? She'd even heard rumors that there was once an island that housed all the villains of folklore—a dastardly and dangerous place where nobody followed any rules at all and everyone did whatever they wanted. *The Isle of the Lost*. It all sounded perfectly wonderful to Red.

But speaking at this most important Tea Ceremony would mean she was publicly showing her loyalty to the throne, bound to Wonderland forever.

From the top of the Tumtum tree, she could see the now-empty checkered garden, where a lone soldier-card was removing the dessert-mush from the pond with a net. Where was the boy who had stolen the tarts now? Was he in the dungeons?

Red stood, balancing on the rough bark of the Tumtum tree. She would *not* issue any kind of new horrible royal decree at the Wonderland Tea Ceremony; she simply couldn't. The prospect made it seem like Red's life would be over, and really, she hadn't even truly begun to live!

The light of the setting sun hit Red's face, and she thought it over. It wasn't enough to just sneak out after curfew and surreptitiously swipe a sword or a helm here and there. (A girl wanted to train, after all!) Like the boy who had taken the forbidden tarts, Red would take what she wanted. Because somewhere before Red, just out of reach, was the equally enticing possibility of life out from under her mother's thumb.

She began to climb down from the tree with new strength in her arms, eyeing the rigid lines of soldier-cards as they filed out for the evening watch.

I'm going to light this place up, she told herself as her feet touched the neat lawn of the hedge maze once more. *If it's the last thing I do.*