

HOW
THE RAKE
STOLE
CHRISTMAS

THE
~Scent of~
SNOW

A novella from The Winemakers series

GIOVANNA SINISCALCHI

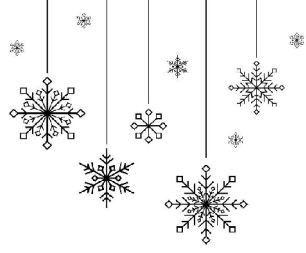


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The Scent of Snow



“Anne had the substance of things that shimmered and disappeared — a firefly, a fairy, a flicker of hope. Could Pedro be blamed if he struggled with the need to keep her always?”

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Special Glimpse into The Winemakers' HEAs

How the Rake Stole Christmas

Also by Giovanna Siniscalchi

Author's note

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Copyright

Praise for The Winemakers

“Siniscalchi’s compelling characters and propulsive plot create a warm romance that goes down easily and does not hesitate to explore the difficulties of a cross-cultural relationship.”

Kirkus Reviews

” *I found The Truth About Myths by Giovanna Siniscalchi to be one of the most enjoyable historical romances I’ve ever read.*” ***The Historical Fiction Company***

“Rich historical detail, vibrant prose, and engaging relationships.” ***Booklife***

Dedication

To my faithful readers,

Your support and enthusiasm have been the wind in my sails, gently guiding me on this storytelling journey. Each word I write is a tribute to your steadfast dedication and love for the worlds I create.

To my family,

Your unwavering encouragement and belief in my dreams are the foundation that keeps me steady, much like the sturdy beams of a ship braving the open seas. In both the calm and the storms, your love is my safe harbor.

And to those who bravely navigate the path of healing from trauma,

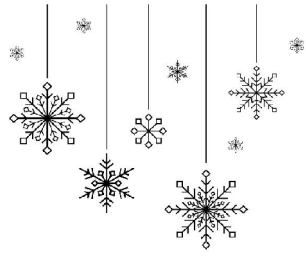
This story is a subtle nod to your journey. Like a lighthouse offering guidance to ships at sea, may these pages shine a light of hope and resilience. Your strength in adversity inspires me.

“The Scent of Snow” explores love, healing, and the enduring power of connection. May it serve as a gentle reminder of your courage and the incredible journey you are on.

With heartfelt gratitude and love,

Giovanna Siniscalchi

“Love is only the beginning...”



Chapter 1

North of Portugal, Coudelaria Almoster,
December 1874

Pedro lifted his head from his correspondence as sunlight flooded the study, casting a warm glow on the Gobelin carpet. Despite the drop in temperature, the sky was a deep blue, a hallmark of Portugal. Anne would be disappointed. His wife hoped for snow to grace her Christmas celebration. Anne's wishes fell into two categories — those Pedro could marshal into line, and those beyond his command. The weather couldn't be coerced, but all else stood at attention, ready to serve his will. Perhaps he would fulfill her desires right now. His lips tugged up as an image of Anne innocently embroidering in her morning room graced his mind, and all the wicked things he could do with the soft cashmere thread he had bought her from Scotland.

He was about to stand when, among the elegant parchments and neatly penned notes atop his desk, a letter stood out—a scrawled message on cheap paper.

He scanned the lines and leaned back in the chair. His heart rate quickened, and a thrill resonated in his bones. Since Fernando's death, claims that the royal duke was alive had poured in daily. He dismissed them as the utter rubbish they were. The king's brother—Pedro's best friend— had been butchered by a slave trader eighteen months before.

Still, Pedro's instinct told him there was something different this time, and his instinct never failed. He could go to Paris himself to check. But the New Republic could object to his presence. His royalist convictions were common knowledge.

The secretary knocked at his study's door. "You have a visitor, Your Excellency."

Expecting his brother-in-law and his best friend tomorrow and his brother Cris the following day, Pedro was surprised. His hand instinctively sought his concealed short sword under the desk. The secretary opened the door, admitting Diomedes da Veiga, Marquis of Faial.

Pedro stifled his irritation at the unannounced presence. The Christmas gathering was for family.

The country's top diplomat's son greeted Pedro with a hesitant smile, his complexion flushed from the chill. Releasing the sword, Pedro crossed his legs and observed Diomedes closely. His striking looks and effortless navigation of high society and underworld alike were well-known, yet Diomedes was more than just a charming aristocrat. His composure under pressure in Spain the previous year had proven that. For a man of action, trust didn't come from years of stilted relationships, but from the split second it took for a bullet to catch a man's rearguard. There were six men Pedro counted on to watch his flank. He might not enjoy his brother-in-law's arrogance or how Henrique spent his cerebral advantage, but he could depend on each to guard his back. Dante, his aide-de-camp, he trusted implicitly. His brother had been his second for all his military career, and Gabriel, his cousin, had regained his trust. The sixth one was dead. Or not... either way, it was time to expand the circle. Pedro caressed his goatee as the idea solidified. Diomedes was the

perfect choice to investigate the letter. He might refuse, but all men had a price.

Pedro rose to greet his guest. Diomedes carried a vase, no doubt a present for Anne.

Seemingly relieved to relinquish the burden, he placed it atop Pedro's desk. Pedro squeezed the other man's hand and nodded in appreciation as Diomedes returned the pressure.

"I thought you were visiting the Duke of Palmela in London," Pedro said, moving to the liquor tray. After pouring two port crystals, he offered one for Diomedes and leaned his hip over the windowsill. "How is the old fox?"

Dio accepted the wine and averted his eyes. "Father sends his regards. He was grudgingly impressed by how you dealt with the port prices dispute. You know how he can be a nagging—"

"An excellent trait in a diplomat, for sure."

"Of course." After taking a swig, Diomedes nodded and pointed his glass at the window. "You have quite the fortress here. I couldn't help but notice the bridge. A poetic construction."

"That's the Misarela."

"It looks ancient. How is it even standing? It seems to defy gravity."

Pedro chuckled. In all his thirty-one years, he had never considered the bridge's structure. "A legend speaks of the

castle's lord striking a dark bargain with the Devil to erect it. When the Devil gives his word, he never breaks it.”

Pedro tasted the port, eyes traveling the stretch of rocks as it crossed the river's turbulent waters like the Devil's finger. When Pedro first created the Lusitano's stud property, he valued the bridge for making it impregnable. Now, with no threats dusting the horizon, he appreciated it for a different reason. It kept everything he loved inside, protected from outside changes. Happiness, such as what Anne brought into his life, was ephemeral. How many in his path had to heed heaven's call, some even by his own hands? Ice coursed through his veins, turning the muscles on his neck and shoulders as rigid as the granite slabs of the bridge. Pedro swallowed the port and exhaled slowly, breathing out through his mouth. Anne wasn't going anywhere. By Saint George, she loved him, and though he stopped questioning his blessings, he would battle anything keen to change their relationship. Her love was a delicate meadow bathed in the glow of dawn. A beautiful, impossible-to-defend meadow. Vulnerable. Exposed. To protect it, he had constructed a glass dome around it. Within this dome, Anne remained untouched, their happiness preserved. Every hazard, every shadow of doubt, was kept at bay. Pedro would protect their love by any means necessary.

He forced himself to look beyond the bridge to the road leading to the forest. No enemies lurked there. He was in control of his fate.

“If the Devil built it, it sure is a monument to his craftiness, and wherever he is, he must be at peace for a job well done,”

Diomedes said, his voice uncharacteristically solemn.

Pedro paused. Tilted his head. Did Diomedes da Veiga crave recognition? A deed impressive enough to leave a mark? Perhaps this was his price. “That sort of peace isn’t exclusive for mythological beings. Mortals can aspire to greatness as well.” Pedro watched the other man closely.

“I have no doubt of it,” Diomedes said, and his eyes strayed to the urn. “I have a deep respect for Portuguese heroes.”

“Enough to become one?”

Diomedes choked and loosened his cravat. “What? No, of course not, I’m here to—”

“Your arrival was fate’s doing. The country needs you. You will go to Paris—”

“Fate? Paris?” Diomedes shook his head repeatedly and lifted both his palms. “Christ, that is not why I came. Palmela will own me forever. You see... Almoester, your father is dead.”

Pedro stilled. Diomedes’ words fractured, their meaning slipping away like sand through fingers. His voice transformed into a drone, mingling with the thumping of Pedro’s heart.

As he struggled with the sounds, colors drained from his surroundings, leaving everything in a monochromatic haze. The room, once vibrant, now appeared as if viewed through a veil of gray.

The other man placed his hand above his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

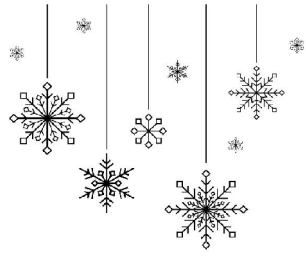
Pedro jerked away from the touch. No one touched him except Anne.

“I’m sorry for my wretched sensibility. Palmela sent me to impart the news. Your father died a hero and will always be deeply admired. Those are his ashes and here.” He fumbled with his coat and took an envelope. “The Duke of Titano left you this.”

The words ‘father’ and ‘Titano’ reverberated through him with the force of a knell. He stared at Diomedes’ outstretched offer and then at the vase. He wanted nothing to do with either. Still, his hand caught the envelope of its own twisted will. Pedro’s fingers tightened around it, crumpling its edges. His eyes drifted to where the portrait of his father used to hang on the wall, and he pictured the old duke’s stern countenance. The duke’s gaze pierced through him, just as they had during their lessons. Never good enough. Never. Pedro clung to those memories, the hatred. Father was dead and would take the violence with him to the grave.

Other memories crawled from the recesses of his mind. A faint smile on the duke’s lips, a father’s proud nod, a shared jest, a pat on the back. Another memory, this one older, took shape — an embrace on a Christmas night, tears. Pedro’s chest heaved, lost between a sob and a sigh.

“What am I saying?” Diomedes brushed his forehead. “You are the Duke of Titano now. Long live the Duke.”



Chapter 2

The *luminarias* arrived at last. Anne picked up the box, her excitement so high she wanted to scream.

Her maid extended her hand. “Let me help you carry it.”

“Where do you plan to do so? Atop my goddaughter? I don’t think so.”

Beatriz caressed her pregnant belly. “Indeed, I can’t seem to hold more than this little package nowadays.”

Together, they crossed the corridors to Anne’s private morning room. Of all Pedro’s properties, the fortress was where she felt less at ease. It wasn’t the house itself, with its grand foyer and cold stone walls that no plush carpet could soften. She couldn’t blame the bridge’s infamous builder or the treacherous scarps behind the property, and not even the stern housekeeper who treated her like a child...

It was the sound of the river in winter.

The perpetual hum spoke to her in ways she couldn’t explain. Whenever Anne crossed or gazed at the Misarela bridge, she sensed an unexplained melancholy. Sometimes, she heard whispers or felt an icy touch on her skin.

“Daydreaming again?” Beatriz touched her shoulder.

Anne forced a smile. Here she was, being fanciful and attaching human feelings to stones and water and landscape. Murmuring river or not, this was Pedro’s favorite property. And she would make a brilliant Christmas for him, even if it killed her. How else would she convince him it was time to start a family?

They had been married for two years and a half now, and whenever she spoke about pregnancy, he evaded her, telling her she was only twenty years old. Granted, after their unconventional courtship, if one could call escaping a conspiracy aboard a yacht and running away from a slave trader a courtship, their married life entered a whirlwind of social activities and travels. Pedro owned estates in several countries and wanted to introduce his countess to each. She didn't mind it, not when he liked to christen all the bedchambers by making love to her... A sigh escaped her chest, and when Beatriz gave her a strange look, Anne cleared her throat.

They entered her morning room. Pedro had redecorated it for her as a birthday surprise. She couldn't have reflected her personality so well if she had chosen the details herself. Bathed in natural light from tall, arched windows, the room offered a stunning view of the estate gardens. Delicate frescoes adorned the high ceilings. The drapery and the Persian rug combined light pink and cream tones to create a comfortable harmony.

Beatriz plopped her weight onto the rocking chair, knitting in hand. Anne settled on the rose chaise lounge and opened the box. Inside were the results of her charity project. The *luminarias*, Portuguese paper lanterns, were the loveliest Portuguese Christmas tradition. With Isabel, The Duchess of Braganza, Anne had created a sanctuary for less privileged women to learn various crafts, gaining independence and

financial stability. The *luminarias* were their first financial success.

“I can’t believe those pompous ladies from court refused to buy these beauties.” Beatriz scrunched her face.

The problem wasn’t with the lanterns or the hands of the impoverished artisans that made them. It was with Anne. No prestigious lady in Portugal dared to mistreat her before Pedro, but that didn’t mean they accepted her, an English lady with a shady past in their midst. Still, to the bourgeois class, she was a heroine, as her family came from trade, and she had married into the most illustrious aristocratic line in Portugal. They supported her charity, and her *luminarias* had sold out before Christmas.

Amidst the soft rustle of paper, Anne unveiled a lantern from its wrappings. “With or without their help, what matters is that all those women will bring extra income to fill their pantries this winter, and several Lisbon houses will get a special glow this Christmas.”

She traced the little angels cut out at the edges. What an enchanting play of light and shadows they would produce once the candle was lit. “The count’s mother decorated the house with *luminarias*.”

Beatriz giggled. “Hard to see your brooding husband playing with paper lanterns.”

Anne pitied those who only knew Pedro as the most powerful man in Portugal. To her, he was company and silence, laughter and heat, tickles and sighs. He was sun and

sunset, darkness and light, calm and storm, fire and ice. Her first breath in the morning and her yawn in the night, her sustenance, her heartbeat, her life.

The image of a baby with Pedro's golden hair flirted in her mind, and a wave of longing unfurled in her chest. How would it be to carry a little being under her heart for nine months? Not that she envied her maid. Quite the contrary. Anne cheered for her. But sometimes, she wondered if she would ever experience the same joy.

Anne shook away the gloom. Of course, she would. Laughing, she threw a pillow at Beatriz. "Pedro isn't brooding. He is just... serious and concerned with, well... everything."

Pedro carried the weight of the monarchy, his tenants, and properties... But she made him happy. She was absolutely positive about it.

The housekeeper entered the morning room, her white hair pulled back in a flawless bun. More ancient than old, she resembled a classical statue or piece of furniture. Her family had worked at the fortress for generations. Cold and efficient, she looked at Anne as if she were a meddling child. A tiny voice in her head whispered that's what she was. Too inexperienced and gauche to be the woman of a politician of Pedro's caliber. Anne silenced the insecurity. Pedro had chosen her, not some blue-blooded heiress. Anne made him happy, and no other could touch him.

"Good evening, Leonor. Can you please send two boxes to the village? I want each house to have one of these beauties to

light up on Christmas Eve.”

She nodded regally. “As my lady wishes.”

The village of Ferral stood separated from the fortress by the river Ribagão, and the only way to reach it was from the Misarela.

Anne’s gaze drifted to the frost-kissed window. “Do you think it will snow?” Her earliest Christmas memories in England were of playing in the snow. She had no recollection beyond the white covering everything and the sense of peace, of completion that came with it.

Beatriz put down her embroidery. “With the Devil’s curse? Not likely.”

The legend that the Devil had built the bridge was common knowledge, but she didn’t remember a curse was involved. “You know we shouldn’t allow folk tales—”

“They say the lord of the fortress made a pact with the devil to build the bridge and that since then, it never snowed in the region.”

“Why would he do such a deal?” A pact to save a dear one was understandable. Anne had tried to strike a bargain with someone worse than the Devil once and would do it again without blinking if it came to save even a day of Pedro’s life. But for a bridge? It made no sense.

Beatriz scoffed, her needle pausing mid-stitch. “Greed, of course. What else?”

Anne frowned. Greed. That was what they said moved Pedro in his political machinations. She knew it wasn't true.

“You speak nonsense, child,” Leonor chided. After dropping the *luminarias*, she went to the window and gazed outside, her back stiff.

“Are you all right, Leonor? I'm sure Beatriz meant no offense.”

“No one understands.” The housekeeper's gaze got lost somewhere in the landscape. “He is there.”

The river's murmur rose until it clashed against Anne's ears. Leonor's eyes became haunted.

“In the shadows of the Devil's embrace, eternal winter, a chilling grace. A pact with darkness, a secret cost, snowless Christmases, a love long lost.” Leonor's mouth moved as if in prayer.

Beatriz crossed herself.

Anne placed her hand over the woman's shoulders. She was ice cold.

“A love long lost. Was it love, then? He agreed because of love?”

Leonor's filmed eyes focused on Anne. They were eerily devoid of color. “The past is buried under the rocks. If you excuse me, I will oversee the dinner preparations.”

With that, she departed.

Beatriz stretched. “It’s just stories. Don’t let her bother you.” After collecting her embroidery, she left as well.

Alone, Anne hugged herself. Look at her... Believing in folk tales? Her brother would call her a nitwit. Brushing her arms, she went to the window. The bridge stood there, unmovable, but the housekeeper’s words continued to resonate, a sad accompaniment to the murmuring river.

The wind invaded the morning room, and the door banged on its hinges. Anne whirled, her heart racing, half expecting to see the Devil lurking among her watercolors.

A figure materialized from the shadows.

When she recognized Pedro’s golden hair and tall frame, Anne released a pent-up breath. “Love, you scared me, I —”

He didn’t move. He just stood there, eyes unfocused, his broad shoulders tense. His face was pale.

Anne raced to him. “Pedro, please, speak with me. What happened?”

She placed both her hands on his cheek. He wouldn’t look at her. Her pulse sped.

“Is it Cris? Is your brother all right?”

Cris had been gone for two years on a grand tour and had wired them from Constantinople last month, promising to spend Christmas with the family. Did something happen to him?

Anne shook Pedro's shoulders. When nothing worked, she went on her tiptoes and kissed his lips.

The kaleidoscope of Pedro's eyes turned from inwards to outwards, his gaze now focused on her. Solely on her. A thrill jolted down her spine, not unlike prey that caught the predator's attention, and she retreated until her back met the recamier. His first step forward made her heart stop. The second made it stumble against her ribs. His arms snaked around her. Her body arched for him.

“Ana,” he said, breathing fire on her lips.

It was the voice he used for her alone — threat and invitation. Goosebumps danced across her skin, her body craving what usually followed those two syllables.

She should make him talk. Understand his worries. Still, it was in moments like this, when he came to her with no words and troubled eyes, that she felt the power of his need for her. So she opened her arms and let him consume her.



Pedro didn't remember coming to her morning room. For minutes or hours, he stood in the shadows — his body, the empty shell. Soldiers learned it from prisoners of war. They called it double-think. The ability to shift reality and escape inescapable situations. He had mastered it much sooner. A side

effect of the Duke of Titano's lessons. And sometimes, he couldn't come back.

“What's wrong?” Cold hands on his cheeks.

Her lips opened and closed, but he couldn't understand her.

She grabbed his shoulders. He didn't flinch. It was Anne, and Anne was safe. In a fragmented world, where memories drifted, each in their own glass shards, that knowledge was embedded deep. He clung to it.

She shook him slightly, given her slight frame. Her mouth moved rapidly now. Words came from a far place, but even from the distance, he could sense her growing unease. Her distress was unacceptable. He jerked his head, trying to regain perception.

She went up on her tiptoes and kissed him. The shock of her lips reverberated through him with the force of a church bell. He pulled away, startled, and then he kissed her back. Another shock, and this time, her scent, roses, and rain, filled his being, expelling the shadows.

Pedro caged her face and drank her in.

Pins scattered across the floor as he fought with the restrictions binding her hair. Closing his eyes, he rubbed the strands against his cheek. Backing her away from the door, he aimed his efforts at the clothes she wore. His fingers were defeated by the buttons and fastenings. His sanity depended on feeling her skin against his. He turned her around and ripped the fabric.

A little gasp escaped her lips as she stood before him, clad in pantalets and stockings. Without taking his eyes off her, Pedro yanked at his coat, cravat, shirt, the ruby studs clattering to the floor. Finally, he could embrace her and, with his chest bared, arrive at his sanctuary. Pedro took a deep, shuddering breath.

He could see colors now — the champagne of her hair, the rose of her lips, her Atlantic blue eyes. He touched a dusky nipple, brought it to his lips, drank from it. He saw the curve of her neck, leaned forward, and nibbled on it. He delved into her and glued his fractured pieces back together. Anne was this to him, the glue that kept his broken shards in one place.

Pedro kissed her, sweeping his tongue inside her mouth, searching for her taste. When he closed his eyes, his soul threatened to leave him again.

Anne pulled away. “What’s wrong?”

Pedro shook his head. Anne’s gaze sought the depths of his soul. She searched for the man she had wanted to marry — unbroken. What would she do if she glimpsed the fragments still inside?

“Something happened. You can tell me.”

How could he tell her he was The Duke of Titano now? He wasn’t.

Instead of words he couldn’t say, he offered her something else. Pedro knelt in front of her on the carpet. Hooking his hand under her knee, he placed her foot atop the chaise. Reverently, he trailed his fingers over a thigh wrapped in ivory

silk and lilac ribbon. Even in her lingerie, Anne was pure, and he, the blackguard who deflowered her every night.

Slowly, he made the garter travel down her long leg. He peeled the stocking, brushing his mouth against the welts left by the ribbon, his lips pulled away by the traction, and he skimmed his teeth up her calf and bit her thigh. Anne shuddered, a blush of desire painting her skin.

The translucent cotton of her drawer revealed the golden thatch of hair above her mound, and Pedro caressed her, marveling at the silky texture.

Snaking his arms around her hips, he grasped her buttocks and brought her closer.

Her arousal perfumed the air, and Pedro filled his lungs with her dew and flower.

Pedro opened the aperture of the drawer. Anne moaned and placed her hands above his shoulders. Heart speeding up, he licked the folds of her sex, and finding the pearl of her desire, he sucked at it greedily.

When her hips stirred, demanding more friction, Pedro penetrated her with his tongue, and she cried out, the climax making her shudder.

She sagged against him, her breaths warming his shoulder blades. Pedro removed her other stocking.

And rose.

She gave him a dreamy smile and brushed the hair from his cheek. "Take me to bed?"

He brought the ribbon close to her face.

And waited.

Her eyes widened, and she gasped. A quick nod.

As gently as possible, he adjusted the garter between her parted lips and tied it behind her head. Silently, she complied with his wishes, and he would be forever grateful. He couldn't speak. Not yet.

Her delicate jaw moved, adjusting to the foreign binding. Pedro clasped her wrists, holding them together in front of her. Silk slid against skin as he tied her.

She stood before him, waiting, submitting but not submissive, his downfall, his benediction, his angel.

He moved behind her, his shadow enveloping her. With a hand on her mid-back, he guided her to rest her torso over the recamier. She kneeled for him, her tied hands in front of her as if in prayer, her face pressing against the cushions.

He took a step back, his breathing harsh bursts of hot air and desire. Her skin was his undoing. He would gladly kill for the right to look at it every day, and it was fate's most extraordinary gift he didn't have to. She was his.

He placed his hands over her neck and waited, wanting her to feel the heat of his palms, and then he lowered his touch slowly, a virtuoso playing the notes of a piano.

A sharp exhale, his breath. A sigh, her breath.

And then he grabbed her hips and pulled, crushing her derrière to his groin. She moaned, the sound strained by the garter. Leaning forward, he tasted the sensitive patch of skin on her neck. And then he brushed his cheek between her shoulder blades, examining every inch of her, ascertaining she was the same. Anne shuddered, the fine hairs covering her skin rising to meet him.

Bound for him, with her derrière lifted, her pearly skin reflecting the hearth's glow, she was his Prometheus. Like the eagle from the legend, Pedro ate her innocence every night. And like Prometheus, her innocence regenerated every day, only for him to consume it once more.

He took himself in hand and curbed the impulse that screamed for him to take her like an animal. His breathing sounded feral, the need to be inside her clawing at his restraint.

She looked at him from beneath golden-tipped eyelashes. She could've spoken. The garter was no real gag, but she didn't, not when he asked her not to. Still, the depths of her gaze were soft and inviting.

With trembling fingers, Pedro opened the lips of her sex and found the welcoming moisture of her desire. His cock glided inside her tight sheath, and pleasure burst the last of his shadows.

Holding her hips with both his hands, he thrust. Asking for oblivion, he thrust. Cupping her breasts, he thrust. Pushing away the shadows, he thrust. He thrust until his body and mind became whole again.

Her orgasm pushed him over the precipice, and only when a roaring release gripped his spine, he remembered to pull away from her and spill on her midback, saving her at the very last second.

Pedro cleaned his seed from her skin with his shirt. Gently, he removed the garter from her mouth and freed her hands. Cradling her close to his chest, he lay with her on the *recamier*, the room silent without his rasping breaths.

Anne kissed the side of his mouth and tucked his hair below his ear. "I love you. Always."

He grabbed her hand quickly and then, deliberately, traced the heart-shaped burn on her palm. "Vow it."

The whispered words against his lips brought a rush of warmth into him, and piece by piece, he regained control. Her weight fit easily into his chest as he carried her to his bedchamber and dismissed her maid. He filled a bath and washed her hair while she spoke about Christmas and snow and *luminarias*. Her voice, mellowed by the steam, poured over him like the finest port. No matter how he took her, roughly or lovingly, her skin never showed the marks of his black hands. Still, he washed her, washed himself from her, knowing he would soon imprint her with his essence again.

After the bath, he carried her to his bedchamber. The crystal panels caught and reflected moonlight. A quiet candelabra cast flickering candlelight over the wood paneling.

"Did you have to hang it in here?" Anne bit her lip, gazing at her new portrait.

“It’s a masterpiece.” Winterhalter had captured Anne’s essence. A soft light kissed her shoulders and elegant neck. Her hair tumbled down her gracious spine, and her eyes gazed directly at him with a mixture of innocence and mischief. In the painting, she looked the way she did after Pedro made love to her, exuding innocent sensuality. And that is why he had put it in his bedchamber, not in the gallery as planned. He didn’t want to kill every man who saw it.

“I don’t know. I expected a dignified painting like the ones the artist did for the Empress and the Duchess of Beira. Mine look more fitting for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* scene.”

“I’ll hire another portraitist. For the gallery. For my bed, I prefer the nymph.”

Pedro deposited her on the four-poster. The art adorning the walls retreated, their colors muted by Anne’s light. Clad in his black robe and among the soft pillows and Lyon’s silk, she was his heaven.

Pedro relaxed back against the bedrest.

She eyed the tray, licking her lips. “Shouldn’t we go down to dinner? Your guest will find it strange if—”

“We will dine here.” The Marquis of Faial could fend for himself for one night.

Before Anne, the grand bedchamber had been a place of solitude. Now, it echoed with her laughter and the clinking of fine China as they dined upon the bed. The shadows were

there, more salient tonight, but they were dazzled by Anne and the intimacy they shared.

She ate blinis and caviar from his fingers, and a sigh escaped her lips. “Our guests will swoon with this food.”

He had brought the chef from their estate in Compiègne to please her. She wanted a perfect Christmas, and he would give it to her.

“Won’t you tell me what happened?”

“It’s nothing to do with Cris.” That was all he would reveal. The Duke of Titano wouldn’t crack the dome of their happiness. Pedro wouldn’t allow it. Grief and unwelcome memories had no place in their meadow.

She knelt between his legs and searched his eyes. “I thought we had battled your shadows.”

He kissed her palm. “We did.” He would not be the malingeringer who clung to his wounds after they were supposed to be healed. Even if the wounds had left scars, scars that weren’t quite smooth. He could be the man she had hoped to marry.

“We are happy, are we not? Perhaps if we started a —”

Pedro kissed her lips and then her eyelids. Her taste, honeyed and layered, drew him to her, and he settled her between his thighs, her spine resting on his chest. The robe gaped open, revealing the valley between her breasts. The glow of candlelight lapped her skin. Pedro drew his fingertips from the hollow of her throat to her navel. The silk, already a

flimsy barrier, gave way after his first foray, pooling by the sides of her torso. Slowly, he pulled the sash from around her waist. Her breath caught when he ventured further, leaving her sex bared to his gaze.

His cock pressed against her lower back, and she shifted, arching her hips, trying to lure him inside.

Unwilling to be rushed, Pedro bit the side of her neck and nudged her legs apart, forcing them to straddle his hips. With his thumbs, he massaged her mound and then opened the lips of her sex to reveal her pearl of desire. He found it glistening, eager for him, and pulled her closer.

She moaned when he penetrated her from behind, her derriere straining against his groin. This time, he allowed her hands to roam, healing and grounding him in her.

The climax took them to their meadow of love.

Afterward, she lay on his chest, her eyes heavy-lidded, her lips swollen from his kisses. Pedro accommodated her on his left side, away from the old wound on his shoulder, freeing his right hand. He caressed her back in the soothing way he did every night before she slept.

“Your family arrives tomorrow for Christmas. You still didn’t tell me what you want for a gift.” He bought the Star of the South for her and had the cushion-shaped diamond set in a necklace. The new coach and the whitest Lusitano horses to pull it had arrived yesterday. If she wanted something else, he would bring her the world and splay it at her feet.

Anne kissed his chest and then placed her hand above his heart. “I want a baby.”

Pedro stilled. “We discussed this before. You are too young —”

“Beatriz is my age, and she will deliver next month.”

Pedro had to look away from the pleading in Anne’s eyes. The need to tear up a limb to please her warred with the absolute necessity of protecting her from what she wanted. He, a father? The Duke of Titano, a father? Never.

“Don’t you want a child?”

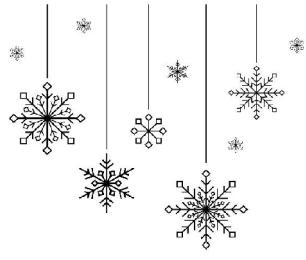
“There’s plenty in the countryside. You can take one to foster here.”

Her gaze clouded, and she shifted away from him. “Really, Pedro, I try to ignore the newspapers, but sometimes you scare me with—”

“None of them is mine. I don’t have bastards.”

“I know you don’t. But can’t you see? I want our own baby. A boy with your hair and strength...”

“We won’t have this discussion now. I protect you. You and the country because you are in it. I cannot protect you from things beyond my control. Go to sleep, Anne.”



Chapter 3

When Anne woke up, her bed was empty. She stretched, lifting her arms above her head. While the sheets were cold, her body tingled in places and ached in others. Pedro's lovemaking was never the same. While he couldn't always express his feelings in words or through his kaleidoscopic eyes, she could sense his moods through the way he made love to her. Gentle, rough, reverent, explosive... She had experienced all the palettes of Pedro's emotions. And yet, something about him last night had scared her... Anne stood, flinging the covers off herself. No, he was happy. They were happy. And soon, they would be even more overjoyed when a child became a part of their family.

A groan escaped her chest. What had possessed her to breach the subject yesterday? He hadn't been in the right mind to talk about children. Why couldn't she learn strategy from the country's greatest strategist? Sighing, she stood and inspected her appearance in the mirror. What was done was done. Plus, Griffin, Julia, and the others would arrive today. When Pedro partook in the bliss of infants, he would change his mind about having a baby. Certainly, spending time with Tony would give him a glimpse of the pleasures of parenting a boy, and Clara, Julia's toddler, was simply adorable. Anticipating seeing them, Anne dressed quickly and opened the door.

Dante guarded the bedchamber.

"You are back shadowing the corridor?" Pedro had dismissed the practice of leaving his aide-de-camp to guard her when she convinced him she was perfectly safe inside the

house. The relapse made her pause, but she ignored it. Pedro was being overzealous.

Dante bowed. “Hemera quickens, My Lady, and the count went to ride Erebus before the stallion demolished the stables.”

“Poor Erebus,” Anne said. Poor Hemera. The mare had to be terribly frustrated. Why couldn’t Pedro realize her mare had chosen her mate and just let them well... mate?

Dante grunted, pulling at his cravat. The big Italian condottiere was more at ease with uniforms than with the three-piece suit Pedro forced him to wear. “The tower spotted the family coaches down the road, and the count said he would join you in the carriage house to meet them.”

Anne grinned, and only by sheer self-control did she restrain the urge to clap her hands. “Excellent. How is my friend Beatriz this morning?”

“Impatient. Swollen. Loud.” Dante huffed.

“Three words, and none of them in Italian. I see. She must be getting close to birthing my goddaughter. Go pamper her, Dante. I can find my way to the bridge just fine.” Anne said, knowing if Pedro told him to follow her the entire day, he would. She would have to talk to Pedro about this regress, but not now. Now, she would greet her family and friends.

Anne grabbed the skirts of her dress and rushed down the stairs. This would be perfect. A lovely afternoon with Julia’s children would change Pedro’s mind about having babies.

Anne exited the house. Outside, the Portuguese sky greeted her with an azure grin. For the first time, she resented it, wishing for the cloudiness that preceded snow. Cold air nipped her cheeks, and the crunch of frosted grass under her winter boots echoed in her ears. Ignoring the River Ribagão's sad gurgle, she tasted the scent of pine and the underlying aroma of rich, damp earth, but would prefer to feel snowflakes melting on her lips. How magnificent the fortress, with its aged stone walls, would look under a white carpet of snow?

No doubt, the snow would mute the treacherous scarps protecting the property's rear and make the bridge, if not cozy, at least less menacing.

She trotted to the gatehouse, hope tingling through her skin.

A footman opened the door to her, and she was swallowed by the gatehouse's dank and dark confines. Wrinkling her nose against the mold, Anne entered.

And then she saw him. Pedro. He had his back to her. Her heart sped, fluttering inside her chest as if wanting to be the first to touch him. The gate leading to the bridge was wide open, framing his tall, erect frame with all the colors of the Geira mountains. Tiptoeing near, Anne closed her hands over his eyes.

And cringed in shame. The scent was all wrong. Instead of Pedro's cedar essence, a spicy cologne greeted her nose. It wasn't Pedro. A throat cleared behind her.

Her cheeks burned.

“My, don’t say you are Lady Almoester’s little sister,” the stranger said, catching her hand in his.

“This is my wife. Lady Daun.” Pedro’s voice was low and resolute.

The stranger eyed them with a mixture of curiosity and mischief. “Oh, how remiss of me. I should’ve recognized the countess’ famous beauty.” He bowed a very courtly bow.

How could she have mistaken her husband for this man? His hair was a shade brighter than Pedro’s and curled into charming disarray. His frame was also leaner, and his skin lighter.

“I’m sorry. I’m not in the habit of accosting my husband’s guests, but the light is dim.”

“I don’t mind being mauled by sweet—”

“This is Diomedes da Veiga, Marquis of Faial, Anne.” Pedro cut in and then turned to the stranger, his expression glacial. “And he will lose his fingers if he doesn’t release your hand.”

Anne laughed nervously, tugging her hand free. Since she married Pedro, she had met most of the Portuguese aristocracy. Still, she had only heard about a few of its most infamous inhabitants in whispers. So this was Faial, the poet, womanizer, and *bete noir* of the Palmela family. “Welcome to our home. I’m sorry I couldn’t greet you properly last night.” She felt heat climbing her cheeks, and her eyes sought Pedro. “I was indisposed. I’m sure your fingers are safe for now.”

Anne looked at the opposite riverbank, hoping the family's arrival would disperse the tense moment.

The current raced beneath the Misarela, creating frothy whirlpools. Transparent, the water revealed smooth pebbles at the riverbed, but its coldness sent shivers up her spine. Her chest ached as if the river echoed the lament of the bridge, yearning for some long-lost connection to be restored.

The coaches rumbled to a stop on the other side. The Misarela could only be crossed by foot.

Anne stared at the obstinate stretch of rocks. Its jagged edges had chafed her elbows or pulled strings from her woolen skirts. Was it the bridge's fault they couldn't have snow? As Anne watched the family progress over the bridge, the housekeeper's trance-like voice replayed in her head. *In the shadows of the Devil's embrace, eternal winter, a chilling grace. A pact with darkness, a secret cost, snowless Christmases, a love long lost.*

"Would you look at how fat the married sheep grow?" The Marquis of Faial drawled, pulling Anne away from her daydreams.

Griffin escorted Julia first, her petite frame a lovely complement to Anne's brother's imposing figure. The red gown contrasted with Julia's black hair and olive skin. The children came right after them, Tony kicking an imaginary pebble and Clara in the arms of a nanny. Warmth spread to Anne's chest at the family her brother had built for himself. When they had to leave England for Portugal over fourteen

years before, Griffin assumed their uncle's port trading business and turned it into one of the largest in Oporto. Still, he refused to let go of his English roots. It took an obstinate and petite winemaker to show him the country's finer points. Now, her brother embraced Portugal wholeheartedly.

Just as they entered the gatehouse, their other guests crossed the bridge. Henrique, the Duke of Braganza, carried a giggling Isabel over the Misarela. Pedro's best friend had married the princess last year. A marriage that started with a scandalous diplomatic mission to Spain and now was one of Portugal's most beloved love matches.

At the others' questioning looks, Henrique grinned. "It gives good luck to carry a pregnant woman over the bridge. It's a mythological fact."

He released his wife and clasped Pedro's shoulder. "What's keeping this bridge up? Medieval mortar and stubbornness? I can evaluate its structure if you want me to."

Pedro frowned. "I'll hire someone in spring. I won't force my guests to work on holidays."

Isabel kissed Anne's cheek. The Duchess of Braganza was resplendent in a violet gown, her skin glowing. Pregnancy agreed with her friend. "Don't listen to him, Anne. He just fabricated that tale."

Henrique lifted his brows. "I'm a scientist. I don't fabricate things. I invent them."

Isabel pursed her lips at Diomedes. “Don’t you think it says something about you that you are the only unmarried person here?”

“That I’m the only one with sanity left?” The marquis bowed. He saw the children and bent further to pick the youngest.

“Almoster, if your wife is already taken, I might have to wait to marry this lady.” He twirled the little girl in the air.

Julia laughed. “Not if you plan to sleep through the night.”

Griffin grunted, eyeing the marquis up and down from his lofty height, no doubt considering and dismissing him as groom material for his infant daughter. Anne already pitied the girl’s admirers. With her mane of black hair and striking blue eyes, she carried the best of English and Portuguese traits, and Anne could bet she would have a string of suitors.

Clara squealed, and when the marquis released her, she stumbled towards Anne. Anne caught her niece. The three-year-old linked her short arms over her neck. Anne kissed her forehead and brushed her cheeks against her crown of ebony hair. They shared a moment of intense bonding. This was what Pedro needed — to glimpse the kindness, the absolute delight of a child’s guileless eyes.

Clara promptly gurgled in Anne’s new gown.

Tony laughed, pointing his finger at the stain. “Now Aninha will smell as badly as Nanny Maria.”

The nanny in question flushed.

Usually, Anne would have tweaked the boy's nose and maybe even chased after him, but a dead silence descended on the hall. Clara started to wail, and Anne could do nothing but stay rooted to the spot.

While Anne's brother sported a thunderous frown, and Henrique and the Marquis of Faial looked about to burst out laughing, Pedro stepped in her direction and halted as if considering how best to defeat a three-foot-tall enemy. He then produced his handkerchief and handed it to her. Anne held the piece of silk, brushing it feverishly against her palms.

Julia reprimanded the ten-year-old boy, and the nanny caught the fussing toddler, and they left the adults' presence. Crestfallen, Anne watched her plans sour.

Anne's gaze sought Pedro. He was tense, his eyes going from her to the assembled group as if ready to send them all back to their carriages.

A prick of unease climbed up her spine. Would Pedro ever feel at ease with her loved ones? This was just the first day. The first hour, actually. During the holiday, she would gift him with such family bliss he would wish for nothing more than a child of his own.

Julia shook her head. "Clara gets sick on the carriage ride, and Tony, he has a very sensitive nose."

Griffin snorted. "Sensitive nose? He has a thick Portuguese head, which only a boarding school can mend."

“We’ve talked about this,” Julia said between gritted teeth. “He will be taught by tutors like a good Portuguese—”

“And be turned into a peninsular nitwit who knows nothing about following rules?”

The men collectively raised their brows. Count on Griffin to insult a whole nation before shedding his top hat.

Anne hated disagreements and lifted her hands. “I will get the children, and the sun is shining—”

Isabel perked up. “Sir, I’ll have you know Portuguese subjects are—”

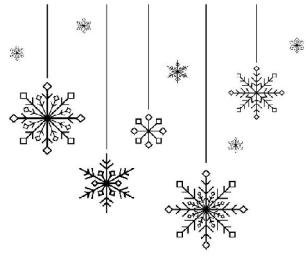
“Grand rule breakers, thank heavens for that,” Henrique said. “We wouldn’t be here if we followed those dratted rules now, would we, darling?”

Isabel chuckled, her shoulders relaxing.

“Now, Pedro, I think we should remove this islander from the ladies’ presence. Before they challenge him for a duel or worse, force him to eat Portuguese food.”

Pedro, whose eyes had wandered to the bridge more times than Anne cared to count, nodded stoically and led the way out of the gatehouse.

Anne watched the men escape to their manly escapades, and a deep sigh escaped her chest. There were still three days to come. Certainly, she could turn her brooding husband into a family man by then.



Chapter 4

Pedro accepted a chalice of port from a passing footman and paced the expanse of the grand foyer. Moonlight spilled from the stained-glass windows and pooled on the polished marble. Henrique, Maxwell, and Faial conversed over their crystal glasses, their easy camaraderie belying the churning in Pedro's stomach. Anne spent the entire afternoon closeted with the women and even decided to complete her toilette for dinner with them. He forced his shoulders to relax. Julia and Isabel had ignored their husbands, too, and by their banter and smiles, they thought nothing of it.

Their husbands didn't deny their wishes for a child, did they?

Anne chose him, not them. Pedro lifted his gaze to the staircase, but the women had yet to appear. Laughter rolled out of the group as Faial told a joke. While Anne didn't grace the foyer, he could deal with another issue that demanded his attention. With a subtle nod of his head, Pedro separated Faial from the others.

"Have you seen my new Caravaggio?"

Tugging at his cravat, Diomedes followed him. Face thoughtful, he admired the painting, lifting his glass in appreciation. "The Calling of St. Matthew. Impressive."

The artist had captured a burst of divine light, illuminating a group of men around a table. While Jesus gestured towards Matthew, inviting him into the fold, the tax collector pointed his finger at himself in disbelief.

“I bought it for the *chiaroscuro*. The play of light and shadow. It tells a story of a profound, life-changing moment. It’s not just a calling. It’s an awakening.” Pedro infused his voice with authority.

Diomedes grunted, stealing glances at Maxwell and Henrique. Both men were still caught up in their banter.

“Have you considered my proposal to visit Paris?”

“Why don’t you assign your brother? Henrique told me he is expected any minute now.”

He did not intend to send Cris away after spending the last two years without him. “Cristiano is *persona non grata* for France’s New Republic.”

Diomedes laughed. “Look, I see what you are trying to do, but I’m not Saint Matthew. I’m no agent of the crown. I’m a decent poet when the inspiration strikes and an indecent aristocrat when it doesn’t.”

“We’ll see.” Pedro narrowed his eyes. Before the eve’s end, he would find a way for Faial to do his bidding. He couldn’t allow the claim that Fernando was alive to go unattended.

“Er, about your father—”

Pedro’s shoulders tensed, and he gripped his port with enough force to shatter the glass. “You will not mention The Duke of Titano’s death.” He said through gritted teeth. “I won’t ruin the celebrations for my wife.”

Pedro would not grieve for a man who brought him nothing but hatred, whose violence had left deep imprints on his life.

Yesterday's double-think was a relapse. He had buried the experience as he would bury Titano's ashes and his letter. After he incorporated his father's estate into his vast holdings, everything would return to normal.

Movement above alerted him of the women's arrival.

"Here they come." Pedro sought Anne, his eyes consuming her light. The new gown from Madame Palmyre, a deep blue silk, complemented Anne's chardonnay hair. The fitted bodice showcased her slender waist and cascaded into a full, sweeping skirt. Subtle lacework graced the neckline and cuffs, and as she moved, the train trailed behind her with regal grace.

The women glided down, their beauty enhanced by the chandelier glow. While Julia and Isabel commanded attention with their distinct characters, his Anne seemed ethereal. Like an angel who decided to partake in a mortal's dwelling. Could he be blamed if he struggled with the need to keep her always? When he feared she would open her wings and return to her place among the clouds? She had the substance of things that shimmered and disappeared — a firefly, a fairy, a flicker of hope.

A sigh burst from Diomedes's chest. "In moonlight's gentle gleam, she steps, a vision fair and rare, descending from the heavens' height, like a dream suspended in the air." He dared follow Anne's progress down the stairs. "I would gladly sign up for Dante's hell if your wife would deign to accompany me."

Pedro stepped to the side, blocking Diomedes' view of his Anne. "Glad you mentioned Dante's hell, because the only way you could accompany my wife anywhere would be from six feet under the earth."

Pedro watched the smile die from Faial's lips and strode to his Anne.

Catching her hand in his, he pretended to kiss her cheek and, at the last moment, bit her earlobe. "You look delectable in midnight blue, Lady Daun, but be forewarned, after midnight, the only blue I will allow close to your skin is the blue of your irises."

He wanted to lick the faint blush covering her cheeks, but settled for escorting her into the dining room.

From his position at the head of the table, Pedro watched as the banquet proceeded with the precision of a well-run war theater and the opulence of any court in Europe. Seated at his right, his countess glowed, her fair skin catching sparkles from the Baccarat crystals.

She was gracious to all, with love and caring clear in her blue eyes. Pedro wasn't jealous of her attention to their guests. Her light, he came to learn in their marriage, was infinite.

Pedro lifted his glass. "Thank you for gracing our home. To an illuminated Christmas."

A chorus rose from the table, followed by cheers.

Isabel sipped the wine and sighed. "What a delicious vintage. Bordeaux?"

“This is a pure Douro wine, straight from Vesuvio,” Pedro said and lifted his chin in his sister-in-law’s direction.

Julia smiled and caught her husband’s hand in hers. “We are experimenting with the grapes. You just tasted our first unfortified red. The Douro has more to offer than port.”

Pedro had known Julia since he was a boy, spending summers in the Douro. In more ways than one, she was the single happy memory he had of his youth. For ten lonely years, he had fought to make her his wife. When Maxwell had stolen her from him, Pedro had cursed fate. Hardly did he know that fate was giving him a present. If it weren’t for Maxwell’s interference, he might never have met Anne. While Pedro was not proud of his failed attempts to marry Julia, he was grateful for her friendship. She was also the best winemaker in Portugal, and Pedro would support her innovations.

Henrique lifted his glass. “To heirs and safe deliveries.”

Anne’s smile faltered, and she looked at her plate. Her eyes sought him for a second, and then she tried to conceal her reaction by sipping her champagne.

Still, Pedro was attuned to Anne enough to notice the strain on her shoulders and how her smile turned too bright. When you lived in darkness for sufficient time, you learned when the candlelight was flickering. He reached out, but before he could cover her hand with his, she hid it under the table.

A vise gripped his chest. Withholding this from her did to him what a protracted siege did to a tiring, hungry brigade.

Pedro couldn't give her the baby she hoped for, but he could provide her with the holiday she dreamed of.

When dinner ended, he steered her to the drawing room. He had ordered the lights to be dimmed before their arrival. Instead of leading the couples to the seating arrangements, he took the procession to the center of the room. He nodded to the maestro and the first notes of Brahms' Waltz in A-flat major, Op. 39, No. 15, filled the silence.

Anne gripped his arm, her warmth reaching deep into his chest. "What is happening?"

"A surprise."

Pedro glanced over at the quartet of musicians he had arranged for the evening. The violinist drew his bow, leading the ensemble, while the pianist's fingers danced lightly over the keys. The cellist added depth and resonance to the violin and piano.

Footmen, strategically placed, approached the ceiling-high Christmas tree.

Movements rehearsed to perfection, they lit the candles, their choreography matching the ebb and flow of the waltz.

The evergreen came alive from bottom to up, a slow, magnetic movement that resembled dawn. Flames danced upon the glass baubles, making them twinkle like distant stars, and the golden glow forced the shadows into a retreat.

After a collective gasp, the guests clapped their hands, awed by the play of light and shadow.

Throughout, Pedro's gaze was fixed on Anne. The corners of her mouth lifted into a soft smile, and her eyes sparkled with surprise and wonder. He had orchestrated this moment for her, and seeing her enchantment made every meticulous detail worth it. The room was awash with music and candlelight, but to Pedro, Anne was the true spectacle, radiant in her joy.

Anne kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

He guided her to the couch and sat by her side, and when she leaned closer to him, he massaged her shoulders, and she dissolved into him. Pedro basked in Anne's presence, enjoying her warmth. His heart beat as one with hers, and his mind quieted, her smell, her smiles, the glowing candles pushing away everything that was not the now.

Pedro leaned back, softly caressing the exposed skin on Anne's forearm.

The first notes of the *Cantique de Noël* struck a dissonant chord inside of him. His heart sped up, and his spine stiffened. The memory besieged him.

Not now.

He tried to push the memory back into the recesses of his mind. But it was too intense, too vivid. The music had acted like a key, releasing a floodgate of images.

Pedro was four, back in the Douro. The house was unlit. He waited before the window as the village came to take alms from his father. He stood by the duke's side way past the midnight mass, his legs tired, his eyes gritty. His father would

not allow him to retire. His mother had died. And his father's chest convulsed with sobs.

Pedro clenched his hands, and, to his horror, his eyes got humid.

When the music ended and the musicians withdrew, Anne stood and lifted his guitar.

“Would you join me?”

Pedro stared at his fingers. They shook. His breathing turned shallow, each inhalation more labored than the last. He couldn't break. Not here, not now.

Ignore the shadows, focus on the present.

She lowered the instrument, and before she could return to Pedro's side, Faial rose and took it from her limp hand.

Pedro watched as his wife sang to another man's tune.



Anne held Pedro's arm, enraptured by the lights he lit for her. She had fretted about his demeanor for nothing. His turmoil since the night before must be something from work. He wouldn't take the time to envision all this if he were unhappy. The sight before her was breathtaking. The

decorations, the harmonious music, the subtle fragrances from fresh pine and pastries... it was like stepping into a Christmas tale.

Seated by his side on the couch, Anne brushed her cheek against his velvet coat. The glow of the candles kissed the powerful lines of his face and outlined his hair's gold streaks. Her hands tingled to remove the string tying the strands and sift her fingers through it.

The handsomest man alive.

How she loved him. Her husband had orchestrated this evening with such care. The desire to give her the perfect Christmas was clear. This was the kind of memory she could keep forever and perhaps one day tell their children.

Children.

Did all this mean he was ready to talk about her wishes? Or was it a way to distract her from them?

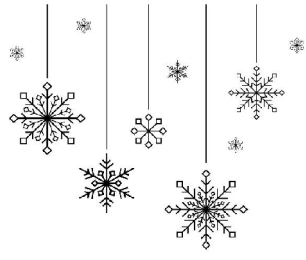
The last notes of the quartet's piece hung in the air. While the other couples clapped, Anne rose and, padding fast to the piano, seized Pedro's guitar. Music allowed both to share feelings and emotions that weren't yet ready to be spoken. She felt the guests' attention on her as she stood between Pedro's legs, offering him the instrument. The kaleidoscope of his eyes changed, turning inwards, away from her. A fleeting shadow crossed his face.

He shook his head. The gentle rebuke pierced her in the chest. Her heart sank, and her nose burned with suppressed

tears. The guitar felt unbearably heavy in her hands.

Before she could lower the instrument, the Marquis of Faial stepped forward, offering to accompany her. Anne gasped, her gaze shifting from the handsome marquis to her husband. Unwilling to be discourteous, she nodded, trying to mask her surprise.

As the marquis struck the first notes of a *modinha*, Anne concentrated on accompanying him, but her focus kept drifting to Pedro. Every note she sang, every chord Diomedes played, made Pedro's expression more glacial. A shiver coursed down her spine as the room grew dimmer, the shadows lengthening and deepening around her husband.



Chapter 5

Curse that memory. Pedro's father had never shed tears. Had to be an illusion. No matter. The Duke of Titano had no right to take his mind hostage and force him to watch Anne singing with another man.

Diomedes played with fire. If he thought he could flirt with his wife and walk unscathed... It mattered not if Faial did it because of a genuine interest or to provoke him. Neither possibility could be left unaddressed.

Hardening himself for the meeting to come, Pedro descended the stairs, his boots echoing over the dark gallery. Light spilled from his study, mingling with the scent of tobacco. It was still early. Pedro had set up the meeting with Faial at midnight. With a hand holding his pistol, he entered the room.

Henrique lounged in the chair, his feet propped against the windowsill, nursing one of Pedro's Cuban cigars. Maxwell sat opposite, dozing. Moonlight invaded the study, casting elongated shadows over the oak floor and bookshelves. In the night light, the Misarela was just a distorted piece of stone.

Pedro closed the door forcefully.

Henrique glared at him. "Do you mind? I need to think."

Maxwell grumbled something and took a sip of his port.

"Go think elsewhere. I have a meeting that starts in fifteen minutes." Pedro pulled the fob off his watch and twisted the chain.

Henrique nursed his cigar. "Since when have you carried a fob? Never knew you needed a watch. Your uncanny ability to

tell the hour never failed to scare me.”

“The chain has its uses.” Pedro twirled it one more time and stored it in his pocket. “I thought you had quit smoking.”

“God Damn Pedro — Never mind. Don’t tell my wife. She would have my balls.”

“You look like shit. Problems in Paradise?” Exhaling, Pedro straddled a chair. “I won’t judge you. Women tend to wish for more than a man can give.”

Henrique lifted his brows. “That’s hard to believe. You are richer than the king.”

Pedro frowned. “Some things money can’t buy.”

“You shouldn’t give in to her wishes. See Isabel. She wanted a child so much, and now she is a pile of nerves.” Henrique said.

“You bragged the pregnancy was your idea.”

“Well, she must have maneuvered me into it. Never fear. Nowadays, whenever she starts to talk, I kiss her senseless. Keeps her distracted, and with her mouth occupied, she cannot manipulate me into doing things I had no intention of doing.” He rubbed his neck, and for a second, panic, plain and raw, replaced his friend’s carefree facade. There and then gone, the worry masked by a grin. “You should try it.”

Maxwell glared at Henrique. “Having no propriety is one thing, but a complete disregard for male ethics is another entirely. Only a blackguard discusses a gentleman’s sister in front of him.”

Pedro shook his head. Couldn't Maxwell see how afraid Henrique was of Isabel's condition? At least Pedro would never go through this with Anne.

Henrique pressed the cigar against the ashtray. "Oh, so now we are being hypocritical? Must I remind you how you seduced Julia? On my property, no less?"

Maxwell blushed, his fair skin no protection against the telltale sign.

Pedro served a glass of port for himself. "You bicker like two old aunts. You will leave now, as the meeting I'm about to have will upset your matronly stomachs."

Maxwell straightened on the wing chair. "If you are cheating on my sister—"

"I'm waiting for Faial." Pedro complemented the revelation with a stare. He was not interested in other women, but wouldn't tolerate Maxwell's interference.

Henrique pursed his lips. "Wouldn't guess you would want to look at the rascal tonight. Not after he flirted with sweet Anne during dinner. See Maxwell? We, Peninsular fellows, aren't jealous hotheads who—"

"I called him here to address that slight." Pedro swirled the wine in his glass.

Henrique groaned. "Don't maim him for life. The lad is a nitwit who fancies himself a new Don Juan."

Pedro eyed Henrique, assessing his reactions. Henrique and Faial were close friends, and he might object to Pedro's

unorthodox negotiation. “That will depend on his answer.”

Henrique shook his head. “I don’t particularly like where this is heading.”

“You may leave now, or you might stay and watch, but when Faial walks through that door, I will convince him to accept a mission requiring him to leave on the morrow for France.”

Henrique rose, his brow furrowed. “How convenient. I hope he gets a return ticket. What is it this time? Are the Moors staging a second invasion of the peninsula?”

“Fernando might be alive.”

Henrique choked on his port.

They had all served together in Mozambique. Pedro, Cris, Henrique, Gabriel, Fernando. A few, a brave few, but a band of brothers, nonetheless. And Fernando had been the best of them. The only one who left the war with his soul intact.

“I would investigate it myself, but the French republicans didn’t forget how I tried to upturn the commune in 1871. I wouldn’t expect you to go since Isabel is near her time. Diomedes is the right choice. He is just the type of aristocratic wastrel that will fly off the attention of the Sûreté Nationale police, but with enough wit to see this through.” Not to mention that it will make the young stud sniff other pastures.

Henrique snorted. “By all means, let’s coerce Diomedes into going. If you don’t mind, I will stay and watch. I have a fondness for the lad—”

“I don’t plan on injuring him more than necessary.”

When Diomedes opened the door, Henrique and Maxwell were seated at the card table while Pedro awaited in the shadows. It said something about his character that he enjoyed the play of emotion on Faial's face, surprised at not seeing Anne inside. He was quick, though, and the shock was covered up by a nonchalant facade. Diomedes might be the renegade of the Palmela family, but he had learned a few tricks of the trade growing up with the famous diplomat. He would do very well on the mission Pedro envisioned for him.

Hiding his feral grin under a blank expression, Pedro emerged from the shadows and offered him a glass of port. When Diomedes lifted his hand to take it, Pedro looped the watch chain around his wrist and twisted it behind his back. With his other hand, he held Faial's arm.

"You touched my wife's hair today. No one touches her hair and keeps all his fingers. I will let you choose which one has to go."

Faial laughed nervously. "You are not serious."

Pedro enjoyed the fear settling in the other man's eyes.

Faial turned to Henrique, a sheen of sweat coating his brow. "He is not serious."

Henrique closed his eyes. "He is. You don't accept an assignation from Almoester's wife and expect to remain unscathed."

"You seemed stranded from her, and I thought she could use a cicerone."

Pedro's sharp intake of breath resounded in the study. His wife had all the male company she needed.

Henrique groaned. "Don't go there, Dio, really. Trust me, you are not improving things. Plus, a cicerone is a wretched position. I once met a beautiful Venetian girl and moved in with her at her palazzo. Turns out her husband was a splendid chap. And one cannot cuckold a friend."

Faial turned to Maxwell. "You are an Englishman. Won't you intervene?"

"Be a bloody man about it, and don't scream. Clara just fell asleep, and Julia needs her rest."

Pedro pressed the paper knife to Faial's knuckle.

Henrique shook his head. "Don't cut his thumb. It's what differentiates him from a chimpanzee. Take his little finger instead."

"I might spare you if you agree to leave for Paris tomorrow."

Diomedes looked at Henrique, his eyes wide with alarm.

Henrique shrugged. "A finger or Paris? Tough choice."

Faial exhaled. "Fine, I'll go. Can I kiss Anne goodbye first?"

Pedro's fist knocked him out cold.

Later, they sat to play Hazzard. Pedro strummed the dice through his fingers. Diomedes, presently snoring on the couch behind them, would leave on the morrow. He had succeeded on both accounts — the young aristocrat would stop sniffing

after Anne's skirts, and Pedro could eliminate the doubt about Fernando's death.

Henrique tossed the ivory cubes, eyeing Diomedes with fondness, and then he turned to Maxwell. "We should have done something similar back then to clear the air between us."

Maxwell rolled his eyes. "Please. You love our grudge."

Henrique grinned. "You are right. I do. But don't tell Isabel. She has this irrational jealousy of me. I can't blame her. Have I told you about how she almost started a war on my behalf?"

Maxwell chuckled. "Only some ten times."

The camaraderie between Maxwell and Henrique was foreign to Pedro. Still, he had never missed it before. Against his will, Pedro's gaze strayed to Faial. In sleep, the marquis seemed much closer to Anne's age. He would no doubt make her laugh more frequently and give her as many children as she desired. Pedro drank the port, its warmth doing little to dispel the knot in his stomach. The air in his study felt denser, the cigar's smoke more suffocating. Faial had no invisible scars, no shadows to haunt him.

No matter.

Fate had given the angel to him. Anne had flown into *his* life, and he would keep her for eternity.



Anne tossed and turned on the mattress. The clock struck two in the morning. The bed seemed enormous without Pedro in it, and she brushed her naked arms. Where was he? They had separate bedrooms, but he had never spent a single night away from her since they married. In fact, she was not sure she could even sleep without his arms around her. No matter how tired he was, he never fell asleep before cradling her on his chest and caressing her back until she slept first.

She was wide awake, and the night shadows shifted in tune with the fire glowing at the hearth. Was he jealous of the marquis? Of her? Impossible. Still, the worry would not fade. It was not fair. She had only wanted to sing with her husband.

The door opened with a soft click. Anne shut her eyes, listening. Was he mad at her? He couldn't be, could he? If anyone had the right to be angry, it was her.

The rustling of clothes reached her ears. Her heart sped up, her breathing turning shallow as she waited. The mattress dipped.

She felt him shifting closer to her.

Anne didn't move, pressing her face against the pillow and forcing her breathing to be even.

“I know you are not sleeping, Anne.”

“Well, I was almost asleep. One more minute, and I would’ve.”

“And who would kiss you goodnight and watch you sleep?” He tugged the sheet, exposing her back. The downy hairs on her skin lifted. Treacherous thing, that body of hers.

She moved away from him, rolling to her stomach. “Perhaps someone willing to play the guitar with me.”

“Perhaps... But then, he would have to have retained all his limbs.”

Anne turned briskly, facing him on the bed. “Pedro, what—”

“I did nothing,” he said, and his lips quirked up at the corner in a semblance of a smile.

With the fire’s glow kissing the harsh planes of his face, he looked otherworldly, a Greek hero in bronze, her very own Alexander the Great. Anne sighed. He wasn’t jealous, not of her, at least. Still, the muscles of his shoulders were tense, his body exuding that same dark energy as before, only now, it was banked.

“The family, they are too loud. Do you miss Lisbon’s society?”

He tucked the hair behind her ear and then trailed his fingers over her shoulder until his palm rested on the curve of her hip. “I would exchange an eternity of their society for a night in your company.”

Then why the shifting moods?

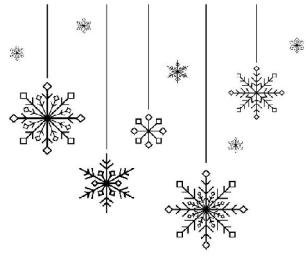
Are you happy? Are you happy with me?

“You work too much. I wish you could let go,” she whispered.

His hand moved again, now to her waist, and he pulled her closer until their chests met. “I only work with diligence because you love Portugal. If you hated it, I would apply myself just as hard to burn it.”

Anne’s breath caught. “That seems exhausting.” Gently, she brushed his bottom lip. “I would rather you just burn me.”

And then he did.



Chapter 6

Pedro patted Erebus' neck and removed his bridle. The moment he closed the stall's door, the stallion started banging on it with renewed energy. He had pushed him harder in training today, to no use.

“Dante, put another bolt on his door.”

Pedro crossed the garden to the mansion's front courtyard. Anne had planned a picnic. While he preferred to spend the winter afternoon with his wife in their bedroom, this was important to her. Last evening, he had allowed jealousy to rule him, but Diomedes had left for Paris in the morning, and he had to share some of Anne's time with the other couples.

He had few subjects for conversation with Maxwell, and even after all this time, there was still a strain between them. Trying to keep the Englishman away from the love of his life and then stealing the man's sister had that side effect. Nonetheless, he admired his integrity, and Anne loved him. Henrique would be there to fill the lulls in conversations, and the scientist could always be counted on to fluster the Englishman, which was at least entertaining.

The footman opened the door to reveal only Anne, Henrique, and the boy.

Pedro kissed his wife's cheek and looked at the empty foyer. He despised tardiness. “Where are the others?”

Anne flushed. “Oh, Julia and Griffin went for a well-deserved ride. You know how they can use time for themselves, and I suspect Isabel is exhausted, what with her

condition and all.” After speaking nonstop, she took a long breath. “No matter, I thought we could go ourselves and take the children.”

Pedro frowned, not falling for any of it. Whenever Anne was nervous, she started to babble. He addressed Henrique. “And what is your excuse?”

Henrique grimaced. “My feet are swollen. The pregnancy, you know. I’m sorry to miss such a great outing. Save some pastries for me.”

Anne turned to speak with the housekeeper.

Henrique elbowed his side and whispered. “Remember what I said yesterday. When everything fails, just kiss her senseless.”

Pedro narrowed his eyes as Henrique escaped to the tranquility of Pedro’s home. It would be a cold day in hell before he took counsel from a libertine about how to deal with his wife.

The housekeeper gave Anne a picnic basket and left.

Anne’s ploy was as transparent as a winter lake. She was a terrible liar, and he, the best of all.

Pedro raised his brows. “This wasn’t the plan.”

“Oh, well, I guess I can take the children myself.” Anne’s sigh was fleeting, and her shoulders deflated. Her fingers furiously traced the patterns on her picnic basket.

Pedro watched those fingers work, knowing they would be skinned raw if she went alone. He eyed the lawn and exhaled. Sometimes, in war, a general had to execute a flawed strategy due to constraints beyond his control. When that happened, he did it efficiently, dispassionately, and with minimal casualties.

So Pedro nodded tersely, caught the basket in his left hand, and offered Anne his arm.

Anne's smile lit up the courtyard, and she curtsied. "Thank you, my lord, but Sr. Antonio will be my escort this afternoon."

The boy's grin was an infuriating mixture of sullen and smug. Pedro narrowed his eyes, returning the stare until the boy dropped his gaze to his feet.

Anne's laugh was a little strained. "You will escort the lovely Princess Clara."

Who? Pedro thought. Anne scrunched her face and pointed her chin down. He followed her gaze. Julia's daughter, all three feet of her, studied him.

Appalled, Pedro glanced at both sides. Why had he left his flanks unguarded like this?

He stared at Anne, his gut churning. How was a gentleman supposed to escort a being that size?

Before he could ask, the girl stepped forward and took his hand.

Pedro breathed in sharply, his eyes meeting Anne's above the child. His wife nodded, and her gaze leaped from him to

the girl with unvarnished admiration. The afternoon would not be as harmless as he expected after all. His stubborn angel became fixated on this idea of progeny, and each minute spent with these children would hurt his cause.

Pedro's hand was limp in the girl's grasp as they set for the lawn behind the stables. Anne walked in front of him. He let the gentle sway of his wife's hips distract him from the little grubby hand grabbing him.

Anne's easy banter with Antonio attested to their shared past together. The boy came almost to her shoulders, no doubt having taken the height from his father's side. Antonio must have inherited the father's laziness and selfishness as well. Julia's first husband had been a wretched drunkard, and more than once, Pedro had been tempted to send him to an early grave. Miserable times. Fighting other's wars, avoiding Titano's machinations and Mozambique.

The little hand tugged, pulling him away from the memories. A pitiful whine followed.

Pedro halted.

The child's eyes widened and then teared up. She hopped from leg to leg and lifted her arms. "Up, up, uuuup."

Stiffening the urge to step back, Pedro eyed the girl. How did one navigate a child's tantrum? Pedro remembered how Diomedes had hoisted her up and did the same, keeping her at arm's length.

Pouting, she kicked with her little legs. Ants swarmed her white stockings. Her gaze, a combination of helplessness and trust, twisted his guts.

Pedro brushed the insects away. “There. They are gone now. No need for distress.”

Her chin trembled, and then she flung herself at him, her arms circling his neck. Pedro’s breath caught. His hand hovered above her briefly, and then he patted her back. She was surprisingly warm, and her loose hair tickled his cheek. Pedro would admonish Maxwell to buy her sturdier boots and cashmere stockings. A child was too vulnerable to be traipsing outdoors wearing such flimsy protection.

Anne rushed to him. “Is everything all right?”

Pedro returned the child to the ground. “It was an insect. She can walk now.”

They set up the picnic. Anne had brought bread and sweetmeats and jams. He stretched his legs over the checkered cloth, watching as Anne captivated the children with her smiles and antics. A knot tightened in Pedro’s stomach. Memories of silent meals and cold hallways, where his presence was merely tolerated, whispered in his ears. He crossed his arms in front of his chest. Where did Anne learn this? Why did she even care? They were just children. They should be seen but not heard. Spoken to but never allowed to speak. To entertain them gave them an importance they would later feel entitled to, only to be sent back to their dark room.

Anne glanced at him, her head tilted as if divining his thoughts. Thank St. George, she couldn't. A weight settled on his chest. Pedro couldn't provide this for her. He was the Duke of Titano now. If his interactions with these children bothered her, imagine what she would think of him with their own.

“Why don't you tell us a story?”

He stared at the horizon, shifting uncomfortably. “I don't believe—”

Anne's smile was all light, and she touched his hand. “Please?”

Pedro exhaled. Could he deny her anything when she smiled like that? He racked his brain for some childish tale and came out empty. All he knew were battle stories. His gaze swept through the land and settled over the bridge. “Centuries ago, a knight wished to capture a fortress. But the castle, high above the mountain, was impregnable. The siege was taking a toll on both sides, and famine and sickness were culling the knight's army. So he called the devil and struck a deal with him.”

“The devil?” Clara asked.

“Lucifer, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles.”

The girl broke out crying, the sound grating in his ears. It was high and loud, like trumpets calling a retreat.

Pedro stood. “We should leave.”

Anne jumped to her feet. “But it's early yet. I have an idea. We can play hide and seek. You boys will search for me and Princess Clara.”

“Anne,” Pedro said, his tone low.

“Can you please try? For me?”

Pedro dropped his chin. He could try for her. Closing his eyes briefly, he straightened his posture.

While Anne meandered into the shrubs with the little girl, Pedro stood with the boy in the clearing. After Antonio finished counting, they set after them. Pedro controlled his strides so he wouldn't outrun his sullen partner.

“Do you really lead the king by a string?” Antonio asked, and when Pedro raised his brows, the boy shrugged. “I saw the newspaper. In case you are wondering, I can read, though it seems it's never enough.”

“That was a caricature. The journalist intends it as a joke,” Pedro said, but it was not far from the truth. The king required guidance from time to time.

“Are you a ruthless politician? The newspaper said that, too.”

Pedro's grin showed too many teeth. “I'm a ruthless everything.”

The boy chuckled. “Maxwell used to say you were an evil man. Nowadays, if he says something cross about you, my mother swats his arm.”

Pedro frowned, disliking the subject. “I'm glad to hear I have a protector in your house.”

“Mother is just a girl. Anyway... You don't look happy to be here. Aninha forced you, didn't she? Well, I suppose one can lead the king by the string but still be led around by a girl.” Lifting his brows, the boy smirked.

Statesmen had regretted disrespecting him. Pedro's temper flared at the insolence, but he banked it, exhaling through his mouth. A ten-year-old boy would not goad him.

“A man must compromise to his wife now and then.”

“Why?”

Pedro noticed the broken twigs and found Anne's champagne hair poking from an olive tree. He halted to give them more time to play their ruse.

He addressed the boy. “You will learn the merits of it when you grow up.”

The boy's expression turned gloomy, and he shrugged. “Who taught you that, your father? I heard he was a war hero. If he was such a dashing man, why did you end up bad?”

Pedro's fists clenched, and his breathing grew shallow and rapid. Hero? He would've liked to see how Antonio fared in one of the duke's lessons. His grip tightened involuntarily, and before he could control himself, he had caught the boy by the lapels, lifting him to eye level. “Do you care to find out?” Pedro's tone was low and dangerous.

The boy's breath hitched, and he shook his head quickly, his chin trembling.

Anne's alarmed voice cut through the tension, her face a mixture of concern and shock.

Swallowing hard, Pedro set Antonio down, cursing his impulsive reaction.

Anne pulled the boy closer, her stance protective, like a guardian fairy shielding her charge. Pedro could feel the weight of her assumption, casting him as the villain. He glared at Tony, who returned it with a smirk full of childish triumph. Clara attached herself to his coat, her little paws grubby with mud.

Pedro's heart sped. He looked from Anne's exasperated face, which seemed to question his every move, to Antonio's smug expression, reveling in the chaos he'd caused.

Pedro took a step forward and then another. Before Anne could open her mouth, he kissed her senseless, pulling her into an embrace that silenced the world.



Anne fed a carrot to Hemera, the scent of hay and fresh straw mingling in the air. As she caressed the mare's velvety nose, a gentle nuzzle reciprocated her touch. "And after that kiss, Pedro just left me there, no words, nothing. I had to take the children back home, my legs barely functioning..."

The horse seemed restless, and the distant thumps in the background revealed why. Erebus was in his stall, his hooves angrily pounding against the door.

“I guess you can’t comfort me today, Hem. You have your own problems. I promise I will talk to my obstinate husband.” Anne whispered, her voice echoing softly in the spacious stable.

Deep down, she knew it was a battle she might not win. Ever since she met Pedro, she tried to convince him to allow the horses to mate, to no avail. Another of the subjects that were forbidden to discuss. Brushing her arms, Anne left the stables.

The afternoon sun shone brightly in the sky, with no sign of snow. The Christmas season would soon end, and they would return to Lisbon, where, more often than not, Pedro got immersed in work and social obligations. She was still as far from convincing him to start a family as when she began this crusade, perhaps even further away.

The river’s sad murmur lulled her to the bridge. Watery shadows formed over the ancient walkway, giving the Misarela an otherworldly glow. She had neared the riverbank when a poignant sound reached her ears. Music.

Her chest constricted as she recognized the virtuosity of the player.

Pedro played the guitar, fingers dancing across the strings, pressing and releasing the frets, drawing out notes, sometimes crisp, sometimes low, whispering and crying, imbuing the winter air with the fado’s deep, resonant longing. Each note he

played, each flair of the strings, each melody he wove, struck a chord in her chest.

The wind had loosened his hair, now a curtain caressing his shoulders. He seemed impervious to the cold. The weight of the bridge lodged itself inside her chest. His profile, chiseled from marble as enduring as the bridge's arches, called to her. Yet, she couldn't command her legs to move. She had not heard him play with such sorrow since... since before their marriage. *Love, why so sad?* Had she not helped him vanquish the shadows? Anne watched, awed by the song, eyes filled with tears, her throat aching at the sorrow she sensed in Pedro's notes. How could there be so much beauty in heartbreak, and beauty be so heartbreaking?

They were happy. They loved each other. Of course, they disagreed, but which couple didn't face difficulties? Not a fortnight ago, they had spent an entire week on the yacht, feeding on nothing but oysters and champagne and making love under the Algarvean moon. By God, she wished those arms were around her, instead of playing the guitar by himself, that they were teaching her to play, infinitely patient, even though she was helpless with the strings. Was he really happy? Of course, he was. She had mended him. Hadn't she? It had been the biggest accomplishment of her life.

Then why the melancholy? It was the bridge. Something about the curse was affecting him. Anne retreated, her steps hesitant, the bridge's lore pressing upon her. She needed to understand this curse once and for all.

After racing to the house, she found the housekeeper in the pantry, the soft clinking of silver and the scent of lavender filling the air. The elderly woman polished a candlestick, her back hunched.

“Tell me about the curse,” Anne urged, eyes searching the older woman’s face.

The housekeeper’s gaze darted away. “It’s just an old tale, Lady Daun.”

“Old or not, why would the lord strike such a deal? Forfeit his soul for a bridge?”

Leonor closed her eyes. “Beatriz was right. It was greed, pure and simple.”

“Greed? Pure? No, there’s more to it.” Anne followed her around the small room, lifting her hands in front of her chest. “Please, I need to know.”

The woman shook herself like a trapped bird. “It’s just a pile of rocks. Leave it be.”

“How can I? When the river’s incessant murmur never leaves my mind?”

The housekeeper paused, frowning. “What did you say?”

Anne pressed her ears, trying to shut it out. “I must be hysteric because I can feel it. It’s ingrained there, deep in the granite, something dark and lonely. So sad. It’s even affecting my husband. I know it is.”

The housekeeper's demeanor changed, and her eyes lost the film of age. She went to the pantry's only window and stared outside. "He is there still."

The hairs on Anne's arms and neck lifted. She looked through the glass but could see no one. The bridge was empty.

The housekeeper's face turned paler, and she swayed.

Anne touched her shoulder. Why did she provoke her so? "Perhaps you should sit."

"Lord Rafael is there, trapped in the stones. He's been there for ages." Tenderly, Leonor touched the windowsill. "God have mercy on his poor soul."

Anne's breath caught. "Why is he there?"

"He was a reckless, stubborn man... He was in love."

"But why—"

"Back when woolen cloaks were mended more than washed, and a loaf of rye bread was a Sunday feast, a couple defied the laws of men. He was a landless knight, and she was a princess betrothed to another. They fell in love. Her father locked her in the Misarela fortress, confident the river would keep unwanted suitors away, and she would retain her virtue for her intended. But Rafael never gave up. Speaking through the treacherous waters, they made plans to escape."

She paused, her eyes lost in the winter landscape.

"And then?"

“The groom arrived early, and the marriage was scheduled for that night. Lord Rafael struck a deal. The devil wanted his soul in exchange for a way to cross the river, but Rafael negotiated with him. The devil would not demand Rafael’s soul if he could convince the princess to run away with him.”

“Certainly, she went with him.” Anne bit her lip.

Leonor turned defensive, brushing at her tears. “She had doubts. The princess couldn’t understand why he would have dealings with the devil. Out of fear, she fled alone. And Rafael’s soul became trapped in the bridge. Since then, it has never snowed. He loved it. The snow.”

“And the princess?” Anne asked, dreading the answer.

Leonor averted her eyes. “She never recovered, and in a sense, she became trapped, too.”

The weight of tragic love and broken promises settled heavily on Anne’s heart. Could it be Lord Rafael’s eternal lament she had heard? Anne rubbed the older woman’s back. “That’s so sad.”

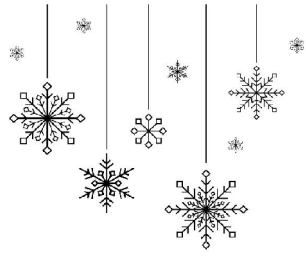
The housekeeper grabbed her arm with surprising force. “He speaks with you. There must be a reason.”

Anne backed away, shaking her head. “I don’t know what reason there could be.” She and Pedro loved each other. Certainly, they were free from such a curse. “I love my husband.”

“Love is not enough. The curse runs deeper. Who loves, sees himself, who accepts, sees the other. A pact with darkness, a

secret cost, snowless Christmases, a love long lost.” As she recited the verses, the housekeeper’s voice grew softer.

After helping Leonor into a chair, Anne gave her a glass of water. She shouldn’t have forced the poor woman to speak. The curse was in riddles. Pedro wasn’t sad. He was merely missing his brother. And uncomfortable with their guests. She had made Leonor distraught for nothing. From now on, Anne would leave this folk tale well alone.



Chapter 7

The air inside the greenhouse was thick with the earthy aroma of damp soil, mingled with the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers, the moisture condensing on Anne's lips. Julia strolled among the potted herbs. Anne, her arms linked with Isabel, trailed behind her botanical-savvy sister-in-law. How difficult was it to ask their friends about Pedro?

Where had that thought come from? She refused to believe there was something wrong with him. The curse had nothing to do with his shifting moods. She was sure they would pass. She already knew the perfect cure for his... his mood. Still, after her attempts to show him how wonderful children could be had failed utterly, she needed a new plan.

Clara's giggles echoed over the glass roof, pulling Anne from her thoughts. Flor arranged flowers in the little girl's hair. Julia's statuesque maid had a hairdressing talent, and with Isabel's tiara crowning Clara's black curls, she looked like a princess. After the picnic, Clara developed an adoration for Pedro. Anne couldn't blame her. When he picked the girl up and saved her from the ants, a perfect knight in shining armor, warmth had infused Anne's chest, and she had been certain her plan had worked. But nothing about Pedro was simple. As soon as his protective streak had flared, he banked it, assuming the aloof facade he showed to the outside world.

Julia, her brow furrowed in concentration, stopped by a green bush and extracted a leaf. "Lemon balm. I love the scent. Good for anxiety and insomnia. Tastes delicious in a tea."

Isabel sniffed the plant. “I don’t have trouble sleeping.”

“It’s for me,” Julia said, lifting her brows.

Anne placed her hand atop Julia’s arm and pressed affectionately. Look at her, focusing on her own issues when her sister was worried. “My brother can be a cantankerous oaf sometimes, but he won’t send Tony away against your wishes.”

Julia closed her eyes. “I know. It’s just... Tony had always been like a bottle of *frisante* — lively, effervescent. All of a sudden, he turned into a *vinho verde*, unpredictable and tart. And I have no knowledge of white wines.”

Isabel perked up. “Have you considered hiring a tutor? I heard German teachers are all the rage in court. I can arrange to import one for you if you wish.”

Anne smiled at Isabel’s pricessing. At first, she thought Julia and Isabel would be too different to get along, but both women became friends. Isabel admired how Julia had turned an Englishman into a Portuguese Patriot, while Julia was grateful Isabel married Henrique, so the rakish scientist stopped pestering Griffin about their flirtations in the past. Anne loved them both, Julia as a dear sister and Isabel as her best friend.

“A German tutor? Why not? Prussia is famous for Rieslings. Perhaps he can teach me about white wine.” Julia shrugged. “Now for your digestive discomfort.”

“I wouldn’t utter it in so many words. It’s more of a little pain in my stomach.” Blushing, Isabel caressed her belly.

Anne felt a pang of jealousy. She had married first. Shouldn’t she be the first to give birth?

“I will gather some rose hips, chamomile, and peppermint, and you can take it in your tea. Should get you better soon.”

“My senses are so heightened lately... I can scent what the cook is up to from my bedroom and Henrique’s cologne. Goes to my head immediately.”

“It’s a perk of being pregnant. One of the good ones.”

Anne sighed, closing her eyes. Her hand went to her empty tummy, and a wave of longing hit her in the chest. The sun streamed through the greenhouse’s glass panels, casting elongated shadows on the plants. Anne traced the outline of a leaf with her finger. She wanted to talk about Pedro, about his moods, but the words seemed trapped, heavy in her throat. She glanced at her sister-in-law and friend, both engrossed in the healing properties of herbs.

Swallowing hard, she started, “Pedro has been...” Anne trailed off, her eyes darting away.

Her sister-in-law looked up. “What is it, dear?”

Anne took a deep breath, her eyes moistening. “It’s just... How did you both convince your husbands to...”

“Start selling wine by the bottle?” Julia grinned, a mischievous glint in her eye.

“To think about starting a family?” Anne blurted.

Isabel exhaled, assuming a teacher-like expression. “A matter of diplomatic maneuvering. You have to raise his desire for fatherhood and let him think the idea was his.”

Anne nodded, her smile tugging at the sides of her face. Maneuvering Pedro? She would have better luck with a wild tiger.

She traced the rough bark of a potted tree. Tiny saplings surrounded the trunk like chicks around the mother hen. After the picnic debacle, she would have to face the truth... “And if the desire is foreign to him?”

Julia shook her head. “Really, Anne, Pedro will relent if you present him with your reasons in a business-like manner. It’s our bodies, and with a few exceptions, the father doesn’t even take much interest in rearing children.”

“I beg your pardon, little miss, but you should keep your talents in winemaking.” Flor placed her fists on her cocked hips. “I better give Aninha a piece of advice.” She covered Clara’s ears. “You don’t need diplomacy. That man of yours is so potent he can impregnate with his heated looks. All you have to do is seduce him.”

Anne’s cheeks heated, not accustomed to hearing such blunt words, but Flor, with all her flamboyant personality, had a heart of gold, and one had to admit she understood a lot about love and men.

“Ladies, to take your husbands in hand, all you need is sitting right here.” Flor rummaged through a bush.

Isabel gasped. Julia chuckled. Anne went on her tiptoes and tilted her head to see what she had collected.

A cucumber?



Anne arrived at the stable and halted, intimidated by the baroque building. The gilded ornaments seemed to mock her intentions. She, a girl of twenty, trying to maneuver a warrior of Pedro’s caliber?

She was his wife. He chose her, and all she asked of him was a family. But could she do this? Enter a stable buck naked, wearing only a black silk cape for protection while her guests played tennis on the lawn?

Hemera grazed on the paddock, her frizzy mane floating with the mountain breeze. She lifted her head and looked right at Anne with her gentle, understanding eyes.

“It was you who taught me to trust him, remember? When we faced the precipice eons ago. You were ready to follow him into the underworld, and I trusted your judgment.”

Erebus’ loud, bass neigh came from inside, and Hemera answered the stallion with a keening sound — forgetting

Anne. Traitor.

Anne grasped Flor's words for courage. Of all her friends, Flor was the wisest regarding the opposite sex. If only Flor's teachings could make Pedro forget about his control... blasted, delicious control. Why couldn't Pedro lose himself with her... In her? Like she did every time he touched her? He didn't even have to touch her. When he said her name with that husky, throaty voice, she promptly relinquished control, clothes, everything.

What would it be like to receive his seed in her womb? She would roll herself into a cocoon, an acorn, and wait for spring, wrapped up in Pedro's arms.

Hugging herself, Anne entered the stable.

The scent of hay tickled her nose. The corridor was empty. Only the sounds of munching grass and Erebus' rhythmic stomps filled the space.

Anne opened the door to the tack room. Pedro was sitting on a stool behind her saddle, polishing the leather. He didn't allow anyone else to touch it. The saddle was propped over a stand, hiding part of his torso. The air inside was warm. He had shed his coat and cravat and worked only in shirtsleeves. When first she saw him, she had been dazzled by his presence, by his magnetic appeal. Time had not dimmed an inch of her reaction to him.

Pedro's golden hair was neatly pulled back from his face, only one lucky strand allowed to kiss his forehead. Anne followed its design to the corner of his upper lip.

There was no catching Pedro by surprise. War and his father had taken that away from him, for better or worse, and by the time she stood on the threshold, shivering under the cape, she already had his full attention.

Under the watchful light of his topaz eyes, she stepped into his space.

“Anne.”

No question, no accusation. A statement. She could manage that, at least.

“Husband. You didn’t show up for lawn games.”

“Is that why you came?”

“I’ve brought you something.”

He cocked his head to the side.

Her voice trembled a little. “My Gyges ring. I want to be invisible.”

His pupils dilated, and he licked his bottom lip, pushing his stool backward.

Taking that as an acceptance, she latched the door. She needed no audience for her plan.

“What would you do if you were invisible?”

When he had asked her that same question two years before, she had stammered and fled, unable to voice her wishes. Now, she was older and stronger, and still, it wasn’t easy. One look from his magnetic eyes and she was reduced to the same vulnerable, shy girl who had boarded the Dawn Chaser. That

trip never finished. She was still sailing the tumultuous waters of Pedro Daun—her life’s greatest adventure.

“I want to touch you,” she whispered.

Back then, he had used the example of the Gyges ring to teach her about human nature, how anyone, if given the power of invisibility, would choose to do something nefarious. Instead, his lesson had turned into seduction when he had forced her to reveal her innermost desire — to touch the man who despised touch.

“Do you remember the rules?” The bass of his voice pulled her back to the present.

She nodded briskly. “I will have my wish, but afterward, it will be your turn.”

“Very well,” he said, and without taking his eyes off her, he cleaned his hands on the rag and threw it away.

Then he raised his arms, the muscles in his shoulders and biceps contracting, and tugged his hair free.

“It’s not your hair I want to touch this time.”

Pedro’s brows furrowed, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Can you please remove your shirt, Your Excellency?”

A subtle, impressed smile lifted the corner of his lips. Ha, he didn’t anticipate her bold move. Well, husband, she wasn’t as predictable as he thought. A sense of accomplishment washed over her, and she suppressed a triumphant grin, savoring the satisfaction of her small victory.

He stood abruptly. The tack room became much smaller. And warm. His hypnotic eyes caressed her while he undid the buttons of his shirt and shrugged away the white linen. Anne's gaze traveled the expanse of his chest, his skin still bronzed from their week at the yacht. Pedro had the body of an Adonis and the scars of a warrior. The play of light and shadows emphasized his lean perfection. She lingered over the trail of golden hair starting on his navel and vanishing inside his trousers. Her mouth suddenly dry, Anne licked her lips.

With a subtle nod to her, he sat back on the stool, his stance now challenging.

Anne moved softly behind him and fished inside her pocket for the black cravat. Fumbling a little, she pressed the silk over his eyes. The chill she felt outside was replaced by a sudden heat. Would she ever tire of his textures, his temperature, his power? And to know he only accepted touch from her? It stirred her in ways she could not explain.

Because she had a weakness for his hair, Anne sifted her fingers through the silky strands. The length was perfect, long enough for her to lose herself, but not so long that she couldn't feel the warmth of his scalp beneath.

How could such a rough warrior have such soft hair? As if she didn't know... It was why she fell in love with him, wasn't it? Anne had dreamed of marrying a perfect prince, but it was in the imperfect warrior's arms that she found perfection.

While she would spend hours touching his hair, she wanted more. She massaged his shoulders, and when he sighed,

leaning back on her, she glided her hands to his torso. A shudder coursed through Pedro, and the way his breathing caught thrilled her. His skin was warm and smooth, deceptively soft against the steel beneath. Bolder now, she allowed her nails to graze over his chest, enjoying how his muscles rippled.

Before she lost herself in him, she moved to his front and undid the buttons of her cape. The silk whispered around her as she knelt before him. She nurtured no illusions that he didn't know where she was or what she was up to. Pedro's sharp intake of breath and straight posture signaled that he was aware the surprises weren't over.

He stood still, even blindfolded, fully alert.

She nudged his legs apart and shifted closer. With trembling fingers, she reached for the placket of his trousers.

“Ana.”

“You shouldn't question my desires.”

The air grew denser, wrapping around Anne's skin like the finest silk, and the cool floor beneath her knees contrasted with the warmth spreading through her core. The cedar of his cologne faded, overshadowed by the raw scent of anticipation.

Anne opened the fastenings and freed his member. He was erect, the skin puckered over the base and stretched taut at the tip. Even this part of him was beautiful... and menacing. Anne's courage faltered her. She had never taken the initiative. But after her talk with Flor, she couldn't help but feel there

were things Pedro had kept her from doing, perhaps fearing for her innocence. Still, she craved this, and taking hold of him with both her hands, she leaned forward and closed her lips around the tip. Heat invaded her as if she stood in front of a furnace. Pedro's musky scent surrounded her. The skin was smooth, like kid leather pulled tight, and she rolled her tongue, wanting to experience all the textures.

Pedro hissed, his hips bucking, and then his hands clamped her head. As she licked the blunt tip, wild energy emanated from him, and his grip tightened as if unsure if he wanted to pull her closer or push her away. He liked this. The feeling was heady, like a potent wine, and she tasted the moment on her tongue, a mix of sweet victory and the metallic tang of power.



His heart vaulted inside his chest, and Pedro wrestled the cravat from his face. Anne was kneeling between his legs, her plump lips around his cock, her hair spilling over his feet. The cape gaped open, revealing her pert breasts. He froze. If the sensation had exploded his senses, the visual had him reeling. Struggling to draw in air, he closed his eyes, trying to center himself.

Groaning, Pedro pulled her from him.

Her lips slid away, leaving a trail of wet fire.

He had forsaken his defenses for her, and he would do it again and again. But in this, in lovemaking, he was in control. He was the one who worshiped her.

He controlled his breathing, but his muscles rivaled with his cock for hardness. He couldn't think with her between his thighs. Catching her by the waist, he sat her atop the saddle.

Her appearance, hot, unapologetic, seductive, tempted him beyond endurance, so he lowered his eyes from the proud peak of her breasts, past her taut abdomen, and down her legs. A red blotch marred her fair skin.

“You scraped your knees.” Pedro moved in the space between her thighs, his every fiber screaming for him to wrap her long legs around his hips and claim her.

But Pedro had not survived two courts and three wars by being gullible. Even angels had hidden intentions. Why had she come? In the middle of the day, demanding invisibility?

“It's nothing.” She tried to cover her breasts with the cape, but the silk caught under her, and she only succeeded in exposing more of herself. “You never allow me to do this to you, even though you always do it to me. Pedro, you placed me on a pedestal, and I—”

“You belong on a pedestal,” Pedro said, tracing the star-shaped birthmark above her hipbone.

“I want to be on the same level as you,” she whispered, and her eyes flashed the blue of the ocean in winter.

“Angels shouldn’t be at the same level as sinners.” He skimmed his hands over her shins, enjoying how her lips parted in response.

Her eyes searched his face, her brow furrowing. “But—”

Pedro silenced her with a finger over her lips. “Now it’s my turn to be invisible.”

“What will you do?” She crossed her arms over her chest, her breathing shallow.

“I will show you your wings.”

She frowned, her eyes following his every move.

“Is this necessary? I don’t think you honestly believe what you are saying, and all I—”

Pedro tied the cravat around her head. Her stream of words halted, and she held to the saddle for balance.

His pulse quickened — part of him urged him to pull her close, to feel the flutter of her heart against his, to see if it raced just as erratically. The other part, the murky one, wanted more. With Anne, he threaded the thin line of love and control, intimacy and invasion, reverence and obsession.

Steadying her with a hand on her hip, he guided her right leg over the pommel. When she straddled the saddle, he adjusted the cape underneath her to cover all exposed leather. He would not risk chafing her skin.

He caught a riding crop and tested the leathery loop against his palm. Rigid enough to produce a startling sound but soft

and flexible not to hurt.

With the crop's tip, he peeled the right side of the cape and then the other. Silk whispered over skin, baring her completely. Contrasting with the muted, brown colors of leather, her skin shone, the glow and dawn of the Mediterranean. Champagne-colored hair tumbled down her back to tease the dimples above her derrière. The blond tuft atop her mound flitted against the silk of the cape. Heat invaded his chest and pooled at his groin.

“Not an angel?” Like an ethereal being, she radiated light, drawing him into her luminous aura. The angel who had lifted him from darkness. “I wish you could see yourself now.”

Pedro brushed the crop against her neck, gathering her hair to the side. Her breath caught, and goosebumps rose in waves over her skin.

“Your wing starts here on your scapula,” He touched the point just below her shoulder blade, and he drew it down slowly until he caressed her left buttock. “All the way to here.”

She arched her back. He did the same to her other side, lingering on the perfect globe.

“Why did you come today, Anne?”

She bit her lip. “Can't I visit my husband during the daytime?”

Whispery soft, he tapped her thigh with the crop. “Careful, I eat little angels for breakfast.”

He knew the pain was intensified by the threat of the blow, just as the pleasure was enhanced in waiting for the caress.

“I came to touch—”

He snapped the crop against the cream of her skin. “Don’t lie to me. You wanted something else.”

Anne lifted her chin, a very proud angel. “I wished to be the seducer.”

“Ah, so the little angel craved control?” He leaned forward and spoke near her ear. “It is intoxicating, isn’t it?”

Pedro circled her slowly. She cocked her head to the side, listening. He stopped in front of her. When he touched the crop to her cleavage, her breath hitched. In war, he became an expert in finding places that produced the fastest death, the most merciful, the most excruciating. In their marriage, he learned which places to tease, to tickle, to lick, enhancing their pleasure. Lazily, he lowered the crop until it stood above her navel. She shifted, opening her thighs, a subtle invitation. Pedro rested the tip against her mound, and waited, refraining from giving her the friction she needed.

“Do you think the angel should control the sinner, Anne? Wouldn’t that overturn the order of the heavens?”

Anne set her jaw, a defiant little smile playing over her lips. “Oh, I—” She leaned forward, brushing her mound against the saddle, searching for the friction he had denied her. Her arousal perfumed the air. “I wonder if angels do this?”

Pedro paused, forgetting where he meant to touch her next. Heat pulsed in his groin, and he gripped the crop to the point of breaking it in two. She purred, and her hips moved in shy languor. Still, her seduction was a little too deliberate to fool him. His lips tugged up in a smile he was glad his angelic cupid didn't see. A kitten baiting a lion.

Pedro stood by her side. With her weight propped by the saddle, they were hip to hip. He caressed her thigh and paused short of her entrance. Her muscles contracted and released, her mound brushing against the black silk.

Pedro held her neck, his hand circling it easily. "Careful, Ana, naughty angels don't get their slice of heaven."

She stilled.

Satisfied with her compliance, Pedro let go and tenderly traced the rose of her lips. The image of them wrapped around his cock was still imprinted in his brain.

"I don't care about heaven. I only want to be where you are." She sucked his finger into her mouth.

Pedro's breath caught, heart speeding. He covered her mound with his palm, letting her feel the heat.

Her hips moved against his hand, her skin flushed. "Pedro, please."

Satisfaction coursed through him. She was the angel, and he, the devil who protected her. It was all about her, but he got control. "Angels are so pretty when they beg."

He positioned himself behind her. With a hand on her back, he forced her forward until her chest was level with the saddle. The new position lifted the globes of her derriere and opened her sex to him. At the first contact of his tongue, Anne screamed. Pedro feasted on her sex until she shuddered with pleasure. Her body became limp, molten light, and he caught her in his arms. Balancing her onto his lap, he sat on the stool.

Anne kissed his chin and the corner of his lips. Her hand, poised above his chest, started a low descent to his navel.

He seized her wrist. “No.”

“But you didn’t —”

“You are fertile.”

She gasped. “How do you know?”

“Your taste changes, and your desire. I keep track of it, so I —”

She struggled out of his lap. “Don’t give me the child I want?”

“Is that why you came? For my seed?”

Her face flushed, and she followed him as he collected his discarded clothing. “Not like that. I want my belly to grow. I want to have my feet swollen and my senses to expand. I want to smell things I never did before. More than anything, I want to give you a son!”

“You bruised your knees for nothing. I won’t be a father. Not now, not ever.”



Anne watched Pedro leave. A storm started in her chest, so strong it threatened to pull everything into its void. How could Pedro control her like this? Shouldn't she have a say in the matter? Her own body? The incessant hits on the wall pierced her anger, and she shook herself. With trembling fingers, she buttoned up her cape and left the tack room.

Erebus pounded away his frustration on the stall's door.

At her approach, the war horse lifted his head. The stallion looked at her sideways, its fathomless black eyes assessing her. After that fateful day at the arena, he had stopped trying to trample her, but to say they became friends would be an overstatement.

Hemera neighed from the paddock. They both stared at the mare, her white coat reflecting the afternoon sun.

Erebus lowered his head and renewed his siege against the door.

Anne's heart sped up. Would she be brave enough to defy Pedro's wishes?

Well, he didn't care much for her wishes, did he?

Before the fire of courage deserted her, Anne freed the latch. It was all the help Erebus required. He pummeled the door

open. With a swoosh, two thousand pounds of horseflesh crashed out of the stall. Anne gulped, her heart speeding and cold sweat breaking out on her brows. What had she done?

Erebus's horseshoes left sparks as he sped to the exit. He didn't break gallop, and with a majestic jump, he cleared the fence, the last obstacle between him and Hemera.

Her mare, her first friend when fate placed her in Pedro's path, calmly waited, her head raised, her elegant ears alert.

Beautiful, courageous Hemera faced the horse who brought terror even to Portugal's most ferocious bulls. Anne held her breath, holding the fence for support.

Black overcame white as Erebus reacquainted himself with the mare, neighing and nipping her. Hemera pricked her ears, ever poised, while Erebus reared up, punching the air. Anne observed until Hemera's gentleness broke through Erebus's eagerness, and he settled into nosing her neck and blowing on her mane.

They were impressive apart — he the God of Darkness conjured out of muscles and shadows, she the Goddess of light, made of graciousness and snow — but together, they dazzled. Anne sighed, mesmerized by the sight.

Then, in a blur of shadows and light, they took off for the forest, no fence tall enough to keep them fettered.

Hemera had stood her ground, and Erebus didn't trample her as Pedro had feared. If Hemera dared to face Erebus, why couldn't Anne confront her husband?

She would speak with him now and demand to be included in their decisions. Holding on to her determination, Anne left the stables and headed towards the house. During the walk through the formal garden, her resolve solidified. She loved him. Without him, her life was like an empty white space, no textures, no scent, no colors. She knew he loved her too, in his intense, protective way. Once he understood she was ready to leave the pedestal, that she craved space by his side, he would allow them to be partners.

The family gathered around the lawn. Henrique played tennis with her brother, their grunts loud and turning louder. While Julia and Isabel watched the game, no doubt cringing at the not-so-subtle competitiveness streak between their soul mates, Tony hacked at an olive tree with a racket, and Clara waltzed with her doll. Pedro was nowhere nearby. For once, Anne thanked her husband's isolation. He had to be in his study.

Inside the house, the housekeeper tried to get her attention. "Lady Daun, a moment, if you please. About the *luminarias* you sent to the village."

"Not now, Leonor, I'm sorry." She felt the need to add, and clutching the black cape closer, she kept on.

Conscious of her nakedness, she raced down the stairs to his study. Midway, she stopped, her righteousness giving way to uneasiness. Why did Pedro's private room have to be down in the bowels of the fortress? Holding the railing, she negotiated the dank steps.

Outside his door, she paused.

Should she do this? What if it ruined everything they had? Perhaps she should leave... Return to the family and enjoy the last days of the holiday. Her marriage didn't have to change. She was happy with him.

Anne traced the oak, trying to divine a course in its intricate design. She paced a few steps, her movements hesitant and unsteady, her body torn between two directions. If she left, she would remain in the shadows, never truly a part of his world.

She didn't want the pedestal. After a deep breath, she pushed the heavy oak out of the way and tiptoed inside. The heavy curtains had been drawn, and shadows thickened the corners. Silence greeted her, the brass clock admonishing her for invading her husband's private space.

Pedro wasn't inside.

Anne wandered to his desk.

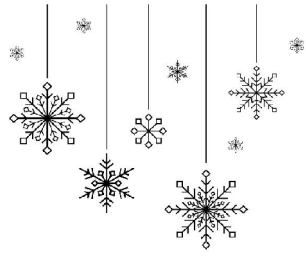
The gaslamp flickered, its wavering light reflecting over a shiny object atop the rosewood top. It was a ring. Anne caught the strange piece and recognized Pedro's father's signet, a crown and a sword. Why would this be here when the duke lived in London?

A letter rested under the ring. Anne took it with trembling fingers, her gaze straying to the door. Dated nearly two weeks before and signed by The Duke of Palmela, Portugal's diplomat in London. Anne scanned the lines. Pedro's father had passed away.

Anne's body froze, her eyes widening. That's why Pedro was so distant, so burdened. It all made sense now — the shock, the isolation. Pedro grieved.

Love, why didn't you confide in me? She exhaled deeply, her hand brushing against her chest to steady her heart.

Anne dropped the letter on Pedro's desk. His father had died. His father had died, and Pedro didn't tell her. She was less than an angel on a pedestal for him. At least an angel had the sinner's faith.



Chapter 8

Pedro paced the length of the lookout tower. She had wanted to seduce him. His little angel had shed the wings and devised a plan to get what she wanted. A little smile tugged the corner of his lips, and though he was painfully hard, he had to admire her cunning. Perhaps it was not only in the bedchamber that he had chipped her innocence.

The river had turned tumultuous, the water scraping to show the pointed rocks beneath. It was here at this very spot, holding a chassepot rifle, that he had made the decision that forever changed their lives. He could have returned Anne to her family, and she would've gone on with her life and married another.

The thought poisoned him, and he gripped the railings, shutting his eyes.

He had given her a choice. She could've gone back to Maxwell when the slave trader was arrested.

After he seduced her? Hardly.

There was no point in reenacting the past. Anne was his, his angel, his wife, to protect, to seduce, to cherish, to debauch. He couldn't give her a child, but he would keep lavishing her with everything else.

Nothing would change their lives. Didn't he deserve the peace?

Movement below caught his attention. A flash of black and white raced toward the woods. Pedro grabbed his binoculars. Erebus and Hemera. How had the stallion escaped?

In the past, he had tried breeding the war horse to a draft mare, sturdier than the delicate Hemera, and the poor animal had almost died.

Pedro strode out of the lookout. If he saddled another horse, he could corner them, hopefully before Erebus could do irreversible damage.

He descended the stairs, his boots clattering over the stone steps.

At the landing, sitting like a statue with her eyes closed and her head resting against the wall, was Anne. She knew about her mare already.

Pedro controlled his breathing so as not to alarm her. "I will go after them. If Erebus hurts her, I will buy you another horse."

"Erebus won't hurt Hemera. He values her. She is his chosen mate." Anne wouldn't look at him.

He clenched his jaw, his gaze straying to the window. "He might have harmed her already. He is a war horse, a brute."

"No. Hemera is safe with him."

Pedro narrowed his eyes. "How can you be so certain?"

"Because I let him loose." Her voice was low, almost a whisper.

A rush of heat surged through Pedro, a tight knot forming in his stomach. "You disobeyed my orders."

Anne's fingers unfurled, revealing the crumpled envelope and his father's ducal seal. "Your father died. Why didn't you tell me?"

Pedro's temper flared, his voice rising. "First, you try to seduce me, and now you read my private correspondence?"

The intensity of his anger caught her off guard, making her flinch.

"I was looking for you. And then I saw the letter. Why didn't you tell me?" Her voice came out soft yet hurt.

With a swift motion, Pedro removed the paper from her hand, his eyes never leaving hers. "I chose not to relate the news because it wasn't relevant—"

Anne gasped. "Not relevant? I barely recognized you these past few days. You are tense, unstable—"

"I don't care if he is dead. He's been dead to me for a long time."

She reached out, touching his arm, her eyes brimming with tears. "That's not true. You are grieving. The feelings you have for your father are not black or white, please—"

He shook his head, pulling away from her touch. Memories of his tumultuous past climbed out of their holes, threatening his sanity. His father was an evil man. Both her parents had loved her. What did she know of his wretched childhood with the duke? "You are too good to understand—"

She stepped forward, desperation clear in her voice, "Stop. I'm tired of being the angel on the pedestal. I want to share

everything with you. I want to be your partner.”

He shook his head and went to the bookshelves. His shoulders were rigid, and his breathing shallow. She wanted a peek inside his mind? The menagerie of fractured pieces? She would judge her sanity by choosing him as her husband. No, he built this, them. The glass dome he'd constructed around their meadow shimmered in his mind's eye. Every word Anne spoke, every plea she made, she banged on its surface.

Her expression was pleading. If he let her in, perhaps — what if the dome could evolve?

She placed her palm over his arm, her touch warm enough to sear his skin. “Pedro, please. Tell me about your father. About your feelings. This is hurting you. I know it is.” Her voice wavered, her eyes glistening with unshed tears.

A yearning to drown in her eyes, to let her in, to confide in her of the memories so she could make sense of it, took him by surprise.

“Is that why you are afraid to be a father?”

A wave of panic surged through him, and his heart raced. His father had been an evil man. Pedro pushed away from her, his voice rising. “I'm the Duke of Titano now. Is that what you wanted to hear? Do you know what the Titans did to their progeny? They ate them. Is that what you wish for your children?”

Anne's lips parted, her face pale, her eyes wide and shocked.

There, she finally knew the truth. Pedro stared at her, his heart pounding against his ears.

Anne lifted her chin. “I won’t back away, Pedro. I can’t live atop the pedestal. I want more.”

Pedro’s throat tightened, and a cold sweat formed on his brow. “I give you everything. All that I can give.” His voice broke, his eyes searching hers. Why did she want this now? If he allowed her to break the dome, she would never look at him the same way. Yet, if he reinforced the walls, he might lose her.

Anne shook her head, her lips quivering. “I don’t think our marriage can continue like this.”

A cruel smirk formed on his face, masking the turmoil inside. “I picked up a thing or two about parenting. I could teach you. Do you know that fear is a powerful tool for chiseling character? The secret is identifying what the child loves the most, and then you threaten to remove it.” He touched her cheek. “But then, I feel you already learned the concept.”

Anne stepped back. “After Christmas, I will spend a few weeks with Julia and Griffin on Vesuvio.”

The pain was immediate and sharp, like a knife to his heart. Pedro watched her turn to the door.

The dome had crumbled.



What have I done? What have I done? What have I done?

Anne dragged herself through the house. The hallway stretched before her, infinite, Pedro's works of art blurring as tears drowned her vision. She needed solitude, a quiet corner where she could crumble.

A frantic voice broke through her haze of pain. "Anne!"

It was Julia, her face a mask of concern. "I've been searching everywhere for you."

Anne halted, swiping at her tear-streaked face. "Julia, I really can't right now. I need to—"

"I must find Pedro," Julia interrupted, her voice high-pitched. "I need his help. It's important."

Anne's heart constricted further. She couldn't face Pedro. Not yet. "I can't see him now," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "I need to lie down." Would Pedro even bother to help a family he found so bothersome?

Julia grabbed her arm, her grip tight. "Please, Anne." Her eyes searched her face. "It's not about you or him. It's the children. They're missing."



Pedro strode outside the house, his orders echoing in the cavernous foyer. He pushed all thoughts of Anne and their separation from his mind. If he were to find the children, he needed total focus. A winter gale hit him in the chest. The majestic oaks, once proud and tall, now shook like frail skeletons.

The women whispered in the courtyard, their colorful gowns contrasting with their grey complexions. Anne's face stood out. Her expression of disbelief at seeing him leading the search cut him deep. Did she believe he would shirk from this? Had he become Titano in her eyes already?

With a confident nod for Julia's sake, he kept on. Fifteen minutes later, he had gathered the men at the edge of the property. Pedro looked at the horizon. The sun had started its descent, and black clouds converged at the south as if preparing to assault the hill. None of the prospects boded well for the children.

“We separate here. Maxwell, take the pastures and the gardens. Henrique, sweep the north side. Dante, stay with the women. Don't allow them to leave the house.”

“What about the scarps?” Maxwell asked.

Pedro narrowed his eyes. "I'll take them." If the children went traipsing in that direction, they had probably met the riverbed. He wouldn't want Maxwell to see it. No father should witness such a scene.

Once more, Maxwell looked at him, panic very close to his surface. This time, Pedro felt no satisfaction over the fear in his brother-in-law's eyes. He clasped the other man's shoulder and fixed him with a resolute stare. "I know the terrain. If they went there, I will retrieve them."

Maxwell nodded, his English composure one thread away from snapping completely.

They set up their different paths.

The wind cut Pedro's face, the cold metallic. The scarps were a winding maze of sharp inclines and narrow ledges overlooking the river below. If the children had wandered that way, he would need to think like them and predict their movements.

The surrounding woods were still, save for the occasional rustle of dry leaves carried by the wind and the distant caw of a raven. Pedro's boots crunched on the frost-covered ground, disturbing the quiet landscape. The bare trees stood tall and eerie, casting long, sinewy shadows over his path.

Pushing onward, Pedro kept his eyes peeled, searching for any sign of their passage, scanning the rough texture of every tree, checking for any unnatural breaks. And then he found a series of broken twigs.

His pulse quickened. Moving with renewed urgency, he followed the trail. Just off the path, obscured by a clump of dry grass, was Clara's doll. Pedro bent to pick it up. The cloth was dirty and damp. A pang of fear gripped his heart. The children had indeed been here. Saint George had mercy on their souls.

Twenty minutes later, the evergreens closed ranks around him, their canopy swallowing the waning light. No more signs. The trail went cold. Where were they?

Panting, Pedro gazed towards the fortress. He couldn't see the house, just the desolate trees. He brushed his chest, the pain returning full force. Anne had dreamed of a perfect Christmas. Instead, they were on the brink of losing everything — the children, their marriage, all teetering on the edge of the scarp.

Pedro's heart sped, trying to break free from his ribs, the thuds echoing in his ears. The air burned as it rushed in and out of his lungs. What if he couldn't find them? If the trail vanished, the children were dead already. Anne would never forgive him.

Cold seeped into his great coat, and with it, a numbness. The rough terrain beneath his feet, the river's murmur, his heart's rapid beat — all became distant, muted. Pedro watched himself in the forest as if floating from the bone-dry branches. Part of him knew that if he allowed the double-think to catch him in the dead of winter as night crept in, bringing with it a host of predators, he was signing his death warrant. Yet,

another part of him didn't care. He tried to anchor himself to reality — the gnarled silhouettes of the oaks, the weight of the doll hidden in his cloak, the crust frosting the ground beneath his feet. But it was hopeless.

And just when the weight of it all threatened to crush him, a glimmer caught his eye.

Pedro shook his head. A soft, ethereal light flickered amidst the dense trees, dancing and weaving in the distance. The hair on the sides of his neck lifted. The light beckoned him. His instinct took command of his legs, propelling him after it. He didn't fight it.

He trod cautiously, always alert. The light's luminescence cast a gentle warmth, easing the chill that had settled on his skin and into his bones.

Closer to the precipice, the light vanished. It was then that he listened. A pitiful whine.

Pedro crouched at the edge of the scarp. Even though the clearing afforded more waning light than the forest, he could hardly see. At least ten feet below, Antonio lay on his stomach, holding onto a rock outcrop. But where was the girl? The wail again. Pedro peered below. Antonio's right arm stretched down, clasping onto something.

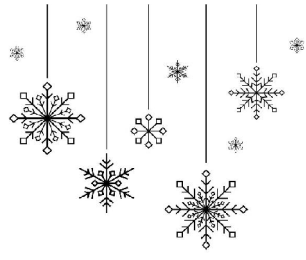
The scarps loomed, unforgiving and steep, as the children teetered on the brink. The air sliced through his lungs as he exhaled a steely breath, locking his gaze on the children.

“Stay still!”

Pedro sprang into action, and judging the rock sound, he vaulted. He landed by the boy's side. Antonio glanced at him, panic and relief warring in his youthful features.

The girl dangled from Antonio's arm, her hair flailing her pallid cheeks.

Before Pedro could act, the boy's hand gave way.



Chapter 9

“Lady Daun, what should we do with the Christmas feast?” The housekeeper intercepted Anne.

“What? I... I can’t think about it now, Leonor. Please excuse me.”

Anne pushed forward. When she arrived at the drawing room, she halted. Night had fallen with all its shadows. The Christmas tree was faded, as if rain had swept inside and snuffed all the pretty candles. The *luminarias*, too, stood dark and lonely, as if they missed the children. Julia held the rosary beads in her hands, her face scrunched up in concentration. Isabel stared into the fire, her hand cradling her tummy as if intent on protecting her unborn baby from a similar fate.

Anne had invited them here for the perfect holiday. She had taken Julia and her children from Vesuvio and brought them here for what? To show Pedro how children were wonderful? Christmas was ruined, and it was all her fault. Her chest felt burdened by a thousand winters. Could they ever recover from this? If only Pedro were here to tell her everything would be fine.

Anne dropped on the chaise, her back hunched like a rag doll.

The large double doors opened, bringing in dry leaves and a frigid blast of wind. The women stood. Anne’s heart sped, hoping against hope that they were all well. Henrique and Griffin entered, their faces reddened by the cold.

Julia clutched the beads to her chest, her expression a mix of hope and dread.

Griffin shook his head.

Julia cried out, and her legs gave way underneath her. In two strides, Griffin was by her side and caught her in his arms. Julia, resolute and strong Julia, crumbled, her formidable petite frame hunching over.

Anne had never seen her cry, not like this.

Henrique went to Isabel and embraced her, his hand rubbing her back. “We searched until the sunset, but there were no traces of them.”

Her sister-in-law buried her face in Griffin’s neck. “Tony thinks he is all grown up now, but he fears the dark. And Clara... Oh, my sweet baby, she never even slept alone.”

The wind howled outside. The children must be so cold and frightened. Her Pedro, too, hated darkness. Anne wrung her hands, her breathing so shallow she feared she was about to faint.

The footman closed the door. Still, a breeze swept into the sealed room. The luminaria, cold until that moment, breathed into life, its tiny flame casting shadows over the wallpaper.

A silence descended over the drawing room, the family staring at that tiny flame. The light flickered once, twice, and then stilled. As Anne watched her lantern glow, a sense of tranquility unfurled in her chest, and she was able to control her breathing.

Griffin hugged Julia. “We came for torches. We will go back to the search.”

“No,” Anne said, her voice calm and resolute.

Everyone stared at her.

She held her brother’s arm. “The property is closed. If you didn’t find the children, they went to the scarps.”

Griffin shook his head, his handsome face lined with worry. “I’ll go myself—”

“The scarps are too dangerous in the dark. One false step, and you will fall over the precipice.”

“But I—”

“Pedro will save them. He might not be the perfect family man, but I trust him with my life.” Anne imbued her gaze with certainty.

Her brother nodded, his chin falling to his chest.

She turned to her husband’s aide-de-camp. “Dante, ride to the village. Tell the villagers I ordered them to light their luminarias now.”

“But, my lady, you canceled the Christmas celebrations and said they shouldn’t—”

“Now, Dante.”

Anne placed her hands over the windowsill. The landscape had all the shades of darkness.

Love of My Life, give me ten children or give me none. Just come back to me.

She then approached the women. For the first time, they gazed at her, not trying to comfort her, the youngest among them, but looking at her for directions. It was easier to be the youngest, Anne realized, and much easier to let taller, stronger shoulders weigh the responsibility.

She had allowed Pedro to nurse his sorrows. Her half-hearted attempts to understand what he had been going through had been superficial, more a way to calm her own fears than to truly understand his struggles. Leonor's words echoed in her mind. *Love alone isn't enough. The curse runs deeper. In love, we often see only ourselves. In acceptance, we see the other.* Had her love been selfish, fixated on love itself rather than genuinely seeing Pedro? Was her worry more about her hurt from his sorrow than about his actual pain? Not anymore. If Pedro returned to her, she would delve into his feelings and help him deal with his grief.

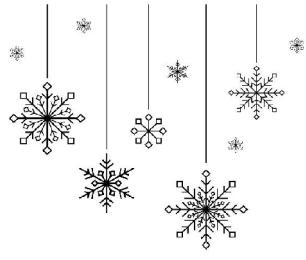
Anne caught Julia's hand in hers and then Isabel's and guided them to the Christmas tree. Silently, Anne lit three candles over the nativity scene, and they gathered around them, sitting cross-legged over the carpet. The serene figures, bathed in the candlelight, watched over their vigil.

Henrique sat behind Isabel and brought her closer atop his lap so her back rested over his chest.

Griffin embraced Julia. "I don't mind how Tony turns out. Nor Clara. As long as they return, they can join the circus for all I care."

Julia looked at Anne, her eyes pleading. “What do we do now?”

Anne met her friends and family’s gaze. “We pray.”



Chapter 10

With a guttural shout, Pedro launched himself after the children, the world narrowing to the expanse of space between them. Time stretched, his heart pounding like battle drums as his arms reached out, fingers grazing the chilled rocks.

The children's cries rose above the river's roar, spurring Pedro onward. As the ground crumbled beneath them, Pedro's arms encircled the children in a vice-like grip. The air was knocked out of him as he tumbled down the steep mountain, the stones scraping his back and shoulders. The riverbed loomed below.

He spotted a cave in a flash of instinct—a mere shadow against the cliff face. Pedro twisted his torso, guiding them away from the abyss, and used the momentum to steer them into the opening. Rocks lashed at them as they rolled into the cave, Pedro taking the brunt of the fall.

They skidded to a stop, a heap of breathless, pounding hearts in the dim shelter. Dust settled around them like the aftermath of a storm. The children clung to him, their sobs subsiding into quivering breaths.

Antonio broke away from Pedro, pulling the little girl close. The siblings embraced each other, a knot of grimy skin, dark hair, and luminous eyes. Memories of his brother flashed before him, and a familiar ache tightened in Pedro's chest. Cris should be here by now. Where was the rascal?

Pedro looked away from the brotherly love to inspect their surroundings. The entrance of the cave stood out against the

setting sun. The occasional gleam from the river cast ghostly ripples on the granite walls. The interior was narrow but deep. Nothing but dank rocks surrounded them, not even branches to provide kindling.

Tony pulled away from the girl and brushed his tears with angry swipes.

“Can we leave?”

“Not in the darkness. We’ll have to spend the night here. Now sleep.”

Pedro leaned back, stretching his legs over the opening to avoid any attempts to disobey his orders. Each breath he took felt heavy, laden with gelid air and responsibility. Pedro closed his eyes, attempting to lead by example. Memories of Anne and their exchange haunted him. How would he survive if she left? His mind spiraled, but the pressing concern of the children grounded him.

The boy laughed. “Do you think this will be easy? My mother complains she never gets to sleep because Clara keeps her eyes and mouth open no matter what.”

A distant hoot invaded the cave.

Clara began to wail, a sound that tugged at Pedro’s gut.

“What is wrong with her?”

“Oh, do you want a list? Let’s see. She almost died. She is scared, tired, and cold.” The boy enumerated with his fingers, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Jaw tense, Pedro turned to the girl. "Come here."

She obeyed, shuffling closer until her little legs brushed against his. Pedro patted her head, praising her obedience. During a battle, a soldier dealt with the necessities he could. The others had to wait. Pedro shifted to remove his coat for her. Before he could shed the heavy wool, the girl jumped onto his chest. His breath caught, and her warmth seeped into him.

Pedro's arms came around her instinctively. "Clara, hush."

His voice had some mysterious effect on her. She stopped crying and glanced at him. This close, her eyes were just like Anne's. It moved something in his chest, seeing those eyes. He never thought of children as carriers of pieces of loved ones.

The tears kept rolling down her dirt-smeared cheeks, and her chin trembled under silent sobs.

Pedro remembered the doll and retrieved it from the coat.

She instantly hugged it.

How could he comfort one so little? If only his Angel were here... Memories of a long-ago night when a girl with dawn in her eyes dazzled away his shadows swept through him, and he knew what to do.

Pedro sang. The lullaby came out rusty and graveled, but as he intoned the words, Clara stopped crying. Her tiny hand brushed against his hair once, twice, and then her eyelids fluttered, and she fell asleep in his arms.

He had dismembered a slave trader scheme, he had negotiated a wine treaty with the czar, he had helped avoid war

with Spain — all paled with this silent conquest in a dank cave.

The boy pressed himself to the farthest end of the cave, his teeth rattling with the force of his shivers. If he spent the night like this, Pedro would return a corpse to the mother. “Sit by my side and take my scarf.”

“No.” He shook his head stubbornly. “I know of you. You are a bad man.”

Night fell in earnest. The wind wheezed over the dank walls, the sound of banshees. Impenetrable darkness reigned, swallowing everything into its depths. A wolf howled in the distance. They were trapped in the shadows. Pedro’s breathing turned shallow, and his legs twitched. Darkness pressed against his face, thick and oily. Without light to check it, the memory clawed to the surface again. He could see his father’s tall frame. Pedro had been so young, only four. He heard sobs — a child’s and a man’s.

His father was dead. He would not allow him inside his life. But it was useless. The sounds of crying invaded his being. Sticking his nails into the stone, Pedro fought against the memory’s hold, but it was a lost battle. Dammit, not here.

A faint glimmer appeared on the other side of the river. Pedro rubbed his eyes. Flickering lights shimmered to life, one after the other. They were too small to be torches and too big to be fireflies. Slowly, and then faster, the riverbank was awash in the soft glow. *Luminarias*. Anne’s *luminarias*.

Each light that flared into life kindled a flame in Pedro's chest. A kiss, a whisper, a smile, a caress. Every little gesture of love Anne had taught him brushed against his skin. A deep sigh escaped his chest, and Pedro drank the vision before him, his shoulders relaxing against the cave wall.

"What's that?" Antonio shifted closer.

"Anne." If she did this, if she cared enough to light the night, then she still loved him.

Somewhere in the house, she knew he was here, and she cared. Her light washed away the darkness, leaving only determination. Pedro would endure the shadows, and he would return the children unharmed.

"Aninha?" The boy watched the riverbank, the glowing points reflecting on his olive skin. Without the bravado, he seemed much younger.

Pedro placed the woolen scarf around him. Antonio huddled close to his side and didn't protest.

"Clara is so stupid. She followed me into the woods. Now, her father will hate me even more. No doubt he will tell my mother it was my fault."

Pedro covered Clara with his coat and shifted so the outside wind would not touch her. "That Englishman is many things, but a liar isn't one of them."

"No? When he married my mother, he promised to take care of us, and now he wants to send me away."

Pedro studied Julia's son. Despite the dismissive tone, the boy was whispering. And the effort not to wake his sister resonated more than his rant.

“He wants you to be educated properly. To become a gentleman.”

“That's not why he wants me gone. My father, my real father, was a bad man. And I'm just like him.” He jutted out his chin. “Tell Clara. I was halfway to the forest when she appeared. If it weren't for her, I would be far from here now.”

That explained their disappearance. Antonio was running away, and Clara followed her brother. What an utter waste. One minute more, and they would have met the riverbed.

“I knew your father.”

“You did?” The boy's eyes lit up, but he quickly concealed the reaction and shrugged. “Don't bother telling me how good he was. I won't believe you.”

“He was a selfish bastard. I wanted to kill him more than once.”

The boy sucked in a breath.

Pedro's gaze pierced through the darkness. “Bernardo Ferreira was a weak, conniving drunkard who left your mother in a dire situation.”

Silence engulfed them as Antonio's shoulders sagged, the boy's defenses crumbling under the burden of truth. His eyes closed, and a ragged, whistling breath escaped his lips.

“And I suppose I will grow up to be just like him, huh? Like father, like son.” He looked into his hands as if already envisioning the terrible deeds he was fated to accomplish.

Pedro had shared Antonio’s dread for longer than he could remember. His heart clenched, and he averted his gaze. It was with difficulty that he spoke. “I knew your father, and I know you are nothing like him.”

Antonio’s head snapped up, the white of his eyes a stark contrast to the grime on his face.

“Your father would have left his half-sister to fall into the abyss. Selfish bastard he was, he would never have risked his life to save a stupid girl.”

“I couldn’t let her die.” Antonio’s admission hung between them and, with it, a truth and a promise. The truth of the boy’s goodness — the promise of the man he would become, shaped not by blood, but by choice.

“I knew your mother, too.” Pedro exhaled a pent-up breath.

“Huh?”

“When she was your age, she saved a boy. She did it selflessly, and he never forgot. When I look at you, I see her, not him.”

A weight lifted from Pedro’s shoulders.

This was for you, Julia, for saving the boy I was back then. He had been so lonely, so lost. But in the touch of a girl’s fingertips, he had found the man he wanted to be. Pedro still

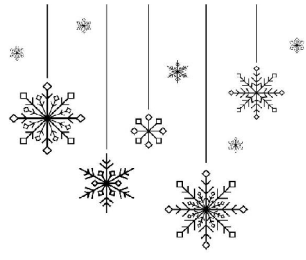
kept that boy in his chest, and for the first time, he dared to let him go.

Antonio gripped Pedro's hand with surprising force. "Do you think I can grow up to be good? Like my mother?"

Pedro would not lie to him. He deserved the truth. "We all have evil inside us. The amount is beyond our control." Especially for those who were born to bad fathers. "How much of this evil we use against others is our choice."

"But if my father was bad—"

"My father was bad as well. That only means we will have to control our evil even more."



Chapter 11

Anne woke up, brushing her arms. They had fallen asleep around the nativity scene. Griffin sprawled over the hard stone floor, and Julia slept above him. Her brother was so chivalrous that nothing of Julia's petite frame touched the ground. She was draped atop his chest, her face resting above his heart. Henrique had moved to the sofa and snored, a sleeping Isabel over his lap. Anne massaged her neck, her gaze straying to the window. Frail daylight filtered through the gauzy curtains.

It was Christmas morning.

The door opened with a creak, bringing in a gush of chilled wind. A tawny crop of hair poked through the gap, then a smaller, black one. The children. Anne sprang to her feet. They were safe. They tiptoed inside as if unsure of their welcome. Anne's heart squeezed when she saw Pedro's great coat on Tony and his cashmere scarf wrapped around Clara. She had been right, then. Pedro had saved the children. Of course, he did.

Julia awoke first, and with a whine, she launched herself up. Crying, she knelt in front of her daughter and son and hugged them, her sobs like a perfect Christmas carol.

Griffin embraced his family, his arms large enough to circle all.

Tony pulled away and looked into Griffin's eyes. "I know you must be mad, but I didn't take Clara. She followed me, and when —"

Griffin stopped Tony's words with a hug. "I know you didn't. Never leave us again."

Henrique yawned and patted Isabel's thigh. "See, I told you children were bliss. You had nothing to worry about."

Isabel rolled her eyes and pulled him in for a kiss.

Anne sped past the family. Where was Pedro? Why didn't he enter with the children? She needed to see him.

Tony caught her arm. "Your husband is a good fellow. I might want to be a ruthless politician myself someday."

She would rather be married to one.

Smiling, Anne left the house. Her eyes scanned the pastures and the gardens. A pale winter sun reflected over the fog. She followed its trail until she saw a flash of gold atop the bridge. Anne raced to him.

Pedro leaned over the stone railing, a vase in his hand. What was he doing there? Was he still hurt she had threatened to leave? Was that why he didn't return with the children?

She ambled closer, fidgeting with her skirt. Pedro was shedding his father's ashes, and when he finished, he placed the urn over the railing. He gazed at the distance, his profile to her. Sunlight melted the fog to caress him — golden hair, disheveled and loose, the straight nose, and uncompromising chin. The chiseled perfection only she could touch.

He turned to her, noticing her presence. How would he receive her?

He gazed back at the river. “My father loved to sail. A Portuguese through and through. Some say that’s why our nations are friends — this shared love for the ocean.”

“It’s beautiful here. A fitting resting place.”

“Indeed.”

He was silent for a long moment, and Anne’s throat closed when she noticed the unshed tears glistening in his eyes. She had seen his gaze stormy, placid, indifferent, cruel, heated... but never like this. It took all her willpower to stay in the same spot, clutching her skirts instead of going to him.

“I did as you said. I read my father’s letter.”

Anne stepped closer, tears rasping her throat.

“He asked for forgiveness.” His voice came out strained.

Anne kissed his palm, then brushed it against her cheek. Why did this have to be so hard on him? She loved this brooding politician, no matter what he did or didn’t. Her love was thick and all-consuming, and nothing could separate him from her.

“He repented many of his sins. But most of all, he regretted never telling me how proud he was of me. God, I forgive him. But I won’t be the Duke of Titano. I will write to the king. The title will die with my father.”

“Pedro, it is not wrong to grieve for your father.”

He shook his head. “Since I learned of his death, I’ve been besieged by a memory. I tried to fight it, but it overcame me.”

Pedro gripped the railings, his shoulders tense. “When my mother died, my father was heartbroken and vowed he would strengthen me. So I would never have to go through the same pain. I remembered it. When she died, I remembered his sobs. I tried to forget how he was when my mother was alive. I loved him. That is why I didn’t want to talk about him with you. How twisted is a man who loves his evil father?”

“No!” Anne cried and held his hands.

“If you want to leave, I will understand. When you married me, you hoped to mend me.” He shook his head. “But there are things inside, the memories. They are better, but they will never go away. The happiness you brought demolished my previous fortress. You are my meadow of light. I couldn’t protect it, so I built a dome around us. Not because I don’t think you are capable or mature enough to deal with problems, but because I wanted to keep our meadow safe from changes.”

And what was a more significant change than a child?

After living all his life in darkness, could she condemn him for wanting to protect all the light he could catch? When that was what Pedro did best? Protect? He protected his brother all his life. Julia when she was sick. His father, the least deserving person in the world, her from a fate worse than death and now, her brother’s children.

If Pedro couldn’t accept change, then she would accept him. She would stand by his side and cup her hands, trying to hold sunlight, even knowing that life, as sunlight, was impossible to contain.

“I want my love to be the mortar that keeps our dome strong. I want my love to reach here,” she caressed his brow, “and when the pieces are shifting and drifting apart, I want to be the magnet that holds them together. And most of all, I want my love to bathe you in light.”

His breath caught, and he searched her eyes, his gaze intense.

“I accept you as you are. Protector, lover, warrior, the kind, the ruthless, the broken. I want to help you delve into your past and rewrite the stories you carry inside your chest like rocks. So, instead of believing only the worst, we can find peace in them. And more than all, I want to help you create new memories. Pedro Daun, I accept you all.”

Pedro exhaled, and the dark energy surrounding him vanished, leaving only peace. He took her hand in his, traced the burn atop her palm, and kissed it. He looked at her, and the kaleidoscope of his eyes turned, revealing a love so pure it made her heart weep.

A symphony of earth and stone began as a low rumbling, strong enough to shake the leaves from their branches. Anne felt a sudden chill, her heart resonating with the vibrations, and the fine hairs on her arms rose. The sensation was electric, like the first note of a song. Pedro pulled her away from the bridge as the structure shuddered.

The river roared, its waves surging and ebbing. The first arch yielded. The second followed, surrendering to the insistent push. Stone by stone, the walkway surrendered, each piece

cascading into the water like the mournful notes of a fado. Anne and Pedro stood transfixed, witnesses to the end of an era. When the last remnants of the bridge disappeared, a hush fell upon the river. A ghostly mist replaced the once mighty Misarela. The veil caught the glint of the winter sun, casting ephemeral rainbows before it too faded into the chill air.

A gasp escaped her parted lips, and Anne made the sign of the cross. She closed her eyes, hoping Lord Rafael's soul might finally find peace.

The murmuring stopped. Pedro embraced her, and they looked at the river, enjoying the silence.

“Your bridge is gone.”

“I'll have a temporary pontoon built in its place, and I will commission a larger one that allows carriages to cross. I'm relieved. I want the devil to take no part in our family.”

Anne placed her hand over his cheek, searching his gaze. “I'm sorry for trying to seduce you and threatening to leave —”

“I'm proud of you. You wanted something, and you went after it. My countess should be able to teach my son some grit.” He lifted his brows at her, a teasing glint in his eyes. “Our daughter, too, shouldn't be raised believing all men are good before proving otherwise.”

He then gazed at the horizon, his voice solemn. “Despite my efforts, I'm certain the Almosters will always be in the thick of things here in Portugal. And Europe.”

Anne froze, searching his expression. She didn't bother asking if he was jesting. Pedro was serious when it mattered. She placed a finger on his lips. "Are you sure? Because I can wait. A year, forever. You complete me, and I want for nothing else."

"A certain boy taught me that a man's lineage doesn't determine his character. I will need your guidance, Anne, and it won't be easy. If you have doubts—"

Anne smiled through her tears. "You will be the best father on this side of the peninsula."

He caught her by the hand, tugging her away from the river.

"Where are we going?" Laughing, she raced to keep up with his much larger steps. He paused long enough to pick her up.

"I want inside my meadow."



The world outside the bedroom froze. Nothing mattered. But her. Him. She shed her clothes and came to him nude. Her skin was so light she was almost translucent. Ever since he found this spark of life in his life, he fought to keep her by his side. He came full circle from villain to hero. He was neither. He was what was reflected in her eyes. And in her eyes, he saw what he craved—the certainty that she would never leave him. The rest was history, tide, and what had to be done.

Ana, ethereal and yet earthly, goddess and mortal, friend and lover — his. She took a step in his direction, and everything faded.

Pedro cradled her face. She gazed at her toes and then at him from beneath gold-tipped eyelashes — the Atlantic seen from the shade of palm trees. The only dawn he chased. His chest expanded with a hush of air. The world could end now, and he would be in paradise.

He strummed his fingers over the strands of her hair as if playing the guitar, then fanned the champagne mass over her shoulders, dressing her with the precious mantle.

“Whenever I see you nude, no earthly trappings to detract from your beauty, I fear you are not from this world.”

“If I were an angel, the moment I saw you was my downfall. You are my heaven.”

Pedro tilted her head to the side, and for a second, he breathed the same air as her. “I would battle heaven and hell to keep you by my side.”

“You won’t have to. I’m here to stay.”

He traced her upper lip with his tongue. A taste was not enough, and he swept inside, craving more of her essence.

Sunlight poured from the gauzy curtains, adding a brilliant light to their bedroom. Anne was an extension of him, their communion so complete he felt in his body her desire, where she needed him to touch her. He let her guide his hands where

she yearned for him. She needed skin-to-skin, and together, they got rid of his clothes.

He sat back on the mattress, leaning on the bed rest. He kept his hands still, watching her, allowing her to be in control. She smiled shyly and crawled on her hands and knees to him. Her hair tickled his chest as she kissed the corner of his lips. Pedro covered the place with his palm.

She kissed his chest, his ribs, his navel, her pecks like a hammer against his restraint. Her eyes were heavy-lidded and sultry when she placed her lips around his cock.

Pedro's gaze lingered over her glistening lips, and he caressed her hair, pulling it away from her face. The wicked angel drove him mad with her innocent explorations. His heart pounded in his neck, and his breathing rasped against his throat.

“Ana, enough,” he groaned.

She licked him one last time and released him. The cold air brushed over the sensitive skin.

Pedro pulled her atop him until she straddled him, her heat brushing against his erection. He wanted to see her, to sense her, to be attuned to her while giving her this last piece of himself.

He guided his cock into her sheath, and pleasure burst through his veins, so acute it obliterated all else.

Inside her, he was.

Pedro made love to her like the sun coaxed the seasons from flowers, slowly, tenderly, drinking her moans and sighs. He was so attuned to her needs, the barriers of body vanished, and they were one, propelled by the rhythms of nature, of tides, of seasons, sowing and reaping.

He stood still, feeling her warmth enveloping him, pulsing against him, the puffs of her breaths over his neck. He kissed lips, cheeks, eyelids. Then he pulled away to look into her eyes. In her eyes, he saw their future, her love, his love, eternity.

She shuddered around him, her eyes closing, her lips parted in a wordless breath. He grounded her with his hands over her hips. He thrust into her sheath and lingered, thrust and lingered, and when she cried out her pleasure, he guided her to her back and mounted her, holding her knee to his hip.

She cradled his face. “Give me all of yourself. I want it all.”

Her words were true. Anne accepted him, the good and the bad, the warrior and the lover, the healer and the ruthless. And so he moved. She blessed him with her touch, and so he thrust. Breathing heavily, his heart pounding out of control, he pushed inside her one more time and shuddered, pouring his seed into her womb.



Anne blinked awake. The open curtains beckoned a milky light, bathing the room with dawn's ethereal sheen. Pedro stood between the window and the bed, watching her, his expression almost boyish in its impatience.

“Finally, Lady Daun.” He extended his hand to her.

Pedro wore Cossack trousers, his bare chest catching the sun's rays, casting his skin in bronze and gold.

She shifted on the mattress, the fabric rustling softly beneath her. Anne's bare feet pressed into the plush carpet. He leaned in, his lips brushing her cheek, a fleeting touch that sent a tingle down her spine. Drawing her into his embrace, they both reclined on the window seat, their heartbeats synchronizing.

She settled into his lap, and when his arms enveloped her, she cocooned closer, a seed burrowing for winter. Anne took a deep breath, inhaling Pedro's musky scent, and her fingers traced the rough texture of his goatee.

“I have something to show you,” he murmured against her lips and opened the curtains. “Merry Christmas.”

The landscape beyond was transformed. A pristine blanket of snow covered the lawn, the formal gardens, the paddocks, making the world appear untouched and serene. Snowflakes floated leisurely from the heavens, catching the morning light and shimmering like tiny diamonds.

Awed, Anne placed her fingers over the glass. “Yesterday, the bridge crumbled, and today it snows. The curse was

lifted.”

“Just a coincidence,” Pedro murmured, but he seemed so at peace, much more than she ever saw him.

The world outside was hushed. Without the river’s murmuring, the silence soothed her soul.

In the distance, Erebus and Hemera walked towards the stable. Erebus, with his dark coat, stood out starkly against the white hills. Hemera was like a snow sculpture conjured from the winter landscape.

“I can’t wait to see their foal. I knew Erebus would never hurt her.”

“You are a wise woman, Anne.”

Shifting in Pedro’s lap, she opened the window. Anne’s breath caught as a brisk winter breeze slipped in. The chill was infused with the resinous scent of evergreens. Yet, underlying it was something more. She could scent it — pure and white, beginning and end, renewal — the snow.

“I can scent it, love. I can scent the snow,” she whispered.

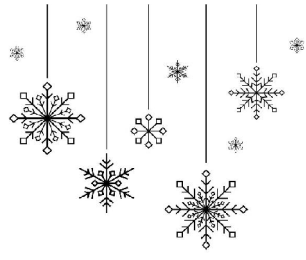
Her fingers cradled Pedro’s face, feeling the rough stubble beneath her fingertips. She closed her eyes and saw a little boy, golden waves floating in the breeze. Happiness unfurled in her chest.

Pedro’s gaze was intense as he knelt before her. He unwrapped the sheet from her body. Tenderly, his fingers explored the curve of her stomach, his tanned hand contrasting

against her pale skin. “You seem so small here to carry a child. I would do it for you,” he said gruffly.

A lone tear, glistening like a precious gem, escaped from the corner of his eye to land on her belly. She felt the drop, and her tears coursed down her cheeks.

“Ana,” his voice was rough with emotion, “I will protect you and our baby with my dying breath.”



Chapter 12

Hand clasped in Pedro's, Anne left through the front door. The family had gathered in the garden, watching the children play. The air was crisp and carried with it the delicious scent of snow.

Henrique wiggled his brows at them. "Look who decided to appear. We missed our hosts during dinner yesterday. Not that we doubted what you were doing. The sounds, they were indeed an entertainment."

Pedro narrowed his eyes at his friend, and Henrique lifted his hands in front of his chest. "Please don't remove my thumbs. My wife is fond of them."

Isabel poked his ribs. "Henrique, leave them be. But if Pedro must choose, then I would prefer to keep his fingers, but the tongue..."

Feeling heat color her cheeks, Anne ignored their banter and stepped into the snow. She had been six the last time she saw it, back in Repton, and the memories had faded. The snow reflected the sunlight, setting up a gentle brightness. The cork oaks, the olive trees, and even her hibernating begonia bush wore fluffy white caps. The family's winter attire splashed color among all the white, their breaths creating small puffs of mist.

Beatriz waddled to her. "Anne, Leonor is gone. Dante searched her room, the house, everywhere. Her things vanished. He only found this."

Beatriz gave her an aged golden ring. Anne traced the letters R and L intertwined inside. Could it be Leonor and Rafael? Had Leonor not said that the princess had been trapped as well? Perhaps when the bridge crumbled, it freed the princess too. Wherever they were, Anne hoped they had found peace.

“Anne, are you listening?”

Anne kissed Beatriz’s cheek. “Merry Christmas, dear. I’m sure Leonor just went to visit friends. Go find that Italian husband of yours and exchange some holiday magic.”

Befuddled, Beatriz returned to the house just as Pedro reached Anne’s side.

A snowflake landed on Anne’s lips, and Pedro licked it before she could taste it. Glaring at him, she tasted the next. Pure and cold, it melted almost instantly. The snow absorbed and muffled other sounds, creating a sense of peaceful quietude, broken only by the family’s joyous noises.

The children went to the adults and grabbed their mother’s hand.

Laughing, Julia caught Griffin’s arm, tugging him along. “Come Englishman, Portuguese snow is better than island snow.”

“You go along,” Griffin said, freeing his arm. Still, a snowball landed on his face. Face flushed, he raced after the children, who peppered his coat with snow and stole his top hat.

Soon, it became the proud possession of an ugly snowman.

“No, Henrique, don’t you dare wet the royal coat.” Isabel lifted her hands.

Grinning, Henrique powdered her with snow. She opened her mouth, no doubt to upbraid him, and Henrique kissed her in front of everyone. When he broke the kiss, Isabel seemed quite dazzled.

“You will excuse us, but Isabel’s feet are swollen, and she must retire.”

Isabel gasped. “What, I’m not—”

He gave her a pointed look, and she nodded. “They are ballooning, actually.”

Henrique took a giggling Isabel in his arms and climbed the steps to the front door. “Excuse us.”

Pedro caught her by the arm. “You know what they are going to do, don’t you?”

“Nothing that we didn’t do ourselves. Repeatedly.”

“Ana,” Pedro said in that deep, intense voice.

“Later, husband. Now I’ve been dying to do this.”

Anne bent and gathered snow in her hands. Laughing, she dared to throw a snowball at her husband, who just watched her, bemused.

“What, too ruthless for a snow fight?”

Pedro took off after her, and with a cry, she turned from him, the snow slowing her steps. He had caught her in his arms when a booming voice startled them.

A man with a fur-lined coat observed them. “Why did you demolish the Misarela? I had to use that secret passage I shouldn’t know about.”

Pedro helped Anne to her feet, and then he strode to the newcomer and embraced him. “Brother.”

Anne recognized Pedro’s younger sibling then. Cris seemed leaner, and his usual clean-shaved face now sported a sooty beard. But the green eyes, so full of life, were the same.

“Little Sister. Has my brother been treating you well?” He kissed her cheek.

“And who is that?”

A woman was beside him. She wore a long black coat, but her fiery red hair could be seen underneath a white scarf. Her striking hazel eyes were outlined by kohl. She was petite, even more so next to Cris.

Anne might be wrong, but had Cris blushed? Could Pedro’s rascally brother have settled for a lady at last?

Cris caught her hand in his and cleared his throat. “This is ___”

The woman stepped forward. “I’m his sex slave.”

The End

Special Glimpse into The Winemakers'
HEAs



As a heartfelt thank you to those who have journeyed through “The Winemakers” series, I offer a glimpse into the characters’ happily ever afters.

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exiled king threatens Portuguese independence, he has to take drastic measures to save his country and their newfound love.

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Author's note

Dear Readers,

Thank you for journeying with me through the pages of “The Scent of Snow.” Your support means the world to me, and I am immensely grateful that you chose to spend your time in the world I’ve created.

As we close the chapter on “The Winemakers” series, I hope you found a sense of fulfillment and enjoyment in the conclusion. Crafting this series has been a labor of love, and sharing it with you has been one of the highlights of my writing journey.

In “The Scent of Snow,” the Misarela bridge plays a pivotal role. This bridge actually exists and is shrouded in legends, including the widespread belief that it was built by the devil. It was a delight to weave this intriguing piece of folklore into the tapestry of my story, adding layers of mystique and history.

A significant part of writing this novel involved researching trauma survivors. In creating Pedro’s character, I delved deep into understanding how trauma can alter a person’s personality and the unrealistic expectations of rapid healing. This research reinforced the importance of patience, understanding, and validation in the journey of recovery. If Pedro’s character sheds light on the complexities of trauma recovery and encourages empathy, then I feel I have achieved my goal with this novel.

What's Next

As the final pages of “The Scent of Snow” turn, I am thrilled to announce that the journey doesn’t end here. This novella has woven together three storylines, and I’m eager to delve deeper into each of them in my upcoming spinoff series, “Lost and Found.”

This new trilogy will feature novels centered on Cris, Pedro’s charismatic brother, Diomedes da Veiga, the enigmatic Marquis of Faial, and a surprise character I hope you’ve already begun to suspect. Each story will unravel new mysteries, adventures, and romances.

For those of you who, like me, have grown fond of “The Winemakers,” I have good news. While we venture into these new tales, our beloved characters from “The Winemakers” series might make an appearance or two. After all, the happy ending is just the beginning of their adventures.

Don’t miss out on any updates or new releases! Sign up for my mailing list and receive the latest news about my writing.

Here’s to the next chapter in our adventure together!

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