



Staining Snow

Marsha Sisolak chases five-year olds, drives teenagers thither and yond, passing their insanity onto her husband, and writes stories in her off moments. Her family reports these moments occur more frequently of late, and that she appears fixated with fairy tales.

"Staining Snow" is the result of a personal challenge to twist the reader's perception of a character during a story arc, while requiring the reader to deduce the character's true identity on their own.

*"She would
repay his love
and loyalty
with the
pleasure of her
body. Tonight.
Derrick loved
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reflections in
the mirror,
candlelight
and shadows
twisting in the
drafts."*

Lilli's skirts rustled as she hastened along the gravel path. She slowed near the corner of the last castle garden, and under the pretext of rearranging her cloak, checked for observers.

There were none.

She slid aside the vines trailing over the high brick wall to reveal the slatted wood door. Her heart thudded; her chest tightened. Her hand drew forth the key nestled between her breasts, and with one twist, she was free for this small portion of the day, the only time until late tonight, when all — all except two — peacefully slept.

The woods loomed, dark and deep. Lilli leapt over the small drifts of snow, not wishing to leave traces of her passing. Pale sunlight gleamed through patches of clouds. Spring hovered, certainly, but winter had not relinquished its hold.

She dodged among the trees, choosing a new route as always. Twigsnap muffled beneath her feet. Her slippers were damp, her toes numb by the time she reached *their* tree.

Another glance all around and Lilli thrust her hand into the rough hole of the trunk, fingertips grazing a soft surface. She gasped, then tugged, twisting the gift to release it from its hiding place, pulling it out into the dying light of day.

A red velvet bag. And inside, a box.

Had Derrick finished—?

Eager fingers wiggled into the soft opening, and knew the crisp-heavy touch of vellum and the satin of wood.



"She would repay his love and loyalty with the pleasure of her body. Tonight. Derrick loved to watch their reflections in the mirror, candlelight and shadows twisting in the drafts."

Lilli drew the box out, her teeth nipping the soft flesh of her lower lip. A gift. From *him*.

In a moment, she had the note open.

My heart bleeds for you.

The corners of her mouth lifted. How sweet. Completely unlike her husband, who never loved her the way he had his first wife. Gerard appreciated her beauty, but only that. Refolding the message, she counted herself fortunate to have discovered someone who cherished her.

She lifted the latch on the box, hinges complaining, her breath catching, note fluttering to the ground.

Bianca's fresh heart.

Lilli stroked the sticky-cool surface, then sucked her reddened finger, mouth watering. Excitement arced through her, and she smiled. She would repay his love and loyalty with the pleasure of her body. Tonight. Derrick loved to watch their reflections in the mirror, candlelight and shadows twisting in the drafts. Her breath frosted the air, and with a jerk, she snapped the lid shut. But that would be later. After...dinner.

With a graceful stoop, she recovered the note from the ground, and noticed the mark outlined in the snow at the base of the tree.

Not his footprint. Much smaller. Far too small to be Derrick's. She swayed; her world twisted.

Bianca.

Which meant...

With dawning horror, she stared at the note, searching for similarities to Derrick's penmanship, finding none.

Lilli shrieked, then collapsed on the semi-frozen ground, hands to mouth, box spilling open, blood-red organ tumbling out to stain a patch of snow.

She stared at her huntsman's heart.

The little bitch wanted everything. Beauty. Lover. *Mirror*.