

USA Today BESTSELLING AUTHOR
K.J. JACKSON

WICKED
RECKONING



Wicked Reckoning
A Guardians of the Bones Novel
A Regency Romance

K.J. Jackson

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First Edition: February 2023

ISBN: 978-1-940149-78-3

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– *For my favorite Ks*

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{ Prologue }

London

July 1823

One month.

That was all that was left of her life.

One month. Thirty short days before her body was no longer her own.

“Get her out of here.” Bloodwater flicked his finger toward two of his henchman at the door to his office.

“But—but you cannot.” Daphne’s hands twisted in front of her, the only way she could keep her palms from slapping down onto Bloodwater’s desk. That wouldn’t go over well. She’d earn a black eye for sure for such an infraction.

Still, her mouth kept running. “You always promised Mama Layla you wouldn’t do this. You swore it. I can keep cleaning. I’m very good at cleaning. All of the girls like the job I do. Never a complaint.”

“Ye have a month. Ye turn sixteen then.” The odd cesspool of Bloodwater’s Scottish-Irish-English accent scraped the insides of her skull. “That’s more than I’d give any other girl and only in deference to Layla.”

“But—but—you told her eighteen, eighteen at the earliest.” A meaty hand clamped around her arm. Shorty, always ready to grab some part of her body at any opening.

“Aye, ’cept now she went and did what she did, and I don’t exactly have to adhere to her demands no more, do I?”

She sucked in a gasp she couldn’t let free.

Hell—he’d mentioned it. He hadn’t spoken a word of it in months. Hadn’t hinted at what had happened.

Her chest tightened, the loss of Mama Layla blooming shards of pain in her chest and she shook her head. “But—”

“Keep along with the arguing, pet, and I’ll put ye on the block tonight. I gave ye one month fer ye to get acclimated to how it will be, generous cove that I am.” His head tilted back, his lips pursing as he pointed at her head. “And start growing yer hair out, or Fidor will make ye wear one of the wigs, and ye know the lice that comes with them. Out with ye.”

Shorty, Bloodwater's eldest bastard, twisted her arm, shoving her toward the doorway. Not actually short, he was a brute of a boy—bigger than most men—even though they were roughly the same age. He pushed her out of the office into the rear third floor hallway at the Fashionable Filly brothel.

She stumbled, trying to catch her balance, when the shoulder of a strange man rammed into her, knocking her body into the wall as he passed.

He didn't pause, didn't apologize—not that any man would ever apologize to a woman in this brothel. His stride didn't even break at impact, like she was nothing more than a gnat brushed to the side. Before she could even turn to send a sour look his way, he charged through the open doorway of Bloodwater's office and slammed the door behind him.

Move.

She needed to get out of this hallway before she was in Bloodwater's sights again and he changed his mind on giving her a month's grace. Hiding in the shadows had gotten her this far—out of sight, out of mind. If only she hadn't made the fatal mistake of stumbling into Heddie's room for cleaning just as Bloodwater was leaving it. She'd rammed full force into him and that had been the end of it. The end of her.

Now what was she going to do?

Her legs trembling jelly, she couldn't quite take steps to escape, instead collapsing against the wall, her head clunking back onto the plaster.

No. No. This couldn't be happening. Mama Layla had always promised. *Promised.* This would never happen.

But what were promises without the one who made them?

Mama Layla was just one more of the many people gone from her life. Here, then gone. Nothing permanent. No one stayed.

She had to talk to Bloodwater again. Appeal once more to promises made long ago. Promises she needed to make him keep, for if he was willing to do this to her, what would he do to Sasha? Her sister was two years younger—far too young for what he wanted out of her.

Maybe she could add in the kitchens to her day. Do both cleaning and kitchen work. Maybe doing both jobs would allow her a stay of execution. Sasha could take on more work as well. She had to try to reason with Bloodwater, even if it caught her a fist in the eye.

Her arms slid across her belly that had been flipping in circles ever since Bloodwater had demanded her presence.

Wait. She would wait—wait to talk to him again. She had to.

Sudden screaming made the wall behind her vibrate. The man that had rammed past her was inside Bloodwater's office, yelling in a loud, booming voice. An agonizingly deep voice. Deeper than anyone's she'd ever heard.

"How could you dare let that happen—how in the hell did you think that would go? How could you?"

"I do whatever I damn well please, ye stinkin' rat," Bloodwater yelled back, his voice shaking the wall behind her head just the same.

"You took her away from me—bloody well took her away and I'm going to kill you for it."

"Don't make threats ye can't keep, rat."

Feet thundered against the floorboards.

Crash. Grunts. More screaming. *Crash.* Fists hitting flesh. Wood shattering.

She cringed, the sound of brutal chaos thick in her ears. Not that she would ever dare to open the door to see what was actually happening in there. She'd seen Bloodwater slice a man's neck for less.

But hell, he'd be in no mood to listen to her pleas for mercy now.

Maybe later tonight. After he dipped into Heddie's bed and got his aggression out. Maybe then he'd listen to her.

Crash. Grunt. More fists into flesh. Again and again and again.

No. Definitely not time to interrupt. She still had thirty days to change his mind. Not that anyone had ever accomplished that feat other than Mama Layla.

Still, she had to try.

For both her sake and Sasha's.

Daphne pushed herself off the wall to leave, but jumped when the door flew open next to her.

Shorty dragged the man that had bumped into her out of the office by his torso, his limp heels dragging along the floorboards. Shorty caught sight of her. "Daphne—grab his legs."

The man had been severely beaten, splatters of blood covering his face, his eyes closed, his head bobbing like a loose noodle in a boiling pot of soup.

She shook her head. "I can't—can't carry him. He's too heavy." The

unconscious man was tall, but thin, like he'd just grown into his height.

Shorty flicked his head at her as he stumbled backward, struggling with the man clasped in his arms. "Just his feet. Grab them. I know yer stronger than ye look. I seen it."

A shiver ran down her spine. Shorty had been giving her twisted looks for months now, and she wouldn't doubt it if he'd convinced Bloodwater to be first in line when she turned sixteen.

Still, she knew not to argue. Not to become more of a target than she already was.

Swallowing down bile at the bloody mess of the man, she squeezed around Shorty and the man, bending over to wrap her arms around the man's feet dragging along the floor.

Bloodwater filled the doorway to his office, wiping a cloth along his bloody knuckles. There was a trace of smeared blood across his cheek—unusual, for no one ever got a hit in on Bloodwater. His eyes went to pinpricks focused on the unconscious man and then he looked up to Shorty. "Dispose of him."

"Aye, Pop."

Shorty struggled backward along the hallway as Daphne lost her grip on the man's legs every few steps. Even if Shorty held the majority of the man's weight, his legs were still blasted heavy.

Down the narrow set of stairs at the back of the brothel, and they stumbled with the load into the back alley. Shorty grunted as he heaved the man into a wheelbarrow.

Daphne turned to escape back into the brothel when Shorty grabbed her arm, stopping her.

"Not so fast—yer coming with in case I need help."

She glanced down at the heap of the man in the wheelbarrow, his body no longer moving at all. Her instincts screamed at her to argue, but she nodded instead. She'd gotten this far in life with her head down, doing what was asked of her without fail. Now was not the time to grow a backbone.

She followed Shorty as he wheeled the man down the alley, then darted ahead at each street before moving into the next alleyway, making sure no one was about to witness them moving the man. At least it was a rare clear night, the moonlight helping her to not stumble over the drunks at the edges of the lanes.

Several streets over, they reached an empty dock jutting out into the Thames and Shorty veered out onto it.

He set the back of the wheelbarrow down and looked to her.

“Daphne, get his feet. We get him onto the dock.”

She went to the opposite side of the wheelbarrow and grabbed the man’s legs again. Shorty dug his arms under the man’s armpits and they both heaved, flopping him out of the wheelbarrow. He landed with a thud onto the planks of the dock, then rolled over onto his back.

Shorty took a step away from the man, fishing in his boot for his knife. In that moment, Daphne looked at the man’s face in the hazy dim light of the moon and gasped when his eyes flickered open.

Not already dead, then.

His eyes found hers and time slowed to a bitter crawl, her body frozen as the look in his eyes became her entire world.

Oh, hell.

Something entirely unique in his eyes. Pure, innocent kindness that she’d never seen before. So completely different than any other man she’d ever seen and it rooted her in place.

The thought came over her, sudden and overwhelming, and it choked the breath out of her lungs.

The man needed to live.

She didn’t know why, didn’t know how. Only that he needed to live.

In the moonlight, the glint of a knife hit her eyes and she reacted without thought, jumping in front of the blade as Shorty swung it down at the man’s chest. It nicked her across the side of her neck, deflecting away from the man.

“Blasted wench.” Shorty’s swing was instant, the back of his hand making hard contact across her face and making her stumble away.

Blood flooded her tongue and she descended into fight mode, losing all rational thought.

Shorty lifted the blade high in the air again for another swing at the man’s chest. She pounced, both of her hands clamping around his wrist and twisting the blade back toward him. Springing off her feet, she thrust forward, sending the blade straight into Shorty’s neck.

For one terrible, crushing instant, he stilled, teetering on fighting her, his hand on his own blade quivering under her grip.

A cough. Blood splattering out of his parted lips onto his chin. More blood. Blood seeping from the blade of the knife onto her hands. Waves of it. So much damn blood.

Shorty blinked. Blinked again.

Then dropped. His body thudding onto the dock and rolling over the edge.

The eerie splash of his body hitting the water echoed in her ears.

She sank onto her knees, her bloodied fingers gripping the edge of the dock, and she peeked over the edge of wooden planks. Nothing.

No thrashing.

Not even a bubble.

How in the bloody hell had she just done that?

Killed a man?

A murderer. She was a murderer, bound for hell.

The man next to her grunted, turning over, his body landing against her calf.

The eerie calm with which she'd just stabbed Shorty abandoned her and panic began to set in, her heart starting to thud out of control. What in the hell had she just done?

For what? A complete stranger?

She glanced around them to make sure no one had seen, then looked at the man next to her. His eyes still open, he stared at her like he couldn't quite place what had just happened. His head started to loll again, the blinks getting longer and longer.

She had to hide this.

No one could ever know she'd just killed Shorty. He was Bloodwater's favorite son.

Scrambling to her feet, she grabbed the collar of the man's coat, shaking him. "You just got me into a heap of trouble, so you're going to do exactly as I say. Get up."

The man nodded, but made no effort to move.

"For Judas's sake," she muttered, threading her arm behind his back and dragging him upright. "Into the barrow. You need to help me with this. Get up."

The man's leg kicked out, weak, but it was the leverage she needed to roll him up over the edge of the wheelbarrow and shove him into it.

Going to the handles, she bent, her legs and arms straining, and she picked up the end of the wheelbarrow.

Holy hell, he weighed a brick load.

The wooden handles creaked, twisting crooked in her hands as the weight was too much for her, but she took one step, then another, and another.

Sweat pouring down her brow, every one of her muscles threatened to snap, but she made it off the dock and onto the empty street.

There. The Bony Storm Tavern. Lots of seamen. Luck had to be on her side for this one or she would be dead before sunup.

Every step a battle she fought and won, she wheeled the man up over the hump of a hill along the seawall, but she lost control at the downward slide and the wheelbarrow slipped out of her grip, rolling on its own down the hill. It crashed into the side of the tavern, sending the man splaying into a heap against the building.

It would have to do.

She ran down the slope after him, stopping and bending over at his form. “You need to leave here. Leave and never come back. Bloodwater cannot know you’re alive. He cannot know what I did.”

A low groan and his eyes opened to her, glassy, like they couldn’t focus. Even glazed, the pure kind essence of his eyes startled her again, never mind she’d already been stopped in her tracks once by them. “Daphne? Is that your name?”

She grabbed his jawline, squeezing it as she shook his head so he would pay attention to her. “Did you hear a word I said?”

“I did.” He shifted his head against the wall of the tavern to see her better.

“Good. Then what are you going to do?”

His mouth opened and closed several times, like his jaw wasn’t working. “Leave. But there is nowhere to go. Everything is here—everything was here.”

“Yes, well, I’m going to give you some help with that.”

His eyes closed, his head lolling.

She shook him.

He didn’t move.

She shook him again.

His eyes crept open, his look unfocused until it landed on her. For one searing moment, his stare sank into her, ate into her soul. “You’re pretty, Daph. I am sorry about the blood.”

His hand lifted, his thumb landing on the side of her mouth and then swiping outward with the blood that had dried along her cheek. A clumsy attempt at wiping away the blood, it only smeared it against her skin.

The touch of his hand was soft, gentle, and she jerked away from it, not sure how react.

No man was soft, kind. Not in her world.

She shook her head, leaning away and getting to her feet. “Wait here.”

A deep breath and she turned, barreling into the Bony Storm Tavern before she lost her nerve. She looked around the smoke-filled tavern, scouring the many faces that had turned toward her and were already sizing up the length of her black skirt and how quickly they could find a way under it. “Captain Ipswich,” she called out.

Silence. Then a cough from the back of the room. “What are ye about, lass?”

“I have one for you. He’s out front.”

Captain Ipswich stood from a high-backed booth in the rear of the tavern. “That so?”

She turned without a word and exited the tavern.

To her surprise, he followed her out the front door.

Praying her nerve didn’t abandon her, she walked over to the man she’d just saved and glanced up at the gruff, imposing captain, his black beard littered with crumbs and beer foam, his dark eyes ready to tear her apart for interrupting his dinner.

Swallowing down the terror, she pointed at the heap of the man. “Here.”

Captain Ipswich looked the lump of the man over, stroked his scraggly beard, then nodded. “How much ye want for him?”

“He’s a free one. Bloodwater just wants him gone. Disappeared. Tonight.”

He nodded. “I can do that, lass.”

She glanced at the inert form of the man, a twinge of regret at what she’d just done flickering in her chest.

She'd heard life on Captain Ipswich's ship was harsh.

But then, the man was alive. It was a chance.

She'd at least given him that.

She stared at him a moment longer and a shiver spiked down her spine, vibrating out to her limbs.

Maybe she needed to give herself that.

A chance.

One month and her life would be over.

Or.

Or she could choose a different path.

Hell, she'd already just killed a man—something she never thought her hands capable of. Bloodwater's son, of all people.

But maybe she was capable of more. Maybe she was capable of saving herself.

Save herself, and then she could save Sasha.

Her gut churning low in her belly, she turned around and walked away.

Disappearing into the night.

{ Chapter 1 }

London

Four years later, July 1827

A babe thrown away.

Into the gutter of the mews.

Tossed off as nothing more than rubbish.

Under the flickering lamp outside the carriage house, Daphne stared down at the gully that ran along the edge of the mews. All manner of filth from chamber pots and kitchen garbage mixed in a stew to wash away in the rain.

She heaved a quivering breath, kicking the wet cobblestones with the toe of her boot.

Was this where she'd been tossed twenty years ago? Or had it been farther to her left? Maybe a little to her right? Had she been covered in slop, hidden so no one would find her? Who had done it? Him? A maid? A footman? His butler, Seward? Seward always struck her as the type able to toss a defenseless babe, not even a week old, into the muck.

Rubbish.

Meant to rot with the chicken bones and moldy cabbage.

Judas.

What was she even doing here?

He called, she answered. A bloody lap dog willing to scamper into his view at the slightest whistle.

Not exactly the front she wanted to put forth.

Salvation don't exist with a nob like that, sweet Daph. Best to stay to yer own kind. Ye may not be able to trust yer own kind, but at least ye know how not to trust 'em.

Mama Layla's words, said to her the first time she'd asked about him, and every time she'd thought out loud about running away from her drafty hovel in the rafters of the brothel. She'd always taken solace in the fact that when the building would eventually collapse, at least she would be on the top. Lucky favors.

Her toe flicked up, her heel grinding into the stones to make a satisfying grating sound that would send most to cringe. No quivering breath.

No emotion. Her countenance set firmly back in place.

Begrudgingly, she'd come to the West End solely because she couldn't chance him showing up in the rookeries to find her. The last time he'd done so, he had almost blown her cover. It was deuced hard to infiltrate a rookery club that sold virgins when liveried footmen were making a spectacle trying to coax her into a shiny black carriage with a coat of arms in full regalia on the side of it.

"Daphne, you came." The voice came out of the shadows of the garden adjacent to the mews, the shuffle of his feet slow, the silver tip of his third leg clunking onto the stone pathway. His ancient body appeared in the light from the end of mews. "I did not think you would."

"What is it you need, Lord Orelin?"

"You know exactly what I want." He came to a stop in front of her, leaning heavily on his cane. "I want you to give up the Guardians of the Bones, give up your need for vengeance."

Her lips pursed for a quick moment. "Which vengeance would you be referring to? Who deserves it more? You? Bloodwater?"

"Daphne—"

"No. In my eyes, you are the same. You both stole a mother away from me." Harsh, but she had to put an end to his interference in her life. She didn't need his money. Didn't need his protection. She had both of those things in hand in a life of her own choosing.

Well, mostly of her own choosing.

Lord Orelin heaved a sigh, the weight of the past visibly heavy on his shoulders. "That did not happen—not the way you think."

"What I know." Her eyes went to pinpricks on him. "What you refuse to admit."

"I cannot admit to something that didn't happen, child."

Rewriting history. That's what rich old men did.

She took one step closer to him, looking up at him, even though the stoop in his back had taken near a head off his height. "My mother walked into your home with me. She never walked out. Her babe tossed away as garbage. There is no defense. You control this household. No one else. There is no defense."

A blink, and his wiry eyebrows drooped, his head hanging for a long moment before his look lifted to her. "Please, Daphne. I am old. Weary. I

need to know you are safe—taken care of.”

“Do not despair. I am all of those things, so I ask you kindly before I have to ask you unkindly—leave me alone, Lord Orelin. Do not send any more of your men to find me. Do not imagine that reconciling with me will soothe your soul, pave your way to heaven, for it will never do so. Your sins are your own to reconcile, old man.”

His jaw dropped, his tongue ready to chastise her, yet the thundering fire she’d seen in the past with him had watered down to a flickering flame. Only a slight puff of breath escaped his lips and he shook his head.

Exactly. There was nothing more to say.

She spun on her heel, grinding down hard onto the cobblestone, and she disappeared into the night.

{ Chapter 2 }

Thorburn Abbey, Essex

One month later, August 1827

Three hours.

Three hours too late.

Magnus Gerald Faldon stared down at the shriveled old man in the bed, the stench of rotting flesh thick in his nostrils.

Odd that his father smelled like a three-day old corpse baking in the sun, when he had only been dead for a few hours. Though the old man *had* been rotting away for some time now. Both inside and out.

Kind of the staff to leave his father in place for Magnus's last goodbyes, though if Lindon, the butler he'd installed at Thorburn Abbey two years ago, had known what was in Magnus's mind, he wouldn't have bothered.

Magnus stared at the brittle face, willing his hand at his side to move. To pick up his father's thin, limp hand poised atop the coverlet and to hold it for a moment, as that seemed like the right thing to do.

But then, the entire reason he'd even consider creating the façade of a grieving son was dead in front of him. There was no longer a need to pretend he cared.

His hand stayed at his side.

That was it, then.

So much of his life, wasted. Wasted worrying. Wasted trying to fix something that would always be broken. Wasted trying to get the dead man in front of him to right his future, when the only thing that could ever right his future was himself.

Captain Ipswich had always said, "*With death, life.*"

A simple, ominous mantra spoken over dead bodies on enemy ships. Captain Ipswich was a predator to his marrow. For one to live, another had to die. The only way of the world.

But a deeper understanding of those few words suddenly settled into Magnus's chest.

With death, life.

His father was gone.

Now it was time to live.
Time to unleash hell.

{ Chapter 3 }

London

One month later, September 1827

Daphne walked along the footpath of the busy street, her eyes set straight forward, seeing everything, while looking at nothing.

A blank slate, no one to look at. It was how she moved best through London streets. Don't give anyone a reason to take even the slightest glance her way.

At the last second before she passed an alley on her right side, she sidestepped into it. On the street in one second, gone in the next. Her gloved hands moving along the bricks of the buildings on either side of her, the tight pathway got tighter, like the bricklayers had been soused when they had laid the bricks of the buildings and had veered inward for no reason at all.

At the end of the skinny alley, she took a turn to her left, then right, quick down the path between the middle of the set of ten buildings. An empty, short nook jutted off to her left and she turned into it.

"Libby, here you are."

Her friend looked up from the stroller she was staring down into, her left hand absently rocking the side of the carriage. A wolfhound was sitting, yawning, strapped to the front of the stroller next to Libby's skirts. "Daphne, thank the heavens, I wasn't sure you would show."

"Of course, I would. What is amiss?" Daphne looked down into the stroller. Two wide blue eyes set upon plump, squeezable cheeks looked at her, a wide smile coming onto the babe's face. Cute little bugger.

"It is my mother."

"She is worse?" Daphne's gaze jerked up, dread cutting through her heart for her friend. "You should have called for me earlier."

"I didn't want to bother you. I know you were training recruits. And I know Hector is irate with you at the moment. I didn't want to add lard to the fire."

"Bother that." Daphne waved her hand in the air. "Tell me what I can do."

"I need you to watch the babe. I should only need half a day. The babe's mother doesn't know her husband had needed to hire a guardian to

protect his child—secrets and all that—and my current story had me being an orphan with no sick mother about.”

Daphne nodded. Rarely did any of the guardians create identities that had anything to do with real life.

Libby had been with the Guardians of the Bones for years, not as long as Daphne, but she’d embraced the life just as Daphne had. She’d paid her dues just the same, and her latest assignment was one most women of the Guardians coveted—nanny protector.

The richest of the London *ton* were often paranoid about the safety of their children—ill-gotten gains always seemed to be haunting the elite—so they would often employ the Guardians to protect their youngest.

It was considered the safest job to have with the Guardians, though Daphne had never asked for a post such as this. Better for her tenderhearted friends to get assignments such as these, for she had always been one to get her hands dirty—and not by baby excrement. She had the mettle for being a guardian, day in, day out, without fail.

Daphne set her hand on Libby’s shoulder. “Only half a day? Your mother must be in a dire state?”

Tears glossed into Libby’s eyes. “She is. I wish I would have found out earlier, I could have worked with Hector for a replacement. Could have been there this past week.”

“Oh, dove.” Daphne pulled Libby into a hug. “You go. Little...” She pulled away to look down at the baby wrapped in layers of white swaddling.

“Jameson.”

She looked to her friend. “Little Jameson and I will spend an idyllic day down by the water at Hyde Park. We’ll feed the ducks and I’ll tell him swashbuckling tales of his nanny that he’ll never remember. Is there anything I need to know? Any real threats that you know of?”

Libby shook her head. “No one has even looked at us cross-eyed in the past four months I’ve been in the post.” She twisted toward the dog sitting next to her and scuffed its head. “The only trouble I’ve been given is by this lug of a dog that would rather sit than pull the stroller. But if you tug on his leash enough, he’ll come. His name is Gustav. He’s old, so he’s not a good protector—or puller of strollers—but he’s someone to talk to if you get bored chatting mindlessly with Jameson.”

“Good.” Daphne leaned past Libby to scratch Gustav behind the ears.

“I’ll come to your mother’s building if you are needed. But we should be fine. Take your time.”

Libby clasped onto Daphne’s hands. “Thank you, I will meet you back here an hour before sundown.”

Daphne gave her another quick squeeze. “Be well, my friend.”

Libby took two steps at a normal pace, then ran out of the hidden nook between the buildings, no doubt desperate to get to her mother.

Daphne stared at the brick wall just past the opening to the nook for a long time, her heart bleeding for her friend. It was always this way for so many of her friends—juggling the real world with the fake world. Never letting the fake world see into who one really was.

That was why she was so well-suited to life as a guardian. There wasn’t much juggling necessary in her life. Her real world consisted of only one person that she cared about, and Sasha rarely acknowledged Daphne was alive.

Taking off her gloves and setting them into the stroller, she grabbed Gustav’s leash, then stepped back to look down at the babe. He smiled again and she couldn’t resist reaching out and stroking a chubby cheek. This was going to be a nice change of pace for a day. Lots of innocent gurgles. Less blood. A park around her and crisp sunshine that wasn’t too hot and didn’t make the streets stink of a boiling cesspool.

She backed out of the skinny nook, pulling Gustav’s leash with her. The dog tugged back for only a moment before ambling along behind her.

Weaving through the alleyway, she kept her eyes ahead when footsteps behind her perked her ears. Footsteps that were attempting to be light and soundless, instead of landing normally.

The hairs along the back of her neck spiked.

That was the exact second another man—burly—appeared in front of her, blocking her pathway out of the alley.

Hell.

She peeked back over her shoulder at the babe. Still gurgling, happy, his fingers tangling together above his face in little claps.

Better to keep that smile on his face if she could. She would need to dispose of this—whatever *this* was—as fast as possible.

Just keep clapping little one.

She whipped around, only to find a man—tall and skinny, in dirty

clothes and half toothless—with his palms raised at her, quickly advancing.

“We don’t need trouble, just give us the child, lady.”

A quick glance over her shoulder. The burly brute was advancing on her just the same, trapping her and little Jameson.

Blast. Tight quarters.

But then, tight quarters usually gave her an advantage because of her size.

She looked back to the skinny man. “I’ll not be giving you the babe, and I will not hesitate to make you bleed. Best that you turn around and leave.”

“Truly, lass, we don’t want to hurt ye, we just want the babe. Hand him over and ye can go about yer day.”

“You’re insane if you think I’m going to give you this child. Also insane if you think I’d let you even close enough to touch this child.”

She crooked her neck to look back over her shoulder—hell—the burly brute was coming in fast. She needed to get them both to one side of her.

In one swift motion, she scooped up Jameson from the stroller with her left arm, locking him against her chest while she yanked out her dagger from the side of her boot.

She kicked the stroller sideways to block the alley, making the dog yelp, and she spun, running directly at the tall one. At the last second before she rammed into him, she dropped, wrapping her right upper arm around the babe’s head as she slid through the muck of the alley on her backside. Just past the man’s legs, she reached above her head, slashing the man’s calf.

Flesh curled around her blade and the man’s squeal was instant.

Popping up onto her feet behind him, she ran through the alley with just enough of a head start to reach the nook she’d just been in.

She’d just have to take care of this all in here. She quickly stepped into the nook, setting Jameson down and wedging him into the corner. His eyes were big, but he wasn’t crying—yet.

By the time she whipped around to face her two assailants at the entrance of the nook, they were on her.

The thick brute lunged at her, as the skinny man still howled in pain, limping toward her with murder on his face.

“Fucking wench.” The brute caught her neck, slamming her into the

brick wall behind her. Air whooshed out of her body, but it also gave her the perfect moment to jam her dagger into his arm in a quick stab.

His meaty hand around her neck dropped away, and she stepped to the side of him, kicking out and smashing her heel into the tall man's stomach as he rushed in.

His momentum stopped with an *oof* that was satisfying up until the moment the beefy brute made contact across her jaw, sending her flailing onto the ground.

New opportunity.

She sliced her dagger at the back of the beefy brute's ankle, digging into the tendon. Blood splattered and he screamed

Shit. Nowhere to roll.

He dropped on top of her.

Crack.

The sound vibrated through her bones, echoing in her ears. Pain instant and brutal shooting up her left arm to invade her body.

Fucking hell. That was her own bone that had cracked.

She tried to move her arm that was wedged under the hip of the brute who was currently clawing at her, trying to get a hold of her head to smash it into the ground.

No moving it out, only pain.

Definitely a broken forearm.

She squirmed like a cat in a sack destined for the depths of the Thames and wiggled out from underneath the brute. Kicking, she jammed her heel across his jaw as she scampered away, positioning herself between the brutes and the babe that was now wailing in the corner of the nook, his cries echoing up between the brick walls.

The burly brute was down, she knew that—she'd felt his tendons snap under her blade—the best he was going to be able to do was drag himself out onto the street for help.

Her boots slipping through the muck of the alley, she tried to gain her feet without putting weight on her left hand and still clutching her dagger in her right.

The tall man stepped over his friend, bearing down on her.

Most would continue to retreat, find solid ground to gain footing, but retreating had never been her specialty. Instead, she reversed course,

somersaulting forward, and she rammed like a lead ball into his legs. It buckled him backward and he tripped over his friend, going down hard.

She sprang, landing on top of him, her blade on his neck. She saw it flash in his eyes—the realization of what was going to happen to him. Pure panic.

“Stop.” Just as she was about to slice his neck, a hand gripped onto her shoulder from behind and stopped her motion.

A second of delay and the tall man under her pounced on her hesitation. His hand whipped up, smashing into the side of her head and slamming it into the brick wall next to her.

Instant blackness.

{ Chapter 4 }

He needed an heir.

For that, he needed a wife.

But not just any wife. One that could protect his heir against anything, and a woman like that rarely came along.

All because he didn't know if he'd survive what was to come—what he needed to finish.

Magnus stared down at the woman in the bed, guilt gnawing at the pit of his stomach.

He'd reached Miss Ollen in time to stop her from killing the man, and she'd paid the price for his interference—her head smashed into a wall.

He should have been quicker from his perch in the room above the alley where Mr. Samson, head of the Guardians of the Bones, had stood with him to observe how Miss Ollen would stand against the men that had been hired to steal the babe from her.

Hell, he should have started down before the fat brute had landed on her, cracking her forearm in two.

A test. One that had gone terribly awry.

“It wasn't supposed to go this damn far,” Magnus muttered, barely able to hold tight on the rage that simmered in his chest.

Sitting on the side of the bed by Miss Ollen's side, Mr. Samson glanced back over his shoulder to him. “You did not approve of her performance?”

“The bastards broke her damn arm. Knocked her to blackness. It wasn't necessary.”

“You asked for proof, my lord. I supplied it.”

The woman stirred, her shoulders clenching toward her head like she was in pain. Which she probably was.

Mr. Samson grabbed the bottle and spoon that were sitting on the side table next to the bed. “You saw what she did? How she reacted to protecting a babe that she'd known for mere moments? Or were you too busy

rushing down to intervene?”

Magnus gritted his teeth. “I saw she almost killed them both—no hesitation.”

Mr. Samson glanced at him again, his dead brown eyes piercing Magnus above his spectacles. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“I did.” His look shifted to Miss Ollen. Her dark hair had fallen haphazardly out of the tight chignon she’d had it wrapped into, the glossy locks stark against the white pillow. Her cheeks lifted, her mouth parting. Pretty. Familiar, somehow. Where did he know her from? He hadn’t been in London in four years. Maybe at a foreign port?

Mr. Samson turned back to Miss Ollen, his monotone voice betraying no emotion. “I cannot fault the men for what they did. They realized fairly quickly it was a life-or-death situation.”

“But to break her arm—to smash her head? They were told not to harm her.”

“Yet they had to stop her from killing them—her injuries were an acceptable casualty.”

Magnus stared at the back of Mr. Samson’s peppered brown hair, his eyes boring holes into the man’s skull. Mr. Samson had ice in his veins—ridiculously casual about the health of one of his best agents. Or so he claimed she was. And judging by her rabid defense against the brutes, Magnus had to believe him on that score.

She mumbled. Her eyelashes fluttered, eyes opened fully once, then closed. Unusual mossy green eyes if the low evening lighting in the bedroom showed true.

Mr. Samson’s thumb went to her eyebrow, pulling her left eye open. “You’re in a safe house, Miss Ollen.”

Her head bobbed, her eyes trying to focus. “Babe...Jameson...the babe...”

“The babe is safe. We got to it in time. Libby is back at her post with the child.”

“Good.” Her eyes focused on Mr. Samson for a fraction of a second, then fell closed.

“Open your mouth, Miss Ollen.” Mr. Samson poured a full spoon of laudanum and set it to her lower lip.

Her lips clamped shut, her head shaking.

“Miss Ollen.” Hector sighed. “Daphne, we had to reset your arm. You know how it will hurt.”

Her eyes still closed, she shook her head until he had to withdraw the spoon from her lips or risk spilling it everywhere. “No. No laudanum. You know that.”

“Fine. No laudanum.”

A moaned sigh creaked through her lips and her head lolled to the side.

Mr. Samson used that opportunity to jam the spoonful into her mouth.

For a moment, she coughed like she was going to spit all of it out, but then her body relaxed, defeated. Her head sank back into the pillow, her slight body near to disappearing into the plump bed.

She didn’t have a low-born accent, even half conscious. Mr. Samson had assured him of the fact, but people usually slipped when they didn’t have their wits about them.

Mr. Samson stood up from the side of the bed.

“Was that necessary?” Magnus pinned him with a glare. “You’ve already shoved several spoonfuls down her throat.”

Mr. Samson gave him a blank look. “It is if you want this to happen. You are thinking of abandoning the plan?”

It struck him as wrong—all of this as wrong.

Mr. Samson had shoved the first spoonful of laudanum into her before the carriage they’d had ready had left the city—before she had even woken. That had gotten them to Thorburn Abbey. He’d shoved another spoonful into her mouth when the bonesetter had appeared. She’d slept through the pain of that, yet her body had still tensed in agony, waves of torture flickering over her face as her bones were wrangled back into place.

And now a third dose. Not to mention the lies piled up along the way.

All of it wrong, but he’d already agreed to the terms with Mr. Samson.

Magnus heaved a sigh, willing his hand to stay by his side instead of punching the spectacles straight off the man’s nose. “Can she even stand?”

“She will in a half hour.” With a look of dismissal, Mr. Samson moved toward the door to the bedroom. “I’ll get the vicar in here so he’ll be ready when she stirs again.”

Magnus's arms clamped across his chest. "The vicar will never marry us."

"He will. Her father has already agreed to the arrangement. We have the special license. The vicar will marry you."

Magnus's eyebrow lifted. "He works for you?"

"I know the man." Mr. Samson left the room, closing the door behind him.

Standing next to the bed, Magnus stared at the door, the unease of the situation sitting heavy in his chest.

It wasn't that he was unaccustomed to blood and injuries and battles to the death. He *was* unaccustomed to a woman being in the throes of it. He *was* unaccustomed to drugging a woman to gain her compliance.

Miss Ollen rustled in the bed and his eyes were drawn to her. Her head rolling on the pillow, it took several heartbeats before her eyes started to flutter open again.

When they did, she looked about, lazy, until her eyes managed to focus on him.

A smile came to her face. "I—I know you." The words were mumbled and wispy, but still assured.

It hit him—where he knew her from.

He sank to the side of the mattress, his weight making the bed creak and her body rolled over down into him, her thighs curling along his hip as her look didn't leave him.

Years ago.

The spitfire that had tried to protect him from Bloodwater. He stared at her mossy green eyes, noting the flecks of gold that looked like sparks of a wildfire dotting a springtime field. He didn't remember that about her. Only that she was unusually pretty. A face he'd branded into his memory long ago.

More beautiful than he remembered her. She'd grown into her looks. Still, he should have recognized her instantly days ago when Mr. Samson pointed her out on the training yard where she was teaching a group of three women where to stab a hay-stuffed dummy man in the gut—the exact spot for a slow death.

The girl that had saved him. Killed for him. Then crimped him onto a ship bound for the Caribbean.

Any last reservations he had about the plan dissolved into dust

scattering in the wind.

She was the one. The one to protect the future. The legacy.

She would do what it took, no matter what. Of that, he had no doubt.

Impossible, the twist of fate of it. But he'd long ago stopped questioning fate, for fate never had any answers to give him, only pain and turmoil.

She was the one.

He couldn't stop this now.

{ Chapter 5 }

Safe.

She knew, somehow, she was safe.

Pain throbbed in her head and radiated from her arm. But she was safe.

Even if the last thing she remembered was blood splattering, her bone cracking, and a brick wall coming fast and furious at her head.

Why was she safe?

Judas. What about the babe?

“Before you even ask it, I can see it forming on your lips.” A male voice, low, so very low it rumbled through her own chest with every word spoken. “The babe is fine. Libby has the child back at home, safe and sound. You’ve asked about it every time you’ve opened your eyes.”

“How?” The word eked from her lips, her tongue thick in her mouth.

“Mr. Samson and I interceded in the tussle in the alleyway. All is well. The babe is fine. Libby is fine. You are fine.”

“The...” She heaved a breath, her lungs thick and heavy to the point where she couldn’t quite get enough air. “The dog?”

“Dog?”

“The dog...with the stroller. I didn’t mean to hurt it.”

A grunt, almost like a stunted chuckle, came from the deep voice. “The dog is fine as well.”

Her lids blinked, groggy, like they weighed a thousand stone each. Laudanum. Laudanum did that to her. Made her forget. Made her weak. Made her unable to move.

Damn Hector. He must have shoved it down her throat.

A finger brushed across her brow, then something wet. A warm wet.

A wash cloth, dabbing at the source of the pain pounding through her skull. Or maybe all the laudanum had collected there on that side of her head, turning her brain to mush.

She moved her hand, trying to touch the side of her head, only to run

into the arm holding the wash cloth. Her hand dropped down onto the bed and she forced her eyes open.

It took numerous blinks before she could focus on anything. A pale peach canopy above her. Sunlight streaming in through big windows. Not the small windows in her bedroom. Not home. Not that she called any place home. Her home was wherever the Guardians needed her.

The wash cloth moved across the side of her head.

Her gaze shifted to the hand, following up the arm to the body attached to it. A man. Familiar. She squinted at his face.

“You. I know you.”

“You do.” His blue eyes shifted to meet her look. Dark blue eyes that were somehow warm. Not like common blue eyes, which too often looked cold, like the sea.

Her head shook slightly, trying to loosen the memory from where it was buried deep in her mind. Long seconds passed, the fuzzy layers that had invaded her skull making it hard to wade through the muck. So many seconds, he should be saying something else to her, talking to her. Instead, he only stared at her.

The memory—there it was. “Bloodwater...Bloodwater beat you.”

He blinked, slow, and nodded.

“And I...” The rest of that night flashed in one fell swoop into her brain and her voice trailed off. That was the night everything changed. She changed.

Years ago.

“What...how...why are you here in this room?” She broke eye contact and glanced about the room. “Why am I in this room?”

Nothing in it looked familiar. Elegant. Expensive. Not her taste, not that she ever needed anything other than a roof and a warm blanket, but she’d been employed in enough fine houses that she knew what she liked and didn’t.

She sniffed.

The air. It wasn’t right.

“This isn’t London.”

“No, it is not.”

His mouth clamped closed.

She stared at those lips, willing them to open, to tell her who exactly

he was and what exactly she was doing in a strange room with him.

He didn't.

"Do tell me where we are then."

His lips tightened for a long second and the wash cloth moved on the side of her head. She hadn't realized he still held it to her head.

He looked to it, dabbing what she imagined was a wicked wound, judging by the sharp pangs of pain shooting into her skull with every twitch of the wash cloth.

She winced.

"Apologies." He pulled away the wash cloth, dropping it into a bowl of water on the floor by his feet.

"Where am I? What am I doing here?"

"You are in my home in Essex. Thorburn Abbey."

"What am I doing here?"

"I don't think I should be the one to tell you."

"So you're stalling?"

He nodded, his lips—which were rather perfectly shaped, not too thin and not too thick—drew to a tight close again.

"If you're not the one to tell me, then who is? How long have I been unconscious?"

"About twenty-four hours."

"And in that time I have been moved here by who?"

"Me. Mr. Samson." His face went blank. He hadn't given her any tells, any nervous twitches, and he'd just taken his indiscernible countenance up a notch.

She held in a growl. Speaking with the man was maddening. "But why?"

He set his look on her, no emotion in his eyes. "We were married yesterday."

Her jaw dropped, her head instantly shaking. She attempted to scream, "What?" but all the air had left her chest. Plus, she was pretty certain she'd heard him right.

He stared at her, not moving, not talking. Just those blue eyes eating into her, stealing her soul out from under her.

She pushed herself upright on the bed, curling forward as she sucked air into her lungs. Her head spun, and it took longer than she would have

liked to gather her wits about her.

Her lungs full again, she looked up to him. “That is impossible. I would never marry someone I don’t know.”

“Except you know me. We already established that.”

Her eyes went huge, words flying so fast and furious in her brain they jumbled over one another in her mind until she couldn’t manage a coherent sentence.

The door knob turned and the door opened, saving her from the present need to scream at this lunatic.

“Daphne. Good, you are awake. Clear-eyed.” Hector walked into the room.

Arrows shooting furiously from her eyes, she pinned Hector. “What in the hell did you do to me, Hector?”

Hector paused, his hand still on the door. It took a lot to make Hector pause. As it was, it lasted only a moment and he cleared his throat, closing the door behind him. His gaze moved to the man sitting next to the bed. “You told her?”

“About which part?”

“About the most grievous part.”

The man nodded. “I did. Though I don’t know *that* is the most grievous thing that has happened to her in the last day.” His look darted down to her arm.

Her arm. The pain. She looked down. Her left forearm was in a splint, wrapped tight under a heavy swaddling of bandages that hid her arm from elbow to the tips of her fingers.

Clearly broken. But it was a dull, aching pain, so hopefully that meant it had been a clean break and wouldn’t take too long to heal. She couldn’t afford to be walking around with a broken arm for long.

Her look whipped to Hector. “What did you do?”

“I had you married.”

A scream, high as it scraped the insides of her skull, seethed out of her mouth at Hector. “Why in the bloody hell would you have me married?”

“You passed the test.”

“A test? What test? Start talking fast, Hector, or you just lost one of your best guardians.”

Hector’s head tilted down and he peered over his glasses at her. A

look meant to scold, but she was in no mood for scolding.

“Hec-tor.” She spit out his name, long and punctuated.

A grunt from him, and he moved closer to the bed. “The men attacking you in the alleyway—they were sent by me, on behalf of Magnus Gerald Faldon, Earl of Thorburn.” His head tilted to the man still sitting next to her on the bed. “It was a test—more of a demonstration—to determine the lengths you would go to in protecting a child.”

Her head snapped back, sending a swirl of dizziness through her brain. “Why would you do that? Endanger an innocent babe?”

“The babe was never in danger. Only you. Lord Thorburn needed assurances of your abilities. I provided them.”

“With my broken arm?” She seethed in a breath, the little information she’d gleaned falling into place. She skewered Hector with a look. “You fed me laudanum, and then you married me, didn’t you? That’s why I have no recollection of the last day. Of how I got here.”

“I did.” He nodded, not attempting to downplay what he’d set in motion.

“But why?” She looked to Lord Thorburn—at least she now had a name for the man. “Why would you randomly pick a wife? Why marry someone that was drugged beyond comprehension? You cannot possibly need to trap a woman into marriage like that?”

She hoped. Maybe Hector wasn’t the only one in this room that had lost his sense of loyalty and decency, or maybe this man had none of those traits to begin with. And Hector had saddled her with him.

Lord Thorburn’s shoulders pulled back, his spine straightening, almost as though he was miffed when he had no right to any anger.

She was the only one with any right to anger at the moment. She stared at Lord Thorburn, waiting. And this time, she was damn well going to out-wait him.

He flicked off an invisible speck of lint from his trousers, then met her gaze. “It was not exactly random. I need an heir. I also need a wife that can protect that heir.”

She waited. He said nothing else.

She had to force her right arm down so she didn’t slap more words out of him. “So I passed your test with only a broken arm and a head wound and as a reward you forced me into marriage?” Her look whipped to Hector.

“Who would have even married us in the state I was in?”

“Vicar Froust.”

Figured. She seethed out a breath.

“This will be good for you, Daphne,” Hector said. “This is a good match. Lord Thorburn has a solid fortune. A title. You will have a secure life with him.”

“No. I refuse this. Refuse all of it.”

“Daphne, you just woke. Take a moment. Consider it.”

Her glare centered on Hector. “I don’t need to take a moment. I don’t want to be a wife—I don’t want any of this.”

He bristled. “Your father—”

“My father doesn’t get a say in any of it. How could you betray me like this?”

“It’s not a betrayal.” Hector’s hands came up, placating. “I am merely ensuring your continued safety. Lord Thorburn came to me in need of a wife as he is in need of an heir. He—”

“So you signed me up for a lifetime job without even asking me?”

Hector puffed out a breath, clearly vexed with her. “There is no one better than you, Daphne. Lord Thorburn has assured me you are free to live your own life after you produce an heir. You can come back to the Guardians if you wish. We will always need you—as a trainer only until the child reaches age, of course. The child will also have some of our best guardians assigned to it and I will give you preference in choosing them. Additionally, you will be endowed with a sum that will provide a lifetime of the utmost comfort for you—money that means security. Luxury.”

The pounding in her head increasing, she ran her fingers across her brow and glanced at Lord Thorburn. Why would the man agree to any of this? Why would the man *want* any of this—to be saddled with a wife that doesn’t want him and would leave him at the soonest possibility?

She looked back to Hector. “I can live my own life?”

“I have been assured of it.”

She pinned a look on Lord Thorburn.

He nodded.

She looked back to Hector. “How much?”

Hector glanced at Lord Thorburn. Thorburn nodded. “Three thousand pounds a year. More than enough to maintain your own home,” Hector said.

She choked. *Three thousand?* She and Sasha could live quite comfortably off a tenth of that.

“And Lord Thorburn is not looking for a real marriage or love,” Hector continued. “Merely procreation. Consider it.”

Three thousand pounds was beyond anything, but it rankled deep in her gut that they had both assumed this would be agreeable to her. Her look pinned Hector. “Consider it? You already had us married. You took away my option of consideration.”

Hector’s shoulders lifted. “The marriage can be wiped clear, like it never happened, if that is your ultimate wish.”

“You can do that?”

“Yes. It hasn’t been near a day since the wedding and it was a private ceremony.”

“Who propped me up?”

“I did.”

“Did you move my jaw and say ‘I do’ for me as well?” Ornery, she knew, but he was lucky he was getting merely ornery from her.

A slight twinge of a smile cut across the corner of Hector’s mouth. “Consider the opportunity. That is all I ask. We’ll have a bath brought up for you as you think on the proposal.”

Lord Thorburn nodded his head, presumably agreeing with everything Hector said.

The possibility of security—for her and her sister, free of Bloodwater’s talons. That alone might be worth taking this asinine proposition. Not that it was a proposition, since they’d already made the decision for her.

That was what vexed her the most. They took the choice away from her. Something she’d vowed long ago to never forfeit.

But the money.

The possibility of finally getting her sister out of Bloodwater’s brothel and London. Of saving her.

Her head dipped, her stare solid on her broken arm for several long breaths. She’d already broken her arm for this job—before she’d even had it. What was eighteen more years? Was it worth her sister’s life?

Holding her breath, she lifted her gaze to Lord Thorburn, staring at his eyes. Staring at the warm blue of them, like she could crawl into them and

wrap herself up in their heat. But they were different than she remembered. Different than she had seen that night years ago. Incredibly kind eyes that had lost their kindness from that time long ago.

The whole reason she'd saved him. Killed. And now it was gone.

What did she expect? She handed him over to be crimped onto a privateering ship. She was surprised he was still alive. Maybe this was her penance for what she'd done—the course she'd set him on.

But a part of her still felt that loss deep in her gut—the loss of the kindness she had once seen in him.

Even though the blue was warm, there was now a crinkle of coldness in the lines about his eyes.

Cold that she was now married to.

Cold she wasn't sure she could spend a lifetime looking at.

{ Chapter 6 }

Hector and Lord Thorburn exited the room and two maids soon streamed in, filling the large copper tub in the adjoining room. One of the maids stayed to help her take the bath, even though she insisted she could do it on her own, splint be damned.

While she wanted to scream at the woman to get out of the room, she stifled the urge. It wasn't the maid's fault her life had just turned to rubbish.

But that was as much grace as Daphne could amass at the moment, so she stayed silent, sulking the entire time the woman, Joan, scrubbed her hair and her back, for she couldn't rightly reach the full of her back with the splint still in place.

Daphne stood in the tub, then discovered her legs were still not solid under her when she almost tripped past the edge of the tub getting out.

Being drugged for the last day did little for her current balance.

The maid grabbed her right arm, steadying her, then helped her slide her arms into a thin peach wrapper with wide sleeves that ended at her elbows. Joan ushered her toward the plump chair by the fireplace in the main chamber. She sat down and the maid untangled the knots in her hair until a knock came on the door.

A quick glance down at her chest and she decided she was covered enough for Hector—who had seen her in all manner of dress during the years. She muttered a, "Come."

Lord Thorburn took a step into the room. "You are done?"

For a moment, she considered telling him to come back later, as she still hadn't wrapped her head around what Hector had done to her. What this man had fully participated in—fully requested of Hector.

But if she was going to even consider agreeing to the proposal—her life for an heir—she had to know more about the man.

Not that she believed Hector would set her into a marriage with a despicable human being. He had that much integrity about him.

But to set her into a test as he had in the alleyway, then to drug her

—*drug her*—to marry her. She was stubborn, yes, and the whole of this charade wouldn't have even gotten this far had she been conscious and sober—but *to drug her*? Too far.

She needed to know how complicit in all of Hector's plans this man truly was.

"I am done." Her hair combed enough it wasn't sticking at odd angles, she nodded at the maid.

With a quick glance at Lord Thorburn and then to Daphne, Joan quickly exited the room, closing the door behind her.

He held up a slew of bandages. "I figured the bandaging around your current splint would be wet and would need to be changed."

"I can manage it. Or I'm sure the maid can manage it if you call her back." She inclined her head to the door. Kind of him, for her left arm was now wet and cold, no matter how she'd tried to keep the water off the bandages.

He took several steps into the room, the mass of him swallowing up the space between them. Even under a coat, she'd gleaned that his mass wasn't from fat—his shoulders were wide, like they needed to grow outward to support all the muscles on his body. He was no longer the tall, thin man she'd met once before.

The sea had built him, rather than break him.

"I would like to do it."

Her lips pulled to the side. "Why?"

"I am the cause of the break your arm suffered. I rectify my mistakes, as much as I can, when I can."

Well...hell...

It was hard to say no to that.

"Fine."

He motioned toward the bed. "On the bed so your arm can lie flat?"

Her eyebrows lifted. The bed? She shook her head. "The table will do."

Before he could argue, she got up from the chair, moving toward the small round table with two chairs that sat before the tall window along the side of the room.

She was halfway across the room when her right leg turned to mush and gave out again, making her stumble to her right.

Just as she was about to splay out wide onto the floor, Lord Thorburn caught his arm around her waist, holding her at an awkward angle to the floor.

“Are you injured? More than your arm? Your head?” He lifted her up, setting her upright onto her feet, but his arm didn’t move from around her waist, still holding much of her weight up.

Instinct sent her right hand onto his arm, trying to push him away. “No. Just woozy. The laudanum hasn’t quite left my body and I’m still fighting for every thought, every movement I make.”

His grip tightened around her waist and he walked her to the table before she could squirm out of his hold.

He tossed the bandages onto the table and pulled out a chair for her. “Sit.”

She twisted, glancing up at his face. At that, she paused. Other than his eyes, she hadn’t bothered to truly take in his features earlier—it had been a monumental feat to cut through the haze in her mind just to see his eyes.

But now, this close and in all honesty, he was rather breathtaking. That is, if one appreciated a slightly crooked nose from what had to be several breaks, thick cheekbones that could absorb blow after blow, and an iron-forged chin that framed the whole of his face. A face born from a line of warriors. Survivors.

Damn that she *did* appreciate that exact type of face. One that could handle anything thrown at it.

Lords of the realm rarely looked like him and it baffled her for a long moment, for she didn’t remember him looking like this when she’d sent him off to be crimped by Captain Ipswich. Though his face had been full of blood that night. Probably the first of the obvious breaks to his nose.

He smelled good—too good for the harsh lines of his face. Buttery sandalwood, with hints of cardamom and moss wafting from his hair and his clothes.

“Are you fine to sit?” His eyebrows lifted at her.

“Oh. Yes.” She turned away and reached out for the back of the chair for stability, realizing what a ninny she’d just looked like in staring at him.

Settling herself in the chair, she set her left arm long across the table as he pulled the opposite chair closer to her. She started to dig around the top half of the bandages, looking for the end knot to loosen.

The chair creaked under his weight as he sat and he pushed her fingers away from her arm, quickly finding the end of the wet bandage and loosening it.

She watched him unwind the bandage from her arm. His fingers didn't match the breadth of him, the digits strong, but slender. Lock-picking fingers—quick and lithe.

She looked to his face, finding him concentrating on the task at hand. “Did you really just observe what happened in that alleyway from up above, watching me and those brutes like we were in a cock-fight?”

His eyes lifted to her in a quick glance, then dropped back to her arm. “I didn't know it would go that far—the second I realized it, I ran down to stop the whole of it.”

“That was you that stopped me?”

He nodded. “I'm embarrassed to admit I wasn't quicker than I was and didn't get to you before that brute landed on your arm and snapped it.” He met her stare. “It was only luck that I got to you before you killed the man.”

“You saw what I was about to do?”

“I did.”

“That doesn't put you off? That I can take a man's life?”

His shoulders lifted. “On the contrary. It serves as reassurance that you are the one I need.”

“I am the one you need? I doubt that, Lord Thorburn.”

“Call me Magnus.”

“Magnus, I think any number of other guardians could take my place and you would be quite pleased with them.”

His gaze dropped back to her arm as he pulled free the last of the bandaging along the splint. “You are the one, Daphne.”

“I am also a bastard.” Her skin free to the air, she scratched the itchy spots along her forearm, then trailed her fingers over the swollen, bruised part of her arm, just behind her wrist where the bone had broken. She pressed in on the puffiness and winced. Hopefully the break had only been to one bone and was clean enough that it would heal quickly. That the broken bone hadn't punctured through the skin gave her hope. “A lord marrying a bastard—that will not be looked upon kindly by society. That alone would seem sufficient reason enough for us to end this union before it even begins.”

“No. I already know that fact.”

Her gaze lifted to him. “Hector told you?”

“He did.” His focus had gone down to her arm, wiping free with one of the bandages the last of the moisture on her skin before he started rewrapping the splint tight to her forearm. “He told me your father is Lord Orelin. Since Lord Orelin has only one recognized son, his heir, it was easy enough to deduce.”

Damn, Hector. Whatever happened to keeping identities a secret? A founding principle of the Guardians.

She cleared her throat, eyeing him. “He told you about my father? What else has he told you about me?”

“Everything that was necessary to make sure this would be a fruitful match. Including the fact that you will require little out of me, as I will require little out of you once an heir is produced.”

The way he said it, calculated, if not entirely cold, made her blink hard. Not that she would argue against such an arrangement, were she to agree to the union.

“Why are you under the delusion that I am the one?”

“Mr. Samson put you in front of me as the first option.” He continued wrapping her arm without pause. “And then I realized just last night that I had seen you once before, long ago. You saved my life. That was truly all I needed to know to make a decision.”

She nodded, her look dropping to watch his nimble fingers work the bandage. Practiced, like he’d done this a hundred times before.

“I hate what you did to me.” The words suddenly blurted out of her mouth.

He looked up to her, his left eyebrow lifting. “Which part?”

“All of it. The men attacking me in a show for your benefit. Drugging me. Marrying me when I wasn’t conscious.”

“It was not my idea.”

“Hector?”

He nodded.

“Figures.” She puffed out a breath. “But still, you were complicit in all of it.”

“I was.” His lips pursed, his head tilting to the side as he stared at her. “Even though I wanted to abandon the plan at multiple points along the

way.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I did not.” The crinkles around his eyes had turned grave, like he didn’t understand himself why he didn’t stop Hector. “It wasn’t honorable. Though honor has not been a part of my life for a long time.”

Not since he’d been crimped onto a privateering ship. Unsaid, but the meaning was there. Her tongue slipped between her molars, biting. She had done that. Done that to him.

Unless he’d always been the cur that he was.

“You are telling me you used to have honor?”

“Aye. Once in my life.”

“When?”

“It doesn’t matter now. The man I was, was dead long ago.”

There it was.

The death of the innocence she’d seen in his eyes. He’d clearly seen pain and death in the years since she’d first encountered him. Pain she’d had a part in producing.

Stop it.

Do not pity the man. Do not think he is anything more than an ass looking to trap me into a marriage I do not want.

She steeled her spine, her eyes narrowing at him. “You seem to be a man that intends to hold back a thousand secrets from me, Magnus. I’ve dealt with men like you for years. The secret-keepers. The ones that think if they never talk of their sins, of their failings, they don’t actually exist.”

She leaned toward him. “Maybe it is something you did. Maybe it is something that was done to you. Either way, secrets always break people. They break them in a thousand ways, one tiny slice at a time. The reaction one has to hold back. The words they cannot speak for someone may just look a little deeper into what they’re hiding. Those moments slice away at them until the secret is the only thing they consist of. The only thing they can think about. Act upon. And that, in my experience, is a miserable existence. One I don’t relish the thought of being married to. But you keep your secrets. I don’t think I want anything to do with them.”

Silent, he tied off the end of the bandage around her forearm and then both of his hands moved to rest on either end of the bandage—one on her hand, one next to her elbow. His fingers curled around her arm before he

lifted his eyes to her. He didn't hide his glare, his blue eyes glinting malice at her, and for a moment she thought he might just snap her arm in two, re-breaking the break.

His fingers jerked away and he blinked, the flood of malice disappearing just as quickly as it had appeared. "You are not wrong."

He stood, starting to exit the room without another word.

She pushed herself onto her feet, her right hand clutching onto the edge of the table for balance. "Magnus, wait."

He stopped a step away from the door and glanced over his shoulder at her.

"I have to get back to London. Now." She tried to keep the desperation out of her voice but wasn't entirely successful.

At her words, he turned around to her. "Why?"

"It is none of your business." In reality, she had to get back to her sister who she hoped was still waiting for her at her room in the boarding house where she lived when she wasn't on jobs. Sasha had promised she would meet her there a day ago, and if Sasha had shown, Daphne had already missed her.

His brow wrinkled. "Hector said you are off all jobs at the moment."

"Hector doesn't know everything that goes on in my life."

"Are you sure about that?" His gaze dipped down, catching on her chest. Pausing for so long that she glanced downward.

Ballocks. Her wet hair had dripped onto the robe, soaking it through, and now her nipples were clearly transparent through the fabric. And fully peaked. Damn the thin wrapper.

Her right arm whipped in front of her breasts and his look snapped upward.

He cleared his throat. "Apologies. Your hair moved away from your chest and I—"

"I understand exactly what that was." She twisted, turning her body to the side so she could both hide her breasts from him and lean against the table. She still wasn't fully stable on her feet. "You don't need to explain. And I do need to get back to London, so if you could have a carriage brought about, that would be appreciated."

"What can you possibly need to be back in London for? It is four hours away. Especially with a broken arm and feet that are not steady?"

She shrugged. She wasn't about to tell him of her sister.

Sasha was a secret she kept from everyone, save one person.

He pointed to the bed. "Stay. Give your body a few hours to recover. Your clothes are being cleaned. Stay at least overnight, even if you decide to end this arrangement before it begins."

She looked at the bed and then to him.

He was right. She was in pain and still not thinking straight from the laudanum. She needed to rest, at least for the night, before she headed back into London.

Sasha would be fine for another night.

Or so she hoped.

{ Chapter 7 }

Magnus had never seen anything quite as erotic as Daphne's hard nipples peeking through her robe.

It was all he'd been thinking about the last few hours.

He'd enjoyed women's bodies in all shapes and sizes, in a wide variety of dress and costumes, but Daphne's nipples peeking out at him had made him pause like nothing before. Her innocent obliviousness to their presence, yet they were just begging to be touched, sucked...

Hell.

He juggled the platter of food and drink into his left hand and reached down to adjust himself. He'd have no problem bedding her, that was obvious. She was a beautiful woman who didn't quite have a grasp on her own appeal.

First, though, he had to convince her of the arrangement, for she was as skittish as a rabbit in a foxhole, trying to get out of Thorburn.

He knocked on the door to the room he'd put her in at the abbey. His mother's room. One of the only rooms he'd had time to have updated since he took on the title.

"Come." Daphne's voice, even muffled through the door, sounded stronger than it did hours ago.

He moved into the room, finding her immediately.

She'd found another robe—a thicker dark blue silk one—and was sitting at the round table, staring out the window at the darkness that had descended. She would be able to see the sea from that window, but the moonless, overcast sky meant she was looking out into a dark inkwell.

"Your maid said you were awake. I brought food."

Her head whipped around to look at him. "Oh. It is you. I thought it was the maid. Or Hector."

"Hector had to go back to London." He moved across the room, setting the tray of food and wine down in front of her. "I thought we could eat."

She stood, pulling the V of the wrap closer together as she shuffled back a step away from him. “Hector left me here? Alone with you?”

“He didn’t know if you were about to awaken or sleep through the night, and he said he had pressing matters back in London. He’ll return in the morning.”

Distrust ran rampant in her green eyes and he stifled a sigh. Not that he’d done anything to make her trust him. He and Hector had done a fine job of manipulating her into her current position.

He removed the silver cloche from the platter, setting it on the table. “Please. Eat. That is all I am here for, to make sure you eat when I know full well you haven’t eaten in at least a day.”

Her look drifted from his face down to the food, and her tongue slipped out, licking her lips. Hesitantly, she pulled back her chair and sat.

Without a word, she lifted one of the plates from the platter and set it in front of her. He poured her a glass of wine.

She took it, sipping, then picked up her fork. She started in on the tiny round potatoes, then ate the pile of citrus-splashed green beans. Half her wine was gone by the time she devoured the crusty bread that had sat at the edge of the plate.

Magnus ate a few bites from his plate, then pointed at her food with his fork. “Don’t like roast beef?” She hadn’t touched the meat on her plate.

She took another sip of wine, then held up her left arm with a crooked smile.

Before she could say anything, he leaned over the table, quickly cutting her meat into bite-sized pieces.

She looked at him, gratitude in her eyes. “Thank you. I can’t hold a knife without pain—not yet.”

“I imagine it will take a few days before your fingers will want to twitch. Hector did try to assure me you were a quick healer, and that you’d broken bones before. But I think that was to assuage my guilt more than anything. Maybe his own guilt.” He lifted his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“Hector doesn’t feel guilt.” She jabbed a piece of meat onto her fork. “He feels very little, in my experience. He feels purpose. He feels the satisfaction of a job well done by the guardians. Other than that, I don’t think he feels much of anything. How can he, when his guardians die all the time?”

“Guardians die?”

Her look met his. “This isn’t a game of fantasy, Magnus, what we do. It is oftentimes harmless, the jobs we are on. But sometimes it is life and death, and we have all sworn that we are okay with the death part.”

His look pinned her. “Are you okay with the death part?”

“I rather like being alive.” She popped the bite of beef into her mouth. “But yes, I know what I signed up for when I joined the Guardians.”

For a few minutes they both ate in silence until Daphne drained the last of her wine glass and then stared at him as he refilled her glass. “Are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Why you need a wife that can protect your heir? What would your child need protection from?”

Magnus grabbed his wine glass and leaned back in his chair, studying her for long moments. He ran his free hand through his hair and took a slow drink of his wine.

He didn’t want to tell her, not until it was confirmed she would take the offer and remain his wife. That was when she would be invested enough to keep his secrets.

But he also suspected she would never agree to the arrangement if she didn’t know what was in front of her.

Caution wasn’t about to help him in this instance.

“I have an older brother.”

“Alive?” Her right hand holding her fork fell to the table. “You are Lord Thorburn, are you not? Or is this some ill-begotten plan to steal the title away from your own flesh and blood?”

“No, I am Lord Thorburn. But there is more to the story. My older brother is my half-brother. He was disowned as illegitimate when I was young. Four.”

Her head tilted to the side, considering him. “That cannot have gone over well.”

“No. It did not.” He had to physically hold himself back from crushing the glass in his hand. “My brother left Thorburn, vowing revenge. He went to London and became a different man. Created a new name, a new identity for himself with one goal—to destroy my father and everything he had.”

“What did he do?” She set the fork down and picked up her wine

glass.

“Everything he set out to. He went to London and pillaged and killed his way to the top of the London Underworld. He had power. Men. Riches. And enough brothels he used to gather up all the secrets of the *ton*. He used it all to take every cent from my father, leaving us in poverty with an empty Thorburn Abbey as our only possession.”

“That’s harsh.”

“That was justice, at least according to Bloodwater. He left us with a title that would never mean anything again.”

She gasped, almost choking on the wine she’d just sipped.

“Bloodwater—he’s your brother?”

“Half-brother.”

She slapped on her chest, trying to clear the wine that had choked her, her words straining out rough. “Which is why I first saw you years ago at the Fashionable Filly?”

“Aye.”

She visible paled. “That means he’s the one that I will need to protect your heir—what will be our child—against?”

“Aye.”

“But he’s—he’s a monster. His reach is far and wide. He does not know the meaning of mercy.”

“Which is why I need a wife up to the task of protecting my child. He does not yet know our father is dead and that I have returned to take the title. A title I intend to pass down to the next generation. Our child will need to be protected, especially if what I have set into motion doesn’t go according to plan.”

She stilled. “What exactly have you set in motion?”

“A plan to destroy Bloodwater before he can destroy me. He already had the chance once. Thanks to you, I survived. Now it is my turn to destroy him.”

Her eyes had been huge, but had now drifted downward, away from him, to stare at the silver platter between their plates. He wasn’t sure if he’d just lost any hope of her consideration in that moment or not.

He leaned forward, setting his finger under her chin and lifting her face to him, waiting until her gaze met his. “Do you understand, now, why you are the one?”

She blinked, her head giving a slight shake. “I don’t know if I should be flattered or aghast that you’re willing to put me in the line of evil such as Bloodwater’s.”

“Choose flattered.”

“Or choose certain death.”

“Again, I will be putting everything possible into place to protect you and the child. Guardians around the clock. And an army of men if necessary, until Bloodwater is dead.”

“How, though? How did you accomplish all this? You would have been penniless when you came to London years ago. Then I set you onto that ship.”

His hand dropped away from her. “It was a privateering ship, Daphne. A lucrative one. Fortunes were made ten times over while I was aboard.”

Her chest lifted in a heavy sigh, her green eyes intense on him. “I always regretted what I did to you in that moment. That I had you crimped into service under Captain Ipswich. Why would you want me after I did that to you?”

“In that moment, did you have a choice?”

Slowly, she shook her head. “I just knew I needed you to disappear—for both our sakes.”

He stared at her, seeing the pain of that moment flash in her eyes. She’d killed a man. For him. When she didn’t even know him. “I admit, I hated you for a good year for setting me onto that course. I wanted to die that night, yet you saved me. Then I wanted to die every day for a year after that night when I was stuck on that ship. Yet I was alive, all because of you, when I wanted nothing more than death.”

She flinched. “And then?”

“And then I slowly realized that I wanted to live. Wanted to live long enough to see my brother suffer like I did. See him destroyed like my father and I were destroyed.” His hand lifted, stroking the side of his face. “That was when I didn’t hate you anymore. I will also admit that flashes of you—of your face—would haunt my dreams on occasion, and I came to realize that you were scared. You were young, so young. And innocent. And desperate. I cannot fault you for any of your actions that night.”

She exhaled a relieved breath. “I was...was desperate that night.”

“Why?”

“I realized I needed to get out of Bloodwater’s clutches.” She reached out to grab her wine glass, and there was the slightest tremble in her fingers.

He waited for her to continue, yet she offered up no more information.

She took a sip of the wine, then set her gaze on him. “With what you know of Bloodwater and what he is capable of, why would you ever want to drag an innocent child into your war?”

“My child will be the final nail in Bloodwater’s coffin.” His words seethed out, harsh. “He does not yet know my father is dead, and if I fail along the way, which is a possibility, the title handed down to my heir will ensure Bloodwater can never scheme it back into his hands—which is a real possibility if there is no line of succession. The title is the one thing he has always wanted, and it will be the one thing he’ll never get.”

“So you need a pawn. And you intend to use me as way to get that pawn.”

“Brutal assessment, but yes.” He wasn’t going to hide from the truth. Daphne was a guardian and knew full well that the world Bloodwater existed in had little to do with truth and justice.

Her head snapped back, then she nodded. “Thank you for your honesty.”

“I do understand how cold it may seem. But I also think you’re the one that can do this, because I’ve seen what compassion you are capable of—what it will make you do. You will protect the child, give it everything it needs—love it, even.”

She blinked hard, her breath drawing inward like she was holding back words. “I never intended to marry. A child was something I never considered.”

“Are you a virgin?”

She gave a sudden chuckle. “No. Not with the lifestyle I’ve lived.”

He nodded, his lips pulling terse.

“Please tell me that gets me out of this godforsaken arrangement.”

He shook his head. “Your virginity was never part of the agreement. How many men have you had?”

“How many women have you had?” She shot back.

He stifled a chuckle, making a mental note to never again bargain with this woman, since that was apparently what they were doing. “Enough. Many.”

Her eyes lifted to the ceiling. “Fine. Three. Two were awkward. One was good.”

“It is good to know. I was curious about your proclivity on the sexes.”

Her look sliced into him. “Just because I never intended marriage does not mean I don’t appreciate men.”

“Even better to know.” He wiped his thumb along the outside of his lips. He could almost taste her now. Her lips, her breasts, diving lower to taste her juices. Hell, his cock was out of control again.

A sickly-sweet smile crossed her face. “You think I’m attracted to you?”

“If I was a betting man—”

“You don’t want to bet with me. You’ll lose.”

He chuckled and leaned forward in his chair. “Have you made a decision about us?”

Her full lips slipped open, a breath going in and ready to escape out with an answer before she stopped herself. Hesitation clear as day in her eyes.

She needed one final push.

“Before you make a decision, I want you to know I owe you.” His hand landed on the table in between them, his fingers stretching across the wood. “I owe you my life, for when we met that first time, I was ready to forfeit it. You stopped all of that—saved my life and sent me on a different path. For that I owe you.”

She shook her head. “You owe me nothing.”

“What I owe you has nothing to do with whether or not you accept the marriage. What I owe you means that when you truly need me, I will be there for you, regardless if we part ways now or not. That is a vow you get from me, no strings attached.”

She closed her eyes for a long breath, hiding from him. Hiding those mossy green eyes that were a portal to all her thoughts.

“Can you get the vicar back here?” Her eyes opened to him.

His head cocked to the left. “Yes.”

“Then I will marry you. But it will be my choice. Me, saying the

words.”

His chest expanded in instant understanding. He respected it. Moreover, it set his own mind at ease. Honor may not be on his side, but how he and Hector had trapped her here hadn't sat well with him. *Nothing* had sat well with him since he saw her getting attacked in the alleyway.

Waking up one day in the middle of the ocean, crimped onto a ship, he'd learned a lot about losing the ability to make his own choices. He'd lived that way for nearly four years.

If she was going to marry him, it would be her choice to live or die beside him.

For that, he intended to keep her alive.

{ Chapter 8 }

The parody of the ceremony was uneventful.

The vicar Hector had brought from London had not yet departed from the seaside coaching inn, probably taking the opportunity and the hefty sack of coins he'd gotten for the first marriage ceremony to enjoy a bit of respite by the seaside. It was easy enough to have him brought posthaste to Thorburn Abbey.

It had taken the vicar less than five minutes to remarry them, but the words, "I will," and the vows came out of Daphne's own mouth on her own accord.

The "love and obey" part she had choked out, but had dutifully said.

The whole of those few precious minutes a balm to the guilt that had been gnawing a hole in his conscience.

With the ceremony, he now had a partner in his plans.

A partner Magnus was currently staring at the back of, wondering what to do with.

Daphne walked across her room, heading straight for the table and the fresh bottle of wine that had been delivered to her chambers while they were married in the Thorburn library. It'd been a peculiarly quiet, echoey scene, for the many tomes had been sold years ago, leaving only empty shelves.

Shelves he would have to restock as soon as he could grab five minutes to send the order to his man in London that was procuring much of the furnishings he was having bought for the abbey.

Daphne poured one glass, then the other. She still wore the dark blue robe. Which had been unfortunate in front of the vicar, and the slightest twinge of red had flooded her cheeks when the vicar looked her up and down. Her embarrassment had struck a chord of regret with Magnus—not that he had any alternate clothing ready for her. Any dresses from the past had long since been sold or removed from the place, and her clothes from the day before were still drying.

Dresses. Dresses needed to be ordered before the dusty old tomes that were merely for show. The finest dresses.

She half turned to him, her hand trembling as she picked up one of the glasses. “You will have to forgive me. This is strange for me. I know I repeat myself, but I was never going to marry.”

He did like that about her, her honesty.

“Yet now you are.” He inclined his head to her. “Nevers have a way laughing at us.”

“That they do.” She smiled, genuine, and it was like the sun had exploded in the room. No wonder she was so useful to Hector as a guardian. She was beautiful to begin with, but then she smiled and the whole world would fall to their knees to grovel at her feet.

She should smile more.

But then, what had he given her to smile about in the last days?

He stifled thoughts of guilt, moving toward her. Her smile disappeared behind her glass as she downed half of her wine.

Stepping alongside her, he picked up his glass of wine, taking a sip. “Hector told me you used to live at the Fashionable Filly, which is how our paths originally crossed, but that you were never, well...worked there. How is it that you managed that?”

“Managed it?” She raised an eyebrow at him as she turned fully to him, her drink still on her lips.

A short answer that wasn't really an answer, and he was quickly having to come to terms with someone just as skilled as he at offering up short answers and no real information.

“You were attractive years ago, I remember that, even if I could barely see out of my eyes that night. I would have thought you'd have had a long list of clientele. But Hector dissuaded me from that notion.”

“I did work there.”

He stilled.

She grinned. “I cleaned rooms since the moment I could walk. Worked in the kitchen when needed. Emptied chamber pots. Anything to keep me from lying on my back with my legs spread.”

“That worked?”

“It did, until it didn't. Mama Layla—she wasn't my real mother, but she was the mother that raised me—she was one of Bloodwater's whores.

One of his favorites. She made him promise that I wouldn't go into the trade until I was eighteen." She paused, taking a long drink of the wine. "That first night we met years ago, I was a month shy of sixteen. Mama Layla had died several months earlier, so I had lost the only protection I had at the Filly. Just before you stormed past me into Bloodwater's office, Bloodwater had informed me that he was putting me on the block."

"The block?"

"To sell my virginity. I was to take my rightful place at the Filly."

"But that didn't happen?"

She shook her head.

"What did happen?"

Her forefinger flicked out at him from her glass. "You happened. I learned I could kill a man. That changed me." Her eyes glossed over with the memory. "So I disappeared that night with nothing. I was terrified of having no home, no food."

Her body curled over slightly, like she could still feel pangs of hunger stabbing through her belly. "But I was more terrified of what Bloodwater would do to me if he knew what had happened, what I did—I killed one of his bastard sons, for heaven's sake. But I knew what areas of London I could exist in without Bloodwater finding me. So I stayed in those areas. Then Hector discovered me stealing food in Haymarket. He apparently watched me for days, intrigued at how I avoided getting caught."

She stopped, chuckling as her head shook back and forth. "Those brutes you had attacking me in the alleyway were not the first test I passed that Hector concocted for me. He sent plenty my way in those early days. And eventually, I became a guardian." Her look snapped to him and she raised her glass. "That was how I managed it."

Well...fuck.

Her life since that night long ago had turned just as shabby as his had. He'd never even thought to ask her on it—much less imagine that what she'd done that night would have affected her life at all.

Ass.

Guilt suddenly eating at him, Magnus took a stiff step away from her. "You should sleep." He motioned toward the bed. "It's been a long day."

Her dark eyebrows lifted. "No wedding night? I got the sense that you wanted to move this part of your plan along posthaste."

“No. We can wait.” He flicked his finger between them, jarred at his own suggestion to wait. For the more he learned about Daphne—the more he watched her—the more his cock started to take over his mind, flooding his thoughts with imaginations of pumping into her, her lips parting with every thrust, moans rumbling from her chest.

Stop. Ass. Stop.

He cleared his throat. “All of this can wait until you have your strength back about you.”

“I have my strength about me.” She lifted her splinted arm. “This will take weeks to heal. Are you suggesting we wait until then?”

“No.”

She motioned the tips of her left fingers poking out above the bandaging in a little circle. “Then we may as well start this sooner rather than later.”

That took him aback. “You don’t wish to take any time to acclimate to what has happened? To the marriage?”

“I don’t spend a lot of time dwelling on things I cannot go back and change.” She shrugged with an easy smile. “Adaptability is a skill I’ve had to hone to a sharp, bloody point. We’re married. You need an heir. I am well aware of what is required of me now. It may take some time for your seed to take, so we may as well get on with it.”

She set her glass down on the table, turning to him, her right hand sliding up his chest and tugging free the knot of his cravat.

Contrary to her robe at the repeat wedding, he’d quickly donned a coat, waistcoat and cravat before the vicar came. A modicum of respectability.

Slowly, with her stare on him, she unfurled the cloth around his neck and then pulled one end of the cravat until it slid from his neck.

His breath hitched. “Hell, are you sure you didn’t work at the Filly?”

“Is this your way of telling me you don’t believe me on my number?”

“I believe you.”

Her brow furrowed. “Do you?”

“Tell me about the good one.”

“You actually want to know?”

“I want to know *why* he was good—it’s been rankling me since you

said it.”

She nodded—more to herself than to him. Her look lifted to the far upper corner of the room with a groan. “Fine. He was a guardian I worked with protecting a wealthy widow that liked to *visit* with a number of men. She hired us in case the lover she was with became belligerent, which had happened to her more than once. I posed as her maid and he a footman, and it was our job to stay in whatever room she had hired that was next to hers—she never allowed the men into her own home. We would listen for anything taking a turn that was too much for her—watch even, if there was a peephole and she was unsure of the man. And we would intervene if necessary.”

His eyebrows lifted. “You would sit around and listen to her having sex?”

“Yes.” She twisted the length of his cravat in her hands. “And I’m sure you can imagine how things progressed between the two of us. There are only so many hours one could listen to the guttural moans of her and her men, before things took the same turn with us.”

“You started an affair?”

“We did. It was never serious and we were careful. I am no virgin, but his seed was never anywhere near entering me.” Her head angled to the side, a smile playing on her lips. “And he was good because we both learned a lot from that widow. She was...adventuresome. Also, you’ll recall I grew up in a whorehouse—I walked in on a lot.”

Heaven help him. He stifled a groan that surged up straight from his testy, straining cock. “What happened to the job with the widow?”

“She eventually remarried. And to this day, she has been completely faithful to her husband. For how many proposals she received—sometimes in the middle of the throes and sometimes as she left the men in the rooms, she chose well.”

His stare ate into her. “Your blatant honesty is befuddling.”

“Does that mean it is *you* that needs time to acclimate yourself to the current situation?” Her look lifted to him, a carnal glint in her wide eyes as she dropped his cravat to the floor.

“I don’t need to be seduced, Daphne. The second you are ready, I’ll be more than willing to perform. I’m busting out of my trousers as it is.”

Her eyes slid down to the front of his trousers and she chuckled with a slight nod. “Well, then, let me slide your jacket, your waistcoat, your shirt,

and your trousers off.” Her right hand landed on his chest, her fingers sliding downward to unbutton his waistcoat. “Slowly. It’s like opening a present for me, as I don’t know what is underneath.”

“Hell, woman.”

She looked up at him, mirth in her eyes. “Unless you got me something else for our wedding?”

He stood statue still as her right hand ran along his body, her knuckles diving and dipping along the ridges of muscles along his belly, his chest, his shoulders, and his upper arms through his clothing. The golden flecks in her mossy green eyes aglow as she followed her right hand roaming about his body.

He was hard—painfully hard—the whole of his body desperate for her hand to dip lower, to grab a hold of him and clench her delicate fingers around his shaft. Naked, through his trousers, he didn’t care. He just needed her touch on his cock.

Yet he remained still.

She wanted a present to open? He was damn well going to be that present.

The whole of how he’d treated her thus far was regrettable. He could do this one thing for her.

His coat fell to the floor. His waistcoat. He helped her with his lawn shirt and her audible intake of breath when his shirt fluttered away was well worth the price of the painful blood pooling in his cock.

Her delectable lips parted as her fingers went to the tattoo that stretched across his chest. “You are marked.”

“Never been with a sailor?”

“What is it?”

“Jörmungandr. A world sea serpent that battled—”

“Thor,” she whispered, entranced by the ink on his skin, her fingertips tracing the swooping lines of the serpent. “It is majestic. And it is chaos, caught on your chest.”

At that, he could take no more and his hand clasped along her neck, his thumb diving under her chin to tilt her head upward and he kissed her. Hard.

No ambiguity about the kiss. He wanted her body. And by the way she was touching him, kissing him back, she wanted his body just the same.

Her mouth parted to him and he pounced, slipping his tongue inward, tasting her. The wine still heavy on her tongue. A flavor that only spurred him on, desperate to learn what every inch of her skin tasted like.

His left hand slid in between them, pulling free the knot on her robe as his lips, his tongue trailed downward from her mouth to her neck. Honey. She tasted like honey. Sweet and of the clouds, a bright summer day captured on his taste buds. The taste of her so intoxicating he wanted more and more and more of her.

His hand around her neck slipped down along her spine, tugging the silky blue robe free from her shoulders, and it slid along her body to the floor.

The softest mewl vibrated from her chest and his cock pulsed with the sound, demanding he hurry this along.

He tried to ignore the bastard.

Daphne tasted too good, and while she thought *he* was the present, he was quickly coming to realize that she was the real gift.

He dipped lower, following the swell of her breasts. She wasn't overly endowed, but her breasts were the perfect size for him—hefty enough to cup, but not so large he had to manage them. Her left nipple slipped between his lips, and he sucked, swirling his tongue around the bud. It hardened with the touch, her skin pricking in a radius outward.

“These have to be the most perfect breasts I’ve ever had the pleasure of tasting.”

A breathless chuckle left her as her right hand wrapped around his neck.

He spent time—too much according to his raging cock—lavishing attention on the breast, before drifting off to her other nipple. Repeating all the motions that had her fingers digging into the back of his neck, her chest arching out to him.

His teeth raked ever so slightly across the sensitive flesh, capturing the bud and softly biting it. Her chest lifted in a quick intake of breath and a guttural groan escaped from her throat. A sound so wickedly wanton it sent tingles to his balls.

She froze, pulling back slightly as her hand dropped away from his neck.

He lifted his head, finding her eyes. Too much. Too harsh. He'd been lost in a world where he wanted to devour everything on her—an instinctual

reaction he wasn't even aware he was having. It'd been so damn easy to lose himself in her naked body.

Her cheeks lifted in half a cringe. "My apologies. I shouldn't have... grunted."

His eyebrows lifted. "Grunted? That wasn't a grunt. I've never heard a more delicious sound in the bedroom. I didn't hurt you?"

"Oh. No. No hurt." Her green eyes went wide, her head shaking. "The sound was unseemly, though. I don't know what came over me—I'm accustomed to suppressing what I am really thinking."

"Don't." He leaned in, his face in hers, his look eating into her. "Not ever—not with this. Demure doesn't suit you. I want to hear everything you like—everything that makes your toes curl, your body wet for me."

She lifted her eyebrows, clearly not believing him.

Only one way to fix that.

He wrapped his hand behind the small of her back, pulling her into him, and he dove down to where he'd been, his mouth attached to her breast. This time, he looked up at her, studying her as he resumed his assault on all her most sensitive areas.

She stared down at him, her lips parted in quick breaths until he had her right where she'd been moments ago. He knew he'd accomplished it when her eyes fluttered closed, her head tilting back as her body arched into him.

His teeth brushed across her nipple again.

Instant reaction, a rough groan bubbled in her chest.

He bit down with more force, rolling the hard peak between his teeth.

A louder groan, longer, and her fingers slid through his hair, wrapping around the back of his head. "That. Harder."

Gladly. He ran his hands down along her hips, her legs, and then he dipped his thumbs inward to her inner thighs as he brought his hands upward. More pressure of his teeth on her nipple. So much it had to hurt.

It only prodded her onward, her hips melting toward him, her groans turning guttural.

Her body was so damn responsive to his touch. Unexpected. But so wantonly visceral in her reactions, it made him want to rake his teeth over every inch of her skin.

He loosened his teeth on her nipple, rolling his tongue around it

gently, then slid it between his teeth again in tandem with his right fingers breaching her slit, sliding into her folds.

Hell. Drenched already.

He had to speed this up if he didn't want to just explode in his trousers like a whelp with his first stiff cock.

He switched breasts, taking her nipple faster, harder, toying with it between his teeth as he stroked along her slit, letting her grind against his hand.

Her guttural groans had turned into panting, growled, jumbled words. "Hell, Magnus, harder, faster. Yes. That. Yes. Yes."

Her hand dropped from his head to scramble to his trousers, ripping with her one good hand at the buttons of the fall front until it was free, his shaft unbound, thick and raging to the air.

He lifted his head, finding her mouth once more in a searing kiss that swallowed every one of her carnal growls as he shoved off his trousers.

Her hand dipped on him, wrapping around the thickness of his cock the second he was clear of his clothes.

She pulled free of the kiss, looking down between them, panic suddenly in her eyes. "My hand barely fits—how—how—it's been so long that I've been celibate—how—"

He smiled, grabbing her under her chin and forcing her look up to him. "I have a feeling my body was made for yours, Daph. Trust me on it."

His eyes locked onto hers, his fingers deep in her folds moving faster, circling her nub that was hard and straining for his touch.

Her lips parted in quick breaths as he sped his onslaught. Around and around and then a swipe straight across the nub. Again. Again. Faster. Harder.

Her eyes tried to dip away from him again, but he held her chin up, forcing her to look at him and nowhere else.

A scream, the ache of it begging, and he could see in her eyes how close she was to coming. How desperate.

"Trust me?"

A scream exhaled and she nodded. "Yes. Please, Magnus. Please."

His cock surging, straining for her, he dropped her chin and grabbed her by the hips, picking her up. Her legs immediately wrapped around him and he lifted her higher, setting her entrance at the tip of his cock.

She groaned at the touch and he let her down, his hips plunging his cock upward into her in one swift motion.

A scream—half pleasure, half torture—slipped out of her lips and she curled forward, her teeth biting into his shoulder. He paused, every muscle sweating in agony with the slow pace, but she had to adjust. And he had to seat himself fully inside of her before he wrecked her body.

It didn't take but seconds and her hips started to shift, lifting herself on his shaft.

Thank the wicked heavens.

His fingers digging into her flesh, he lifted her by the hips until just the tip of his cock was embedded into her, and then set her downward, driving hard into her. He repeated the action, again and again until her legs found leverage on his thighs and she took over the pace, demanding he thrust deep, grind against her nub with every plunge.

Her body devouring his or his devouring hers, he wasn't sure.

He lost himself in her. Lost himself in the feel of her, the smell of her, the sound of her. Lost himself in how their bodies writhed in carnal unison.

Both of them rabid and clawing at the other, chasing completion but not wanting it to end.

Such explosive sex it erased all thoughts from his head, until he was nowhere but in the moment with her, in what their bodies were doing to each other, all his control lost. His body pushing hers like he'd never pushed a woman before. Furiously demanding her release as brutally as he was demanding his own.

She came on a scream. Her inner walls clenching tight, a brutal vise on his cock and he exploded into her, his body ripping in all directions with the force of a thousand wild horses.

Bloody hell.

He hadn't expected that. Hadn't known his body would react to hers with such ferocity.

He staggered several steps to the side and fell back on the bed. She collapsed on top of him, her skin pulsating under his fingertips, her gasping breaths heaving her ribcage up and down.

Her warmth blanketing over him was satisfying. Hot and sweaty from what had just happened between the two of them, and the weight of her

on his chest felt right. With every breath she took, her body calmed, like she'd fallen asleep.

Women didn't fall asleep on him. Ever.

But her body...her body on his felt good.

Too good and he suddenly felt like centipedes were crawling underneath his skin.

Out. Away.

He slipped his hand under her cheek, propping it up slightly so he could see her face.

Her eyes went wide on him, a flush instant to her cheeks. "Oh. Excuse me."

Of course she wasn't asleep. She was a bloody guardian, after all.

He gave her a terse smile. "No. You will have to excuse me."

Confusion flooding her eyes, she didn't move until he wrapped an arm around her and he rolled her to the side, sliding her body off of his.

Without a word, he climbed out of the bed and shoved his legs into his trousers, grabbing his boots and the rest of his clothes, then strode out of the room, itching for escape.

It wasn't until he closed the door behind him that he managed air into his lungs.

He'd been clear about it with her, hadn't he? What this marriage would be?

He wanted nothing from her and she should want nothing from him.

Especially not tender caresses after mating. Especially not lying naked in a bed together, breathing in sync.

Nothing.

That was the only way this was going to work.

This was a business transaction.

A means to an end.

Nothing more.

{ Chapter 9 }

Daphne rolled over in the bed, every muscle in her body revolting against the movement. Magnus had wrecked her body in the best of ways last night, but now she was paying the price.

She cracked her eyes open.

Empty bed. Daylight streaming in past the curtains she'd never bothered to get up and close last night.

Not even the slightest indent in the bed next to her. After stalking out of the room last night without a word, he'd never bothered to come back.

She stifled a sigh.

Easier for both of them that way, she had to admit.

But still, it did sting.

She hadn't even had time to catch her breath, her orgasm still vibrating through her limbs, when Magnus had rolled her off of his body and left.

From her years at the Fashionable Filly, she knew culls almost without fail spent more time with their whores after exhausting themselves than the minute Magnus had bothered to spare her.

But then, maybe she was less than a harlot to him. She was someone to merely unload his seed into.

Yet, there had been the sex. How their bodies had clashed with each other, clawed at each other—it'd been something primal that she'd never experienced and really couldn't explain. Nor did she even want to acknowledge how very different sex with Magnus had been from every other one of her interactions.

Not now.

Not after being abandoned the second it was over.

She would have to prepare herself better for next time when he repeated the action. She was a vessel—nothing more. Kind, really, that he'd even cared about her pleasure for how little he obviously thought of her.

She rolled onto her back, her right fist punching into the bed beside

her.

She needed to get back to London. Needed to get back to reality. She'd already stayed too long here at Thorburn. Sasha would have already left Daphne's room at the boarding house—if she'd even gone there to begin with. She knew how hard it was for Sasha to keep the fact that she was alive from Bloodwater.

Though Daphne had a sickening suspicion that Sasha had never even made the effort to get to the boarding house.

Sasha told her what she wanted to hear to get rid of her. Time and again.

Not that Daphne ever had a real escape plan for her sister.

But she needed to start making plans for how to extract her sister from Bloodwater's clutches, for she now had a real chance at doing so.

Though just having the money now to save her sister didn't mean her sister was saved. She needed to get Sasha out of London, get her fully away from Bloodwater before he could track her whereabouts.

It would be best if Bloodwater thought Sasha dead. But Daphne needed to get her hands on Sasha first—get in the same room with her to convince her of the plan—and that had been a tricky thing to achieve in the last two years.

First, though, she needed to get back to London.

She sat up, looking around the room.

No—first—she needed her clothes back.

Grabbing the robe that was still pooled on the floor next to the bed, she tugged it on, careful around her splint.

It had been dark last night when the vicar had appeared and they had moved down to the bizarrely empty library for a quick ceremony.

Magnus had said his father had lost everything, but somehow, the bleak, empty walnut shelves lining the walls in the library punctuated that fact more than his words ever could.

She stepped out into the hallway, able to take in her surroundings in the daylight streaming in from the windows at the end of the corridors, her bare feet padding along the worn wooden floorboards.

No décor anywhere. Odd rectangles of unfaded paint dotted the high walls, testaments to paintings and tapestries that had once regaled the corridors. No carpeting.

Since becoming a guardian, she'd been in her share of fine homes and castles. There was nothing the aristocracy liked more than showing off their wealth for all to see—paintings, knick-knacks in every corner, golden clocks, elaborately carved furniture, Axminster carpets lining the rooms and halls.

She understood the historical significance of it: expensive things meant money and money had always meant power. It was still true, in some circles. And Thorburn Abbey had probably been filled with riches once upon a time.

But the abbey was now stark in how little there was inside it. Unnerving. Especially since the bedroom chambers she had just occupied had been furnished well, which must have been a recent development.

She reached the right wing of the main staircase, looking down on the wide marble bifurcated steps. Just beyond the railing a level down, a flash of black skirts disappeared into what she guessed was the drawing room.

“Excuse me?” she called out, her voice croaking a bit.

The maid, Joan, that had helped her with her bath yesterday, poked her head back out of the drawing room, first looking about the floor around her before looking upward. The woman smiled when she saw Daphne standing at the top of the stairs. “Aye, it is ye, m'lady. I did not think ye would be rising so early.”

Confusion hit Daphne for a moment until she realized *she* was the “lady.” She gave the maid a kind smile. “I can be an early riser. If you would be so kind, are my clothes dry?”

Joan nodded, walking toward the bottom of the stairs. “Yes, m'lady. I'll bring them up.”

“Thank you.” Daphne started to turn to go back to her room, but then paused, catching Joan before she disappeared into the bowels of the abbey. “Joan, do you know if his lordship has risen?”

“He has, but he has locked himself into his study with a guest, not to be disturbed.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Joan inclined her head to Daphne and scurried off.

Daphne turned back to her room, her mind running through possibilities. Hector wouldn't have returned here this early in the morning, so it had to be a different guest.

Which would make this the perfect time to head back to London.

Magnus's seed was deep within her, doing whatever it was going to do, and he didn't need her for anything else at the moment. He'd made that much clear.

Which made it the opportune time to put her own plan in motion.

With help from Joan, she was dressed and making her way out to the stables within a half hour.

For what the main abbey lacked, the main stable had a nice array of horses, she noted as she walked along the stalls, hoping to find a stableboy.

When a boy, maybe ten years old, stumbled out of a stall, sloshing a heavy bucket between his legs, she got his attention. "Hello." She stepped closer to him, smiling. "Are you the fine young sir that I need to ask to saddle a horse for me?"

Plopping the bucket down, he wiped his hands on his dirty shirt. "Ye are the new ladyship?"

"I am. What is your name?"

"Rudy." He looked at her suspiciously. "Ye sure ye want a horse, m'lady? What with yer arm like that? Ye sure ye can ride?"

"I can. But if you would be so kind as to pick out a sturdy, but agreeable horse for me, I would be most grateful."

"Yes, m'lady."

She wandered the aisle of stalls as the boy chose a mare and saddled it for her, visiting the many horses, stroking noses, studying their builds as she passed. To a one, this was a beautiful collection of horses.

"'Tis ready for you, m'lady." The boy called out from outside the main doors of the barn.

She approached him, stepped onto the block, and then heaved herself up onto the sidesaddle. Slightly awkward with her splint, but doable. A quick adjustment of her skirts and she gathered the reins from Rudy.

"Where are ye intending to ride, m'lady, in case his lordship is lookin' for ye?"

That made her pause—someone wanting to know her whereabouts. Not exactly the independence she was promised, though she couldn't fault the stableboy for it. He was probably doing his best, as she imagined these horses, this job, was new to him.

She considered for a moment lying to him, telling him the opposite

direction than what she intended, but neither did she want him to suffer Magnus's ire if he actually did go looking for her in the wrong direction.

"Thank you for readying the horse." She gave him her brightest smile. "I need to get my bearings about me. Which way is London?"

He stepped away from the horse, looking around. He pointed to his right. "That way, m'lady."

"Excellent. Then that is the direction I intend to explore." An innocuous comment, not too much information, yet not a lie. And the boy would never imagine that she actually intended to go to London. He didn't know that four hours on the roads was a blink of an eye for her. She'd travelled much farther by herself, and she always had her backup coin in the heel of her boot and her dagger strapped to her calf in case she ran into issues along the road.

The stableboy grinned up at her, tugging at the brim of his cap to her. "Enjoy yerself, m'lady."

"I intend to. Thank you, sir."

She turned the horse and headed down the gravel drive of Thorburn, then pointed her horse west. London.

It was time to get her sister back.

{ Chapter 10 }

“There. There he is. Little fuckin’ thief.”

Dammit to all hell and back again.

Thief.

The exact disguise that had gotten her into the Fashionable Filly was now the one drawing attention. The torn trousers with a rope for a belt. The ragged, dirty shirt. Her hair bound into tight braids that wrapped her head and were covered with a black cap pulled down tight over her scalp and half of her face. Enough to fool Bloodwater’s guards that were chasing her. But also enough that she was out of place in the whorehouse.

Daphne skidded into a turn as she yanked open the door of the rearmost room on the first floor of the Fashionable Filly. Mable’s room.

That she knew the layout of the place so well from her youth was her only saving grace at this point. She had to get out of here before someone recognized who was really running around madcap through the hallways.

Daphne pulled up for only a second as she slammed the door to Mable’s room closed behind her.

Mable was on all fours on the bed, facing the headboard with a sweaty, balding man grunting as he pumped into her from behind. The bored look on her face disappearing, Mable could only turn so much toward the intrusion. By then, Daphne had darted across the room and slid into a stop in front of the window. Mable would only see the black cap and what looked like a scrawny boy in dirty, torn clothes about to leap out of the window.

Footsteps thundered down the hallway toward the room.

Daphne yanked the window open and looked out. More of a drop than she would like, but doable.

She kicked her left leg up, the trousers that itched like the devil scraping across her skin, and threaded her leg over the windowsill, then swung her right leg up and out into the night air. A quick breath just as two of Bloodwater’s brutes crashed into the room, and she jumped.

Her feet hit hard and she curled into a roll, trying to not break both of

her ankles at impact. She skidded to a stop.

Swearing came from above as one of the brutes stuck his head out of the window, searching for her in the dark alleyway that lined the back of the Fashionable Filly.

“There, there he is, the runt. Go—get down there.” The brute disappeared.

Shit.

Both of her ankles throbbing, she pushed herself up from the putrid muck of the alley, wiping her hands on the trousers as she started running down the alley.

She made it to the cross street just as the two brutes who had found her on the third floor of the Filly turned the corner and spotted her.

Judas. They’d guessed right on her direction.

Dodging horses and carriages, she ran across the street to the closest alleyway. She had to lose them in the maze of these alleys and buildings that had been built haphazard over the years with no regard to straight lines.

Alleys she had once known well—but could now be blocked by anything—a new lean-to, carts, or wagons.

Turning to the side, she ripped the cap off her head, trying to loosen her braids. Deuced hard with just the tips of her fingers above the bandages on her left hand, but she teased much of the braids out as she sprinted. The brutes were close behind, catching glimpses of her, their heavy wheezing from running echoing along the brick walls and sending fire onto her neck.

Faster. She needed faster.

She jabbed to the left down an alley she didn’t quite recall being there in the past, and heaved a breath of relief as it opened up onto a street.

Yanking out the thin skirt that she’d had tucked in along her waist under the ragged shirt, she spread it wide.

Hair loose down her back, skirt over her trousers. It had to be enough change to fool them.

Tucking the shirt into the skirt, she pumped her legs, pushing hard toward the opening in front of her. Except it wasn’t quite a full street—more of a wider alleyway.

Just as the brutes rounded the skinny lane behind her, she broke onto the next alleyway.

Instantly, a palm slapped tight across her face, her whole body being

picked up and yanked to the side, her hair flying in front of her eyes.

Her body jammed into whoever had just grabbed her. Manhandling her, pulling her along with him. Seconds passed and she was spun again, her back slamming against a chest, the hand clamped across her face still cutting her air.

Caught and locked down.

Her reaction instant, her limbs exploded, fighting with every ounce of energy she had against the brute that had captured her.

“Bloody hell, Daphne—you’re safe. I’m here.” A low rumble in her ear. So low, it was unmistakable.

Magnus.

She froze.

Her eyes opened and she flicked her hair out of her face. He’d just pulled them into a short alleyway with no escape at the other end of it and she could hear Bloodwater’s brutes running along the wider alley, their wheezing breath coming closer and closer.

Magnus knew it as well.

He spun her around and wrapped her fully in his arms, his face buried down next to hers. His right hand reached under her thigh, yanking her leg up around his waist and he groaned loudly, his hips pumping back and forth, feigning a back-alley hump like it was something he did every day.

The wheezing paused for a moment and she could feel the brutes stop to look at them and then continue on, their steps clomping on the wet cobblestones.

Magnus stilled, silent, but kept her wrapped up in his arms for long minutes, his breath on her ear.

Bloodwater’s brutes weren’t coming back.

And bloody hell, she was shaking. The whole of her body so hot and sweaty she thought she was going to pass out.

She wedged her right hand between them and pushed herself away from him.

He let her escape his full hold, but grabbed onto her right wrist.

She yanked on her arm. “What the hell are you doing?” Her words hissed out.

“I’m bloody well here for you.”

She yanked on her arm again. This time he let her go. “Why?”

“Why?” His fingers tore at his hair. “Why in the hell did I lose my wife on the very first day?”

“Was there anything to lose?” She leaned over, digging under her skirts and ripping off the ragged trousers that were stuck to her skin, the sweat on the wool making her legs so itchy she wanted to gouge her skin down to the bone. “I was going to come back to Thorburn after I was done here. Or find you wherever you were.” She threw the trousers to the ground, grinding them into the muck with her heel.

He stared at her for several seething breaths. “Yes, well, I beat you to it.”

“Why?”

“Why?” He took a step toward her, towering over her. “Because, like it or not, I am now a permanent part of your life.”

She scoffed. “Nothing is permanent.”

“I am.”

“No. No, you’re not. You will just be one more in the long line of things that is in and out of my life. You’ve already tilted your hand on that account.”

Out of nowhere, both of his hands clamped onto the sides of her face, his fingers digging into her loose hair. “Hell, Daphne, have you never counted on anyone?”

She paused, then her eyes jerked up to him. “No. There hasn’t been anyone to depend on for a very long time. So, no. And I don’t intend to start now. Separate ways. Remember?”

“That is only if you choose it.”

“Not if you choose it?”

He seethed out a long breath, his fingernails curling into her scalp. “I don’t know what the hell I want. But I sure as hell don’t want you running around the rookeries dressed as a boy and running from men who are about to crush you.”

A scream of exasperation near escaped her throat, but she held it in, not willing to draw back Bloodwater’s men. Instead, her fury eked out in livid whispered words. “How would I know what you expect out of me? You humped me, then left. What exactly was I supposed to do with that? I have a life, Magnus. A life. A life that had nothing to do with you four days ago, and you ripped me away from it. You were done with me last night—done

enough—so I came back to my life.”

“Except your life is no longer your own.”

“Whose is it, then?”

His hands locked around her face, his stare frantic on her, his breath heaving.

In the next instant, his lips crushed down onto hers. Brutal and demanding and punishing.

No air. No escape from him.

And dammit to Hades, that was exactly what she wanted in that moment. All his anger. All his frustration pouring out into her so she could unleash all the same back into him.

She caught his bottom lip between her teeth, biting, drawing blood. He didn't pull away, letting loose a groan that turned into a growl as his hands went down, pawing at her skirts.

The tang of the blood spread across her tongue and the kiss turned rabid, both of them hard and furious. Her left arm on his shoulder for balance, her right hand dove in between them, ripping open the fall front of his trousers as he clawed her skirt upward.

Her thigh bare to the air, his hand went under it, his fingers digging into the muscles as he lifted her leg, wrapping it around his waist.

He sent her backward, her spine crashing into the brick behind her, and still the kiss raged on, neither of them willing to break the onslaught.

Her hand wrapped around his thick cock, guiding him under the folds of her skirt until the head of his shaft was digging into her entrance. No hesitation this time, her inner walls were already throbbing wet at the thought of him burying deep into her—stretching her to the limit.

The second she released him, he surged, driving hard into her.

It broke her hold on sanity, a scream ripping up from her chest. A scream he captured in his mouth, keeping her as silent as possible. Her reaction didn't slow him, his thrusts frantic and demanding, leveraging her against the building to get the best angle to slide into her and grind onto her sex.

Hell, he was good at this—too good—and the build from deep in her core started spiraling out of control. Too soon. Too savage.

Shoving her into a world where she didn't have control of her body or her mind. A world where she was consumed with nothing but his cock

driving into her, sending her into a frenzy.

Her screams into his mouth were met with his grunts.

Until she could take it no more and she broke the kiss, her mouth going down to his shoulder and biting—biting hard to keep the screams from piercing the night and drawing a host of eyes.

Relentless, he didn't stop, didn't break pace as his cock pummeled her. Her legs writhing, forcing each deep thrust to do maximum damage, the firestorm was on her, a blinding light that took over every one of her senses. He drove deep—as deep as he'd ever gone. It hit exactly right. Her body tightened, her teeth deep in his shoulder as the wicked lightning cut through her body, fracturing her.

His cock swelled, surging against her constricting inner walls and he buried his face in her hair, letting loose a guttural growl against her head. His control just as lost as hers.

She felt the rush of his hot seed flooding her, filling her, even though it was an impossibility there was any more room for it inside of her.

The whole of the orgasm ravaged her body so furiously, she couldn't quite get back in her head with the unending shocks that still rolled through her in wave after wave.

His breath heaving hot against her neck, she could feel Magnus's lost control slipping back into place.

Too soon.

She wanted this delicious oblivion to last longer. Moments where she didn't have to think. Didn't have to do. Could just lose herself in the pleasure still rolling through her body.

Her limbs still wrapped around his neck, his head dipped from deep in her hair and his lips moved against the crux of her shoulder. "You need to tell me what is going on, Daphne. Why did you disappear? Why were those men chasing you?"

She leaned back in avoidance, but then hit the brick wall, so she pushed against his chest. "Magnus—"

"No. No fighting. Not yet." He lifted her upward, extracting his body from hers, and he set her onto her feet. "First, food. I need to eat. I'm guessing you do as well."

{ Chapter 11 }

Magnus set two tankards of ale and two glasses full of healthy pours of brandy onto the table between him and Daphne. A bit too much force and all the liquids sloshed onto the worn wood.

Their second round of drinks in this dingy tavern, and hell, he shouldn't even have her in surroundings like this. But he needed a place without all the eyes and ears of London on him—and to be in a public place where he wouldn't be tempted to throw her up against a wall and drive his cock into her again.

Which was what apparently now happened to him when he was close to her.

This was better. This tavern. This table between them. He needed calm. He needed to be able to concentrate on talking to her, for he still hadn't fully recovered from all that had transpired today.

Finding her gone from Thorburn. Searching the grounds for her. Realizing she'd left for London. The crazed dash across the countryside to town. Searching for her. Not finding her. Locating Hector to find out where she might be.

And then that damn moment when she'd run across the street in front of him by the Fashionable Filly—in the clothes of a boy—had nearly undone him. And he'd realized she was being chased.

Running after them all. Cutting her off.

Rabid, frantic sex in the alleyway.

No. He was far from settled at the moment.

One day with Daphne as his wife and this woman was going to be the death of him.

“Eat. You aren't eating enough.” He grabbed the handle of his tankard and swallowed a gulp, staring at her as she sighed, then picked up a piece of chicken, plucking meat from the bone and popping it into her mouth.

Her cheeks had turned a rosy color, probably from the brandy. Endearing, that brandy could do that to her—this prickly, beautiful, spine-of-

steel woman he'd married. Endearing even with the streaks of dirt still left on her face. She'd wiped most of the crud away before they'd entered the tavern, seemingly almost embarrassed he'd caught her in boy's clothes and with dirt hiding her face.

She picked up her tankard and took a long sip. Good. He needed lots of alcohol in her and her tongue loose.

Her look went to the fire adjacent to the secluded, rear booth he'd kicked two drunkards out of when they'd entered the establishment. They weren't in the worst area of London, nor were they in the best. He needed privacy at the moment, anonymity—not to have to fight off drunken oafs pawing at his wife.

Daphne stared at the flames in the fireplace for a long minute, her jaw working back and forth.

She set the ale down and picked up her refreshed brandy, swallowing a fingerful of it in one quick motion.

Her gaze swung to him. "I know what you're doing. Trying to loosen my tongue."

"Is it working?"

"I can usually hold my liquor."

"How about tonight?"

Her shoulders lifted. "We'll find out."

The right side of his mouth lifted in a smirk and he picked up his brandy, not sipping it, just staring at it as he methodically swirled the liquid in the glass. "Whatever you are doing here in London, it obviously means a lot to you in order to leave this morning without a word." His look lifted to her. "What is here that you care so much about?"

Sudden tears brimmed in her eyes, the firelight reflecting waves across the mossy green of her irises.

"I don't cry." She sucked in a deep breath, her head tilting up for a long moment as she drained the tears back down to the well they had sprung from. "Never. Never even as little child. Never that I have ever remembered."

"Why now, then?"

Her look dropped to him. "You just asked me what I cared about." She scoffed a laugh, picking up her ale and taking a drink. "And I think you getting me foxed is working."

"Are you going to tell me what you are doing here, then?"

“It is my sister.”

“Sister? Hector said you have no family, save your father.”

She nodded, her lips pulling wide in an almost pleased way.

“Hector doesn’t know?”

“As I said before, Hector doesn’t know everything about my life, though he would like to.”

“So you have a sister?” He could already envision where this story was going.

“I do, though we are not blood-related.” Her look drifted off of him to stare at the wooden back of the booth next to his head. “Our mama— Mama Layla—gave birth to Sasha two years after she took me on as her own. She became my mother when I was but a week old.”

“Forgive me, but why did she do so? I would imagine her profession was not the most conducive to mothering.”

“No. But my mother and Mama Layla were the best of friends. They worked at the Fashionable Filly together until my mother became a courtesan to Lord Orelin. She died a week after I was born.” She paused, her cheeks lifting oddly, like she was disgusted but didn’t want to outwardly show it. She picked up her tankard and took a sip of ale. Her look settled on him. “But you were wondering about my sister.”

“I was.”

“We may not be blood-related, but Sasha was my sister for as long as I can remember. Just as Mama Layla was my mother. And Sasha and I have a shared hatred of Bloodwater.”

His eyebrows lifted. He knew she used to live at the Fashionable Filly, but Hector had never mentioned anything about her having any further entanglements with Bloodwater.

Leaning forward, he settled his forearms on the worn table between them.

She placed her tankard onto the table, staring at it. “Bloodwater killed Mama Layla near to five years ago after she left him to work at a brothel across the river. Nothing is as grievous to him as betrayal, and that’s what she did—she was his favorite whore and she betrayed him when she left the Fashionable Filly. Above all, he refuses to lose anything he thinks is his. He found us—the rented room she had stashed Sasha and I in when she left Bloodwater. She thought we’d be safe.” She hiccupped a breath.

“And you were not?”

Her head shook. “No. We were not. Bloodwater took Sasha and lured Mama Layla into his clutches with her. He brought both of them back to the Filly and then he beat Mama Layla to death. Sasha saw it all happen—and I got there too late...”

Her words petered out, regret heavy in her voice.

“Could you have done anything had you gotten there in time?”

She shook her head, her eyes glazing over. Her shoulders lifted in defeat, her words halting with agony and regret. “I could have held Sasha. Shielded her from what was in front of her.”

He had the distinct, primal urge to touch her, to gain a conduit to the pain etched deep in her eyes. To ease it in some way, even though he well knew pain didn't work like that. Pain sank into one's soul, ravaging away at the innocence until nothing was left. Pain like hers could not be eased. Because she owned the pain. Right or wrong, she owned not doing what she could in that moment in time. Maybe that was why she had helped him, years ago, by saving his life.

Penance for the pain that gnawed on her own soul.

His fingers curled tighter around his glass of brandy, refusing to even twitch toward her. “What happened to Sasha?”

“We both continued to work at the Fashionable Filly. There wasn't a choice—Bloodwater wouldn't let us leave. So we cleaned. Sasha mostly worked in the kitchen. We did it because it kept food in our bellies and a roof over our heads.” Her fingers lifted to her brow, scratching at the half-unfurled braid that ran across her hairline, teasing the strands free. “Then when I disappeared—when I had to disappear that night I met you—I left her behind. I couldn't go back. Bloodwater knew I left with you and Shorty, his eldest by-blow. I would have never been able to explain Shorty's disappearance.”

A shard of guilt cut into his chest. She'd had to leave because of him. Because she saved him. Because she killed Bloodwater's son.

Her hand fell from her hair, her knuckles landing harshly on the table. “And Bloodwater has had Sasha spreading her legs for years now. He keeps her half-conscious in an opium haze so she doesn't fight it—fight him.”

“You have talked to her?”

“Every chance I get to sneak into the brothel to see her—when I

know Bloodwater is elsewhere. Or I find her on the rare occasion she is out of the brothel, usually with a cull that wants her outside of the Filly.” She heaved a sigh. “I’ve tried to get her out of there so many times, but I’ve never had the resources, somewhere safe to bring her to where Bloodwater cannot touch her. But with you—with our arrangement—I have the resources now.”

“Does she want to leave?” He didn’t want to ask it, but it was a valid question. He’d met many prostitutes that quite enjoyed their lives.

“Of course she does,” she snapped, her green eyes flinging daggers at him. “We both had planned it since we were old enough to understand what would happen to us if we stayed there. We weren’t going to be his whores. Then I got out and she didn’t. And if I don’t get her out of there soon, he will use her up until she’s nothing but a shell. An empty shell of the sister I once knew. Or worse.”

Magnus dragged a breath into his lungs, studying Daphne. She was so passionate, so sure of her sister. But if her sister had been at the Fashionable Filly for years, he had his doubts on whether she wanted to leave the place or not.

Any which way he looked at it, Daphne was more of an ally against Bloodwater than he had imagined. He wouldn’t have to convince her of Bloodwater’s wickedness.

He met her eyes, intention in his voice. “I can help you.”

Her eyes widened. “You would do that? Help a whore? But you’re a peer.”

“Yes, but I’ve also lived on the other side of that twist of fate. The only thing your sister has been doing for the last four years is spread pleasure. I, on the other hand, have woken up with dead men’s blood on my hands more times than I can count. I’ve doled out death for four years. As far as the scales of justice go, I would be the last one to condemn her for surviving.”

“That is...generous of you.” Perplexed, she stared at him. Her head angled to the side and a dark lock of hair fell, caressing her cheek. He had the urge to brush it back, tuck it away.

This urge not to brush away her pain, but because he wanted to feel her silky hair between his fingers, let his knuckle dust against her cheek.

An urge he didn’t care for.

He cleared his throat, taking a sip of brandy. “Why did you change the topic off your birth mother?”

“No reason. I thought you wanted to know what I was doing here running about the rookeries dressed like a boy.”

“I did.” He paused, analyzing her face. Her green eyes not looking directly at him, her fingers fidgeting, her mouth pulled to one side. Hiding something. “But now I also want to know why disgust crossed your face when you mentioned your father.”

She scoffed a laugh, picking up her tankard. “For that story, you’ll need to get me much more soused.”

“Or you could just tell me now and still have control over your tongue and the story. I have already surmised you are not one to let extra details slip from your mouth.”

Her hand paused, the tankard hovering halfway to her mouth. Her lips drew to a thin line. “I’m surprised Hector hasn’t told you about Lord Orelin.”

“He just said your father is very concerned for your well-being.”

“Please stop calling him my father. He has no right to the title.”

“Why not?”

“Because he’s an arse of magnanimous proportions.” She took a drink of her ale.

Magnus nodded, looking down to the glass of brandy in his fingers as he continued to swirl it. “Your father, I met with him. Hector arranged it. Lord Orelin wanted to look me over, I imagine. After meeting me, your father offered me a hefty sum to marry you. He wants you safe. Out of the Guardians.”

“He what?” Her eyes went huge, her voice screeching. “He paid you to marry me?”

Magnus shook his head. “He wanted to. I refused. I don’t need the man’s money, and I wanted this marriage on my terms, no one else’s.”

Her look pinned him. “So you could walk away from our union without guilt?”

“Yes.” He wasn’t about to deny it. And he liked that she was canny, having already surmised everything he wanted out of this marriage of convenience. “I refuse to be beholden to anyone that might want to control me.”

She seethed out a breath, shaking her head. “And he would absolutely think his money could control you. He thinks the money will get

him any damn thing he wants.”

He shrugged. “According to Hector, Lord Orelin is very concerned about the danger you are constantly in. Maybe his head doesn’t deserve to be on a pike as you seem to think. I only told you of his offer because you should know he cares enough to go to that length.”

She slammed her tankard onto the table. “He threw me away, Magnus.”

He jerked upright. “Threw you away?”

“When I was a week old, my mother entered his house with me in her arms to ask for his help. She never walked out. He killed her and then he threw me into the gutter behind his townhouse. Rubbish. I was garbage tossed in with the rancid meat and bones and slop and piss and feces.”

“What?” He stilled, livid shock rolling along his spine and into his limbs.

“That was where Mama Layla found me. In the muck in the alley, half buried, half dead.”

He blanched.

She leaned over the table, her words spitting out fast and vicious. “That man has never wanted to even acknowledge I was alive. Mama Layla saved me and raised me as her own—protected me, until she died. And once she did, there was only one destination for me at the Fashionable Filly, and that was me on my back. I am the daughter of a whore and killer—there has never been anything more for me, so I entered this life. Made it my own. And it is my life. Not Lord Orelin’s to puppeteer from afar.”

He couldn’t fault her for that stubborn independent streak she clung to like it was life and death. Not knowing the full of the story. That stubborn streak had probably kept her alive these many years.

He made a mental note to make a stop at Lord Orelin’s townhouse to punch the arse in the face before they left London.

She sighed, her fingers going flat on the table, her gaze fierce on him. “Mama Layla is the only one I would ever call a true parent. And Sasha is the only family I now have. I need to get her out of Bloodwater’s clutches. I need to save her, because no one else is going to do it for me.”

The vehemence in her voice shook him down to his soul, and he believed her. She was a force and she was going to make it happen, or die trying.

That she'd ever been put in this position by the cruelty of the world twisted something deep in his chest, lodging a vexing discomfort just behind his sternum. Probably right where his heart would be, if he had a heart. But he'd lost that long ago.

Still, he didn't want Daphne to die trying to rescue her sister. He wasn't about to let Bloodwater take anything else from him.

Helping her wasn't exactly in his plan to take down Bloodwater, but he could always slip a little sister kidnapping into the mix.

He reached out and set his hand over hers, his voice grave. "I'll help you."

The look she gave him undid him, making him feel both unworthy and livid at the same time. Her mossy green eyes staring at him like he was a savior that promised her the world, but would never deliver.

He intended to prove her wrong.

{ Chapter 12 }

Daphne could still hear the scattered sounds of the ruckus from down below, floating up from the main floor at the Fashionable Filly.

Chairs breaking. Glass shattering. Screams and shouts.

It had taken a day of planning, but Magnus had managed to enlist a few old friends to cause a distraction by starting a melee in the large central hosting room where men gambled, drank, ate, and of course, picked out women.

His friends were more than good at the task, judging by the racket.

They'd waited until Bloodwater had left the building. Then the first angry shouts started five minutes ago, which only grew louder, mayhem ensuing, as the minutes ticked by.

With all of Bloodwater's henchman running down to help break up the fracas, it was easy enough for her and Magnus to slip in under the cover of darkness through the servants' entrance at the rear of the building, and then make their way up the building via the servants' stairs.

Luck on their side, they made it to the room her sister used without encountering any of the Bloodwater's men guarding the floors of the bedrooms as they usually did.

They had to be fast in this—Bloodwater was elsewhere at the moment, but there was no telling when he would return.

Now her sister just had to be in her room.

With her heart battering about in her chest and Magnus a shadow over her back, she opened the door to what she hoped was still her sister's room. A cloud of smoke hit her, invading her lungs before she had a chance to hold her breath.

Shit. The last time Daphne had seen her, Sasha had claimed she was sticking to drops of laudanum—that she wasn't smoking opium, even though Daphne could smell it all over her person.

Daphne choked out a cough, the smoke expelling from her lungs, only to suck in more of the wicked haze with her next breath.

Darkness shrouded the room—only one lamp above the fireplace cut light through the haze of smoke. Where was her sister?

There. Not even in bed, she was slumped on the floor in the corner of the room, a long pipe in her hand, smoke trailing up from the small pot fixed at the middle of the pipe. Her chemise half hung on her frail body, her left breast fully exposed, the bottom of her white shift pushed all the way up to her waist.

Was this what she did right after a cull? Crawl over to the pipe?

Daphne and Magnus quickly slipped into the room, Magnus quietly closing the door behind them.

Rushing over to her sister, Daphne dropped to her knees as she ripped the pipe from Sasha's grip and her hands went to her sister's face, clasping her cheeks.

"Sasha—Sasha, you need to wake up."

Her sister's head lolled to one side, but her eyes didn't open.

"Sash. You need to wake up. Now. It's time to go. Finally. I can get you out of here."

That made Sasha's eyelashes flutter, her eyes half opening. "Daph?"

A whisper of her name, and Sasha's hand came up, seemingly aimed to touch Daphne's face, but she missed by several inches and her hand fell downward, landing on the floor by her thigh.

"Yes. It's me, Sash. You need to wake up. We're getting you out of here. Now."

"Leave? Why would I want to leave, Daph?"

"You don't want this life. You never did." She grabbed the left top strap of Sasha's chemise and pulled it up over her shoulder, hiding her exposed breast. "We're getting you out. I just need you to move. Can you do that, lean forward, help me get a dress on you? If we carry you out of here, especially in just a shift—someone will notice. But we have to go now."

"But I have everything I need here." Her voice in singsong, it was clear her sister was not in reality at the moment.

Daphne set both of her thumbs above her sister's eyes, pulling up her eyelashes so Sasha had to stay awake, had to look at Daphne. "What you need is to get out of this life. Like we always talked about. You're so thin. We need to get you out."

"It's too late for me." Sasha's voice had turned gravelly, the pitch

going up and down like she had no control over it. “Too late. This is where I belong now. I can hide. Hide here. Here in my little corner.” Her hand patted the floorboards. “Here I’m away from everything.”

Footsteps clunking along the hallway outside the door reached Daphne’s ears and she whipped a look back toward Magnus.

“I’m on it.” He nodded, turning toward the door and opening it slightly.

Daphne spun to her sister, her voice pitching desperate as she shook her sister’s head. “Dammit, Sasha, don’t you see this? Bloodwater is killing you—slowly—but he sure as hell is killing you.”

“No, silly. He adores me. Gives me everything I need.”

“No, he’s using you.” Daphne spied a dress in a crumpled mess next to the bed and she stretched out to grab it, her hands shifting frantic through the fabric, trying to find the openings as she kept her words peppering at her sister. “Bloodwater is using you, milking the life out of you with every man that comes into this room. Taking away your sanity with every drop of opium he’s feeding into your body.” She found the opening of the skirt and flung it over her sister’s head.

Sasha’s hand suddenly swung up, surprisingly strong as she knocked Daphne’s arms out of the way and tore the dress off her head. She tried to sit up straight, but then fell back against the wall, her head clunking hard. “What do you want of me? I’m not you, Daph. I cannot survive on my own.”

Daphne grabbed the dress again. “But you can most certainly survive with me.”

Sasha took another swipe at Daphne’s arm, stopping her progress with the dress. “No. He’s never going to let me go. Look at what he did to Mama.”

Magnus clicked the door closed. “Daph, we need to leave—now.” A harsh whispered order from Magnus, not an ask.

Sasha found Daphne’s shoulder with her flailing hand and gave it a weak push. “Go. Go. You know he’s never going to let me leave.”

Daphne glanced back at Magnus. He met her eyes, then looked past her at Sasha, still half naked, and he shook his head. “We have to go. More are coming.”

“No. Pick her up. Help me.” Daphne scrambled to her feet, grabbing Sasha’s arm with her right arm, trying to pull the dead weight of her upward,

damning her useless broken left arm.

“She can’t run, Daph.” Magnus advanced on her. “We won’t even get down the block. If I carry her out of here they’ll be on me in an instant.”

“She can. She can do it. She can walk. If we help her, we can make it work. Just five more minutes. Give me five minutes.”

More feet clumped along the hallway—loud—walking past the door.

Magnus shook his head, grabbing Daphne’s arm. “Shit. We don’t have five minutes. We should already be down at the street. We should be five streets over by now.”

“No, I’m not leaving her. I’m—”

“Time is up.” At that, he grabbed Daphne about the waist and picked her up, slinging her over his shoulder.

Her gut landed hard on his shoulder blade, knocking the wind out of her and the scream on her tongue was cut before it could make a peep.

But having the wind knocked out of her had never stopped her before, and she swung her fist, beating as hard as she could on his back as he rushed out the door, his feet fast along the corridor and down the rear stairs they’d come up.

She kicked her legs against his hold, her right arm swinging at him the entire way out of the brothel.

Out the rear door, and they met a splattering of men with arms swinging—clearly the lot that had brought the melee outside.

She stilled, trying to blend into Magnus’s body with her dark clothes and letting him carry her along the outskirts of the wild swings and the bodies flailing, praying no one saw him carrying her out of the brothel and decided to pursue.

Stealthy steps along the alleyway and they reached the main street. Magnus set her down onto her feet, attempting to not draw attention to them.

“You had no right to do that,” she hissed.

“Save it until we get out of here.” He grabbed her wrist, dragging her through the busy roadway, weaving in between coaches and horses.

His long strides kept a fast clip—not enough to attract undue attention, but fast enough that she had to scamper to keep up with him.

Halfway across the bridge over the Thames, she yanked her wrist out of his grip, planting her feet in place. “You ruined it. We could have gotten her out—we could have carried her and—”

He whipped around and crowded into her, his teeth baring white in the light from the torches that dotted the bridge. “And every single one of Bloodwater’s brutes out in that back alley would have seen us carrying her down—she was dressed in a bloody shift—white, a damn beacon in the night—you think that was going to go unnoticed? They would have been on us in a second.”

“You don’t know that—it was worth the risk. I had her. Had her in my arms.”

“You didn’t have her at all—she was in a different world and she couldn’t do shit to save herself, Daphne.” His arm swung up at his side. “What is it about that you don’t understand? In that state, she was nothing but a liability that was going to get us caught. Or worse, get you killed.”

“We could have figured out something.”

“Or we could live to fight another day. You’re putting yourself in undue danger and I will not have it.”

“*You* will not have it?” Her head near exploded with frustration. “Since when do you get to make every damn decision about my life and my family?”

“Since I married you and you married me.” His grabbed her shoulders. “And I’m not about to let you put yourself in danger—especially where Bloodwater’s concerned.”

Her right forearm swept upward, knocking out his hold on her. “It is my choice how much danger I am in.”

“It isn’t. Not now.” He leaned over her, doing everything in his power to intimidate her. “That I even let you come tonight was beyond reprehensible on my part.”

“Reprehensible?”

“Yes. I never should have kept up this farce that you could help get her out of there. It was idiotic on my part.”

“Farce?” Her eyebrows high, she stumbled a step backward, her words going cold. “You think what I can do, how I can fight, everything I am as a guardian is a farce?”

He jabbed a step forward, taking back the space she gained. “What I think is that you are far too accustomed to doing anything you want, when you want, and having no one to be accountable to.” His words had ticked up into a barely controlled rage, his low voice thundering through her torso.

“This isn’t just your life, it’s mine. If Bloodwater finds out I’m alive, then my plan is ruined.”

“So this is about you?” Her eyes went to slits on him. “I never asked for your help, and I sure as hell don’t need it.”

“Have you had any success in getting your sister out of the Filly before this?” His arms folded across his chest. “No. So don’t turn this into my fault. I kept you alive.”

She took another step backward, then looked up at him, a sneer lifting her top lip. “All of this was a disastrous mistake. My apologies for even considering this arrangement would work between us. Consider the arrangement voided—I’ll let Hector know. I’m sure he’ll be able to wipe clear any evidence of this ridiculous marriage ever existing.” She shoved past him, charging toward the opposite bank of the river.

“Daphne—” He reached out, his fingers trying to grab her.

She hopped a step beyond his reach, words dripping with venom flung over her shoulder. “Leave me alone. This is where we part ways.”

With that, she broke into a run.

He didn’t follow.

{ Chapter 13 }

A tiny window.

A tiny window to look out onto the bleak street that ran in front of her room at the boarding house. A small portal to where she should be. What she should be doing.

She just had to wait until dark, and then she could escape out onto the streets of London again.

Two damn days.

Two days where she had been itching to get out of her room at the boarding house. She had rented this room for the anonymity of it. The landlady didn't offer meals and was never around, never watching Daphne's comings and goings. And it was cheap. All the better to save every penny she could.

But it was depressing. The creaky bed that barely had room for her frame. The singular dresser with broken handles. The peeling, faded plaster that had once been painted a vibrant blue, but now reminded her of the blue pallor that took people over right after death.

It had never made sense to find anything larger or more permanent, as her work for the Guardians usually took her into other people's homes as a companion, or a maid, or a tutor. Usually to protect an heiress that had all the worst in the *ton* salivating at her fortune.

But now she was stuck in this dour room, at least during the daylight hours. When she'd told Hector that the deal with Magnus was off, he'd told her in no uncertain terms to go to her room at the boarding house and to wait for further instruction.

That had been two days ago.

Even if Hector didn't have a new job for her, she could be helping to train new recruits. Or she could see if her usual partner, Callum, needed any help in his current assignment. She thought Callum was in Scotland, watching over some earl's second son that had designs on becoming the only son in a scheme to inherit the title.

Callum always appreciated her help, especially when he was trying to unravel the truth out of a mystery. She should be with him. Helping. Be doing *something*.

But maybe he'd moved onto a new assignment. It wasn't as though Hector kept her updated on other guardians' whereabouts.

There was always something to do with the Guardians. Except at the moment, there was nothing.

Punishment for how she'd walked away from Magnus. Walked away from a marriage that never should have happened.

Hell, she could be with child at this very moment, and then what?

That thought was particularly unsettling, and she tried to stuff it back down into that dark, hidden hole she never visited in her mind.

Her stare out the window, her foot tapping, she waited for darkness to finally descend over the street.

She shook her head, trying to wipe free all the obsessive thoughts spiraling about in her brain.

She needed to concentrate on the most important thing at the moment—getting her sister out of the Fashionable Filly.

After seeing Sasha the other day, it was clear she was running out of time to save her sister. Sasha was so thin. Her cheeks sallow. Even when Sasha's head had been filled with laudanum in the past, Sasha would still dream of leaving the Filly, of leaving Bloodwater.

But this last interaction scared Daphne. It was like Sasha had finally given up. Given up on ever being cognizant. Of ever being free.

Her stare out on the descending darkness, Daphne twisted her hair into a tight braid she could hide under her black cap. Stepping away from the window, she glanced at the mirror on the dresser and realized her face was far too white with all the black clothing surrounding it. A quick fix, she opened the small pot of charcoal soot she kept and quickly spread it about her cheeks and forehead.

She had to get Sasha out—soon.

No matter that she didn't have nearly enough saved up to move somewhere far from London. For years she'd slipped all of her extra funds to Sasha, until she realized all of that money had burned up buying tinctures of opium.

She had enough to get them north, maybe to Scotland, somewhere

Bloodwater's tentacles wouldn't reach.

But then what?

They would need to disappear and she would need to give up being a guardian. She had enough saved for a year, maybe two if they found a tiny cottage to rent and ate only once a day. But she would need to find some sort of employment. A governess or seamstress, even though she was terrible with a needle. Though any job she could get would probably not be enough to survive off of.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

First things first. Get Sasha out of that damn brothel.

Daphne grabbed her black cap and tugged it over her hair, looking out the window as the last light of day dissolved into darkness.

Just like last night, she was going to lurk about the Filly and she was going to plan a way to get into the building and get Sasha out.

There had to have been something she had missed. A fishmonger bringing the day's catch into the kitchens that she could pay off to help her might be a possibility. She'd gone into the Filly so many times as a scullery maid with a dirty face, that her face even with the dirt on it was becoming far too recognizable.

Her trick of dressing all in black and then waiting until deep into the night when everyone was soused and she could slip in the side door after the outside guard had dozed off had always been a good way in, but no more. In the last month, Bloodwater had hired new guards that had no problem staying awake all night—it was never good to cross the man, and a sleeping brute that should be guarding an entrance was one of the quickest ways to get one's throat slit by Bloodwater.

Her latest idea for getting into the Filly was crude, but had potential.

Finding a chimney sweep that needed someone small to shimmy down one of the chimneys seemed to be her best option at the moment—she'd come out the fireplace covered in soot, and that would hide her face from everyone at the Filly that ever knew her.

Not the best option, but an option. Really, her only option at the moment.

Six hours later, after studying the Filly from all spots across the main street, from the back alleyways, from the roof of the one building she could get access to, and she was no closer to getting into the building than

she was when she set out with the goal in mind.

She'd ended up where she began, in an alleyway across the busy street from the Filly, her heart thudding against her ribcage, crushing desperation tightening a vise around her chest.

Exhausted.

Hopeless.

Bloodwater had doubled up on his men guarding the Filly since the melee the other night.

She wouldn't be getting into the building anytime soon.

And judging by Sasha's state of mind the other day, her sister wasn't keen on setting one foot outside the brothel.

Air choking out of her lungs, dark fingers of defeat slipped around her throat, squeezing.

What would that mean for Sasha? Could she survive another night? Another day? Was it already too late?

She knew in her bones her sister would be lost to her if she didn't get her out of there soon. And she had no plan, no way to do it. She was on the verge of doing something very stupid that was going to get her killed.

Desperation was going to be her downfall, and she wasn't even sure she cared anymore. She'd been in this limbo so long, fighting to survive, fighting to find a way out for Sasha, and the only thing she'd done was fail them both.

Plus, in all reality, Hector might kick her out of the Guardians, and then where would she be?

One did not stand on a street corner and offer up their deadly skills for hire.

"I can appreciate the value you bring to the Guardians—your covert lurking ability is impressive."

The sudden low rumble of the voice behind her—unmistakable—made Daphne jump.

She spun around. The shadows of the alleyway were thick, but the scant light from a single window above cut across Magnus's face. "You're here."

He nodded. "I am."

"Why?"

His right cheek lifted in a half-grin. "I swore an oath to you, Daphne,

that I would always be here for you should you need me. So here I am.”

Her head snapped back. “Exactly where you should not be. I don’t need you, Magnus. This was already decided. Our deal is null and void. Hector knows all about it.”

He stepped closer, his stare on her unnerving—nothing but predator on prey. “Have you eaten anything in the last two days?”

“I know how to take care of myself. And I don’t need you checking on—of all things—to make sure I’ve eaten.”

“Are you sure on that? For you spent most of last night moving to different spots where you could study the brothel, just like tonight. Staring at the window to the room that holds your sister. Then you went across the river and disappeared into that boarding house and didn’t emerge until tonight. I can only assume that food was not top on your priority list.”

Crossing her arms, she leaned against the brick wall next to her. This was too much. The last thing she needed at the moment was to deal with her soon-to-be-never-happened husband. “You’ve been following me?”

“Watching over. You may be quick to dismiss your vows. I am not.”

“Vows that don’t mean a thing. It was an arrangement that I thought, for a brief moment, might benefit both of us. I have been dissuaded of that notion.” She inclined her head toward him. “Believe me, you don’t want me, Magnus. And I don’t want you. Just cut the tie and let Hector undo what was done.”

“Except I believe I do want you.” He reached out, his fingertips drifting along the front edge of the black cap she’d pulled down tight across her brow.

Her head snapped back.

What in the almighty Judas was he talking about? He’d been inches away from strangling her on the bridge the other night.

His fingers dropped to the side of her face, wispig along her soot-stained cheekbone. “You’re more than I thought you would be, Daphne. Even now, after seeing how far your sister has sunk into the quicksand of the poppy, you haven’t given up on her. I find that admirable, if not foolish.” His hand pulled back from her cheek, rubbing the soot from her face between his fingers, and he glanced down at it. “I do believe it is the type of loyalty I’d hoped to find in a wife.”

“Foolish loyalty? That hardly seems like a covetable trait.”

“I would agree, until I saw it in you.” His hand dropped down to his side. “I admit that I would like to see loyalty like that extend to me.”

She squared her shoulders to him, ready to do battle, or run—whatever was necessary. “My sister has had a lifetime to earn my loyalty, Magnus. You lost it before you even got it. You lost it the moment you picked me up and dragged me out of there the other night.” The top of her head jerked back toward the Fashionable Filly behind her.

He glanced over her head at the building across the street. “I doubt I can reason out the necessity of that maneuver to you. But I do hope to rectify the situation.”

“There is no way you can do that.”

“No?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Will you give me five minutes? I think that is the least you owe me in this situation.”

Her skin prickled, the rage at how he’d dragged her out of the Filly still hot and flammable along her nerves. No matter that the situation in her sister’s room had been quickly spiraling out of control. No matter that he probably saved her life.

He still hauled her out of there like a moldy sack of potatoes.

How had she ever let her life sink into this?

She heaved a sigh, knowing she would have to deal with him, for he wasn’t going to let her go quietly. “What do you want out of me?”

“I want you to sit in my coach for a few minutes.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Sit in your coach? Or sit in your coach on top of you?”

He chuckled. “That is an option I hadn’t considered but am willing to take. I don’t think either one of us is going to deny that our bodies like each other, even if our minds would prefer it not to be so.” His thumb came up and rubbed across the side of her jawline. “Though I’d prefer you with less dirt on your face.”

She swatted his hand away. “It keeps people from looking too closely at me.”

“Aye. It also hides your beauty, which in this area, is a smart thing to do.” He motioned toward the street. “Please. My coach. Just for a few minutes.”

She pursed her lips, exasperated. But what could it hurt? It wasn't like she was making any progress in getting into the Filly on her own. "Fine."

He strode past her, leading her out of the alleyway and toward a sleek black coach waiting along the edge of the street in a row of carriages. It was a new carriage, but with no coat of arms on the side of it. Expensive, but not identifiable. A driver but no footmen.

He nodded to the driver sitting atop the coach and went to open the carriage door, ushering her into the interior in front of him.

She sat on the rear bench while he took the seat opposite her.

He settled himself, tugging down his coat and creasing a crisp line down the top of his trousers. The carriage didn't start moving.

Good. At least he wasn't trying to abscond with her.

At his initial silence, her eyes narrowed at him.

He wasn't truly going to waste her time with puffery about his appearance, was he?

"You have me in here. Now what?"

"Now we wait."

"Wait for what?"

He held his hand up to stop her as he leaned forward, pulling the interior curtain aside to look out the side of the carriage that faced the Fashionable Filly.

He let the curtain fall back into place with a sliver of it open so they could both see out into the street. "For this. It would seem we don't have to wait long."

She studied him across the carriage in the glow from the lanterns hanging outside the carriage.

He looked calm, unperturbed. Not like the last time she'd seen him when she'd walked away from him on the bridge when he had been raging.

He also looked devastatingly handsome. Not that she wanted to notice that particular detail.

She'd spent the last few days trying to wipe the exact cut of his cheekbones and how they curved down to his lips from her mind. How those lips felt on her neck. On her nipples.

She swallowed hard, shifting her stare to the dark top left corner of the carriage.

"Look." He shifted forward on his seat, his stare out the window.

Daphne mirrored his movements, her head next to his as her eyes searched the street—carriages and horses rumbled past, men in lecherous drunk groups stumbled down the street, and the street whores milled about. Then she saw it.

Her gut dropped down to her toes.

Sasha—standing—walking out of the front door of the Fashionable Filly. A tall man next to her had his arm about her shoulders, holding her close to him as he looked down at her and laughed. A red velvet dress with a tight black corset pushing up her ample breasts wrapped around her body—which was more than she usually wore. She looked lucid, charming—her steps straight—which was not always the case when Daphne snuck into the Filly to find her.

“Sasha.” The whisper eked out of her mouth.

Sasha out of the Filly. Out where she could get to her.

Daphne shot to her feet, her hand fumbling for the door latch.

Magnus grabbed her wrist. “No. Wait.”

She jammed her heel down onto his foot, then threw her knee upward, knocking him in the back of his arm.

“Bloody hell, Daph.” He winced in pain but didn’t let her wrist go. “Can you just sit the hell down and not react for a moment?”

She glared at him, her right arm shaking for how hard she was trying to pull from his grip. Her next knee was going to be in his ballocks if he didn’t let her go.

“Trust me. Just sit down.” The harsh order stilled her and she looked at him.

“Just sit down, Daph. Trust me.” He repeated, this time with such calm conviction that she eased back downward onto the bench. He didn’t release her arm, just stared at her. “Wait.”

“Bloody hell—if you screw this up—screw up the one chance I have to get my sister away from the Filly clear and free, I swear I will slit open your ballocks and rip your guts out through that tiny little crevice until you are screaming for the gods to save you from the hell of every tug and—”

His hand shot out to clamp his palm over her mouth, cutting her words.

“Just watch.” His head jerked toward the street.

Daphne twisted her face toward the window of the carriage and

found Sasha through the street traffic. Magnus's hand moved off of her mouth.

Swinging the side of her dress in one hand, Sasha was looking up at the man and she opened her mouth and laughed—Daphne couldn't hear the sound, but she recognized the smile, could hear Sasha's rasping, throaty laugh in her mind to match what was on her sister's face.

"She's out of the Filly—how is she out of there? Bloodwater never lets her out of the Filly." Her words were low, drawn out in awe.

"A nice sack of coins will buy her for the night—especially if that sack of coins comes from the right gentleman."

Her look swung toward him. "The right gentleman?"

"A lord—an earl—who requested to take her back to his townhouse for the night."

"What are you talking about?"

Magnus inclined his head out toward the street where the gentleman and Sasha were making their way across the street. "The earl is an old friend of mine who agreed to help me in this endeavor."

Her jaw slipped askew. "So he just went in there and bought her?"

"Yes." Magnus nodded. He had the good sense to look slightly embarrassed at how easy it was when one was a man with a title with a lot of coin to spare. "The earl's man will attest to dropping Sasha off in front of the brothel in the morning. Really, it will just be a maid of the earl's in your sister's clothes that will be dropped off and picked up three streets away, but it will appear as though Sasha has been delivered and then she ran away."

"But no—no, this is no good—I need her dead."

His eyebrows stretched high. "You what?"

"I need her dead—well, not really dead, obviously. I need it to appear as though she died."

He nodded before she was done, his focus back on Sasha and the man crossing the street. "So Bloodwater doesn't look for her?"

"Exactly."

"Smart—hold that thought." His hand motioned to her as he stood, moving out of the carriage. "Stay here."

"What? Why?" She started to scramble after him.

He spun back to her, blocking the carriage door, his voice edging into annoyance. "Truly, Daph, can you not do just one blasted thing that I ask you

to?”

“You didn’t ask—you ordered.”

“Then can you please stay in here—hidden—for one moment while I go and talk to the other driver? And I also need to verify to my friend it is your sister he extracted from the Filly before we set a meeting spot.”

“Oh.” She fell back onto the bench. “Sorry.” She waved at him with her hand. “Go. Go fast.”

A growl of irritation grumbled from his throat and he slammed the carriage door shut, then disappeared up the street. Daphne set her forehead to the glass of the carriage, watching him until he was out of view.

She hated this. Hated having to trust him to do this. Hated having to trust anyone to get her sister out of the Filly. It should be her running up to that carriage. Not Magnus.

Still, she stayed in place, her heart thumping her blood so hard she could feel her veins pulsating along her neck.

This was as close as she’d ever come to getting her sister out of Bloodwater’s clutches.

Also, it meant she was about to be indebted to Magnus. And she was pretty sure he intended to insist this farce of a marriage continue onward.

He reappeared into her view, strolling casually along the line of carriages, like he had all the time in the world. It wasn’t until he was a few steps away from the coach that she peeled her cheek off the window and sat down on the cushion behind her.

Magnus got into the carriage and knocked the ceiling of the coach as he sat opposite her. “It is set.”

The coach lurched into a roll, moving out into the traffic of the street.

“It is?”

“Yes. We’re meeting about an hour out of London, just to make certain none follow us. Then we will grab your sister and move onward to Thorburn.”

She nodded. She had to admit, he was good at this, taking precautions she wouldn’t have bothered to. “And how do we make it look like she is dead?”

“I’m thinking on it.” His fingers stroked his chin. “Her clothes will be key—that much is important. I imagine a body in the Thames nearest the Filly will be key. One with her brown hair color and a face wrecked so badly

clothes would be the only indicator.” His gaze set on her. “Would Mr. Samson be able to help with that detail?”

“Yes, probably. He knows plenty of undertakers. But remember? He doesn’t know about Sasha and it needs to remain so.”

“Why not? You never really explained why you would hide her from him.”

“I’ve seen Hector use people as leverage one too many times. Sasha is power I am never going to hand over to him.”

“Understood.” He nodded. “Then we’ll tell him we need a body but not as to the why.”

“The coin will get you that?”

“It will get one a lot of places.”

Her stomach roiled. To think, all this time all she needed was an earl and an unending pot of coin to throw at the problem.

He leaned forward. “You are not pleased with the plan?”

“I am perturbed that it is so easy for you.”

“Because I have resources that allow me to do this?”

She nodded, her teeth gnawing on her lower lip. “I have spent years trying to figure out how to extract my sister and you do it in days.”

“Those resources were not gained lightly.” His voice went grave. “There was blood and death and what was left of my soul was forfeit.”

“All for revenge?”

He shrugged, then flicked his finger out toward the Filly. “But at least in this, some good can come of it all.” His stare centered on her. “And all those resources are now yours as well—should you choose to continue on the path that we started together.”

And there it was. The carrot in front of the horse.

Of course she would carry on. Of course she would do anything to save her sister.

As for Magnus? She didn’t have it in her to think less of him for using this as chip to cash in. Positions reversed, she would manipulate the situation in much the same way.

All he’d done was give her exactly what she wanted. Her sister.

For that alone, she had to look at him differently.

Not as a burden. Not as enemy. Not as a cage.

As a husband.

Her husband...till death do they part.

A shiver ran down her spine.

For she knew full well his intended path was one straight to hell.

{ Chapter 14 }

Daphne leaned against the tall window, letting the cool glass press against her bare arm. From the vantage in this room of Thorburn, she had a nice sightline to the winding drive leading into the abbey, and she'd been watching it obsessively for hours.

Magnus had given the room right next to hers, to her sister. It was smaller than her chambers, with only one room and not much furniture, but she didn't care. Her sister was safe, sleeping in the bed right behind her.

She tuned her ears to the shallow breathing of her sister as she watched the far edge of the gravel drive where it appeared out of the tree line.

Magnus should have been here by now.

Hours ago.

Yet it was almost dusk.

How long did it take to plant a body into the Thames?

Maybe Hector hadn't helped him. Or maybe he'd been caught with the body. Or maybe no one had found the body before it had sunk to the depths of the Thames, never to resurface.

There had been so much that could go wrong with the idea to plant a body with Sasha's clothes on it. She should have insisted she go back to London with Magnus to help. She was good at the details. Details got the job done, and she was always one to consider all angles. That was why Hector usually partnered her with Callum on Guardian jobs. Callum was pure might—he could move mountains—and he was smart, but he didn't care for details, for slowing down and thinking instead of reacting.

But when they had met the other carriage at the coaching inn outside of London last night, Magnus had sent her and Sasha onward to Thorburn, so he could return to London with Lord Wallish. It had made sense at the time, because someone needed to be with her sister. Once in the dark confines of the carriage with Sasha, she'd had to convince her sister to take off her dress to send it back with Magnus.

That had left Daphne in only a shift, as she'd slipped her own dark

dress over her sister's head. Sasha hadn't been wearing any undergarments under her low-cut dress. Clad only in her chemise, Daphne hadn't had much of an option to even insist on going with Magnus.

It had been an awkward walk into Thorburn.

Lindon, the butler, had wrinkled his nose at her wearing only a shift, and then she'd had to depend on the mercy of him to procure a maid's dress for her to wear. Unless she wanted to raid Magnus's wardrobe, there were little options for clothing at the castle. She knew she hadn't exactly endeared herself to Lindon during her last stay at Thorburn, as she imagined she'd caused much to-do when she'd left without a word.

Still, the man didn't need to heave such a disparaging sigh her way when she'd asked for a dress to borrow. He'd looked like she'd just punched him in the buttocks when the request came.

She should have just asked for the maid's assistance, then asked Joan for some clothing.

Movement suddenly flickered into view at the end of the drive.

Daphne stilled, her breath held until a rider on a horse fully appeared. She squinted. Magnus.

With that, she whipped around, but then stopped for a second to stare at the trickle of sweat lining her sister's brow.

Sasha was still asleep, though, so Daphne could leave her for a spell.

Smoothing the front of the rough, faded-black fabric of the worn maid's dress down over her stomach, she slipped out of the room and quietly pulled the door shut.

In her bare feet, she made her way down through the barren abbey, stopping en route multiple times to peek out a window and watch Magnus's progress up the drive.

She was pacing behind Lindon in the echoey foyer as he opened the front door for Magnus.

Striding from his horse, Magnus stepped into the foyer, his face weary, his clothes rumpled and dirty.

He caught sight of her hovering by the main staircase and he paused, taken aback at her presence, almost as though he was surprised she would be waiting for him.

Hesitancy arrested his face for a moment and then the weariness slowly slipped away. "Daph, I would have rather hoped you would be

sleeping.”

“Because you don’t want to face me at the moment?”

A smile tugged for a second on his lips. “No. Because you must be tired. I know I am. And I don’t imagine you’ve slept a wink since we parted last night.”

Daphne glanced at Lindon, waiting for the butler to leave the foyer before she stepped closer to Magnus.

She watched the hallway, listening to his footsteps echo away along the stone floor. “He doesn’t like me,” she said, her voice low.

“Lindy?” Magnus scoffed, waving his hand in the general direction of Lindon. “All posturing. From where he was when I met him, he doesn’t have it in him to look down on anyone.”

That piqued her interest. Magnus didn’t talk much about what he’d done, where he’d been in the last four years. “Where did you meet him?”

“On the ship. He had the longest grey beard that was so ragged, we used to pretend we were pulling rats from it.” He smirked, shaking his head as he looked down the hallway where the butler disappeared. “He hated me until I saved his life.”

“How did you do that?”

“We were boarding an enemy ship and he got caught in rigging—a juicy target for a pistol. I swung in and cut him down, and ended up taking a bullet in the leg that was meant for him. He was my most loyal friend on the ship after that. Loyal for life—which was why I sent him here years ago to watch over my father. It was really just to observe and intervene if necessary on his care as a favor to me—he’s just as wealthy as I—but he likes to have a job to do and he wanted to be the butler of Thorburn, of all things.”

His shoulders lifted with a smile. “Apparently, his father was a butler, and he had been training for the same job his entire childhood until the family they worked for deemed Lindon too short for their staff, much less to be their butler. After that, he drifted through life—took to the navy for many years, then onto Captain Ipswich’s ship. But once he arrived at Thorburn, the beard came off and he took to the life well—the life he’d always really wanted.”

She tried to envision Lindon with a raggedy beard and in sailor’s garb, but couldn’t quite create the picture in her mind. “I don’t believe it.”

Magnus scoffed a chuckle. “It’s true—it just goes to show anyone

can become anything.”

She nodded. She knew full well that statement held weight. She’d become any character she’d needed to for the Guardians. Including a wife.

She stepped closer to him, her voice dropping to a whisper. “Is it handled?”

“Yes, with some assistance from an associate of Mr. Samson’s. The body was found this morning. And then this afternoon one of the women from the Filly recognized Sasha’s clothing, I was assured. Lord Wallish will have a knock on his door from Bloodwater, I imagine, but it’s nothing he cannot handle. He has plenty of witnesses lined up to corroborate the story on his returning your sister to the Filly.”

“So scandal will not touch Lord Wallish? I hate to put him in that position. Whenever we are on jobs for the Guardians, we try to not involve outside innocents.”

Magnus grinned. “For how I know Lord Wallish, he is far from innocent of most things. He was happy to help in the situation.”

“Yet Bloodwater knocking on his door—that will cause a ruckus, no?”

“Lord Wallish thrives on scandal, but no, this will not touch him. Nothing ever does.”

With that, full relief sank through her, sending her legs woozy and she shuffled backward to sink onto the second step of the staircase. Her hands clasped over her face.

She could hardly believe it. Sasha was safe. Bloodwater wouldn’t look for her. And Magnus had returned unscathed. All of it more than she could ever ask for.

Her breathing ragged, her hands dropped away from her face and she looked up at him. “Thank you. Thank you for all of it. I don’t know how I can ever repay you.”

He stepped closer. “You have nothing to repay, Daphne. You do remember you saved my life, don’t you?” He smiled, and the blue in his eyes warmed so much, she could see the same kindness in them that had struck her long-ago resurface. She’d thought that kindness long since crushed out of him, but there, glimmers of the past out of nowhere.

Kindness so visceral it made her heart start to thud hard in her chest. A crooked smile cut across her face. “All I could think about while

you were gone were the thousands of ways all of this could go wrong, and that you would be caught in the middle of what is my own mess.”

“Your mess is my mess, never mind that wanting your sister out of Bloodwater’s clutches hardly defines as a mess.”

“Kind of you. Regardless, I didn’t want you hurt because of me.”

“Is that your way of telling me you missed me?”

Teasing, she knew, but his comment hit a little close to the truth. She lifted her eyes to the arched dome on the high ceiling of the foyer and gave an exaggerated sigh. “Something akin to that.”

He nodded, lifting his left foot and setting it on the edge of the step next to her skirt as he looked down at her, his countenance going serious. “How is your sister?”

“She is sleeping—she has been since last night.”

“Has she woken at all? Asked for opium or laudanum?”

Daphne shook her head.

“You realize if she has been taking it for a long while, this will be hard for her, leaving it behind?”

Her gaze dropped to the floor and she concentrated on the mud lining his black boots. “I am hoping for the best. Sasha is strong—she always has been. It will be a few days of pain, I imagine, and then she will be fine. She was scared last night, afraid that Bloodwater would be after her for leaving, but then I convinced her she would be safe here.” She looked up at him. “She will be safe here?”

“She’s safe. I don’t intend to let anything happen to you, so by extension, I won’t let anything happen to her.” Another vow, said straight from his soul.

For how she was resisting this marriage, he had taken fast to the idea that she was something that needed to be protected. Peculiar, for he’d chosen her for her very ability to protect herself.

“Thank you.” Her right hand reached out, patting the side of his ankle through his boot. “I had a bath drawn for you, but I imagine it is cold now. I didn’t know when you would arrive.”

He glanced down at her fingers along his boot and she snapped her hand away. It’d been an easy and intimate gesture that she didn’t even realize she was doing.

He motioned up the stairs. “I don’t mind a cold bath.”

He offered his hand down to her and she took it, letting him haul her up to her feet, and she followed him up the stairs and to his room.

Earlier in the day, she'd had to ask Joan which room was Magnus's for they had never even gotten to that particular detail during her first time at Thorburn. She'd gone in and nosed around his chambers as the bath was being prepared in the adjoining bathing room. His chambers were nearly as barren as the rest of Thorburn, the sparse furniture not matching and simple, almost as though all the real furniture in the room had been removed and replaced with whatever was handy. A small wardrobe with only a few sets of clothes. A four-post bed without a canopy and no pillows, just a worn, deep blue coverlet. A few blank pieces of vellum on a nondescript desk along the far wall. That was it.

Nothing with any permanence. A man on a march toward death.

His chambers sat between her room and the stairs, and she imagined that was by design. Protection, of course. It was what she would do—position herself between the people she was guarding and danger at all times.

Hell, Magnus probably already had his future heir's room picked out that was buried even deeper into the abbey. He was impenetrable wall number one. She was to be impenetrable wall number two.

In front of her, Magnus opened the door to his room and walked in. She paused at the threshold, looking down the hallway to her chambers, not quite sure what to do with herself. She'd thought to go into his rooms to check the water temperature of the bath and have more hot water brought up if it was too cold, but now she wasn't quite sure what she should do.

What *he* wanted her to do.

He stopped in the middle of his bedroom and spun around to her. "You're hovering about there like a hummingbird that can't quite decide if it wants the nectar or if it needs to flit away."

He sat down on the wooden bench at the end of the bed and started to tug off his boots.

She stepped into his room, her fingers twisting in front of her like a ninny, but she didn't know quite what to do with them. She wasn't accustomed to being this unsure of herself. "Magnus..."

"Yes?"

She met his gaze, her look sincere. "Thank you. I know all of this was beyond what you had anticipated when you married me. I did not intend

to pull you into this and I know what you did this morning with the body and Sasha's dress...it must have been unpleasant for you and I apologize."

He shrugged. "What was done was necessary. It was a smart thing to do." He dropped his second boot to the floor.

"But why did you do it?"

"Why?" He looked up at her. "I figured out what you needed."

Her head shook in confusion. "What?"

He stood and pulled his coat and waistcoat off, then yanked his lawn shirt off over his head. "When you left me at the river the other night, I realized almost instantly that I wanted you. Wanted to keep you as my wife. Wanted to keep you as the mother of my heir. But for that to happen, I had to figure out what you needed. And I concluded that you don't need anything except for your sister. So I gave you your sister."

Her brow furrowed. "I need my sister, so you gave me my sister, so you could..."

"Keep you as my wife."

She nodded, her mouth going dry.

He turned fully toward her, his stare eating into her. "Did it work?"

An intake of breath caught in her throat. One second. Two. Three.

She nodded. "It did."

"Good." His stare not veering, he moved toward her, slow, a sleek panther stalking his next meal. "And I'm not forcing you?"

"No."

"And I'm not guilting you?" He kept moving as he reached her, prodding her with his body to back up until he could reach past her and push the door closed.

"No."

"Then we are done with this nonsense of an annulment?"

"Yes."

The door clicked closed behind her and in the next instant his mouth descended onto hers, kissing her. Taking all her breath, all her resistance to this marriage, and dissolving it into nothing.

He pulled away slightly, his lips traveling down to her neck, his deep voice rasping. "Then I intend to strip this awful dress off of your body and imprint myself so fully onto you, you have no choice but to feel the phantom touch of my fingers on your skin when we are apart. I need you to know you

are my wife—always.”

She tilted her head back, giving him better access to her neck. “The dress may be awful, but it’s all I have.”

His head jerked up, his look quizzical. “Did the dresses not arrive?”
“Dresses?”

“I’d asked for a wardrobe for you to be delivered. It was supposed to be in your room. Enough to last you until you could pick out your own fabrics and styles. Was it not there?”

Her heart fluttered in her chest.

He’d gotten her clothes.

No one had ever bought her clothes. Bought her anything. “I haven’t even been in my room. Just in the room you said to put Sasha in.”

“They’re in there, then.” He leaned down, trailing kisses along her jawline and downward to the spot on her neck that made her skin prickle. His hands slipped along her spine, popping buttons free. “And we need to get rid of this monstrosity. You are Lady Thorburn now.”

“And as such I can’t wear sturdy clothing?”

“I don’t care if you walk around here naked. Wear whatever you want. But I hope you’ll let yourself enjoy a little bit of luxury.”

The maid’s dress slipped off her shoulders, dropping to the floor, and he made quick work of her short stays and shift. Her breath hitched as her chest, her body, were fully bared in front of him.

He stared down at her breasts, the carnal gaze of hunger in his blue eyes twisting her core and making her press her legs together.

She suspected she was going to enjoy however he decided to imprint himself on her.

He reached up, his knuckles gently tracing the swell of her left breast. “But before we continue this—and I would sell my soul to the devil right now to do that very thing—I need a promise from you.”

{ Chapter 15 }

A promise?

For what?

Damn him. He knew her legs were near shaking in anticipation of his touch and he was using it to his advantage. And she would probably promise him anything at the moment just to feel his mouth wrapping around her breast, his teeth grazing her nipple.

She glared up at him. “What is the promise?”

“I need you to promise me that you won’t disappear on me like that again—when you left Thorburn. I’d thought I lost my damn wife before I even had her. You don’t know what that did to me.”

Her gut flipped. She honestly hadn’t thought he would care if she left.

The glare in her eyes slipped away, her look softening. “I won’t do it again.”

“Ever?”

She stared into his eyes—deep—this meant something more to him that he wasn’t telling her. Whatever it was, she found herself wanting to take the worry from his eyes. She nodded. “Ever.”

The smallest smile came to his lips and he dropped to his knees.

A surprise and she blinked hard, as his hands wrapped around her hips, wondering what he was about to do. He pushed her one step back until her shoulder blades hit the door.

His next motion was to grab her right thigh and lift it over his shoulder, draping her foot across his back, and he dove forward. His mouth slipping in along her slit.

She gasped.

“You’re already drenched for me. I like that.” His tongue dove out, dragging long against her folds, lapping up her juices.

Judas. Her head fell back, clunking against the door. The feel of his tongue sparking every nerve in her body and all the blood in her veins sank

into the core of her, her folds and inner walls pounding with need.

He took several more swipes, long, enjoying himself and the slow pace. Slow that she found torturous. “Good. So damn good.”

Yes. So. Damn. Good.

With a groan, her body sank down into him, her right hand diving into his hair, gripping onto the strands.

A breathless chuckle left him, the brush of air from it hitting her sex, spinning the pleasure in a different way. His mouth found her nub, and he pulled it between his lips, rolling it, his tongue teasing the end.

Her body twisted, nearly coming out of her skin with the pleasure shooting into her. She caught her breath and groaned. “Holy hell, Magnus.”

A low, audible chuckle vibrated from him into her sex. He was enjoying this. Enjoying turning her mad with need. So damn easy for him.

His tongue swirled around her bud and her calf tightened against his back. At that moment, he slipped two fingers into her. It sent her to her toes, slamming her back against the door.

So damn close.

He started pumping in and out of her, as a low rumbling groan fluttered along his tongue into her nub. It added an agonizing vibration to his mouth clamped on her. At that, her body lost all control and she started to shamelessly grind against him.

Fingers pumping in and out. Swipe and circle with his tongue. Repeated, again and again until she was screaming, breathless, her hand digging into his hair, driving him for more and more and more.

His fingers drove deep, hitting that sensitive spot buried deep within her as he bit down on her nub, and she lost all function, her body splintering, breaking for him in the loudest possible way.

She panted for long minutes, coming down from the high as he continued to lavish his tongue along her sex.

She looked down at him, her mouth watering for him just the same. She wanted the wanton essence of him on her tongue.

Slipping her quivering leg off of his shoulder, she dropped down onto her knees in front of him. Her fingers worked free his trousers and she shoved them down from his hips. His cock thick and straining, the dark veins running along it pulsed in madness.

Still balancing on his knees, he drank her in, his dark blue eyes

ravenous on her, and she could see the desire pulsing furiously in him. The look so carnal and mesmerizing, she didn't want to look away, but the need for the taste of him on her tongue overrode everything.

She dropped, keeping her eyes on his as her lips went to his chest, her tongue dipping out to trace along the ink of the serpent. Up and down, along the curving lines of the ink, she licked him. Salt, sweat on her taste buds, the taste just making her thirstier for him.

Her tongue found its way down his body until she reached his shaft.

His glorious, scream-inducing cock that she was already deeply enamored with. She didn't waste anytime bandying about the monster with precum beading at the tip. She just opened her mouth and set her lips around the thick head.

Her angle half up from the floor didn't allow her to look up at his face, but she could hear the hitch in his breathing. The slow hiss of his exhale as she slipped her lips along the length of him, taking him deep into her mouth.

The head of his shaft hit the back of her throat, and she rolled her tongue on the underside of him, playing with the rock-hard muscle.

Her tongue swirling, she lifted her head until just the very tip of him was still in her mouth.

"Bloody saints, Daph." His hands sank down into her hair, gripping, pulling her scalp. He held back from pushing her back down, but she could feel it in the way his body twitched his need for her mouth full on him was to the painful point.

She wasn't about to leave him in pain—not much of it, anyway, and she drove back down, quick, sucking him as deep as she could, then lifted. Fast. Deep in. Quick out. Pumping the base of him then letting her fingers run across his balls. Each movement producing lewd grunts from above that spurred her on.

Until his fingers in her hair ripped her head upward, his cock popping out of her mouth and he hauled her upright, his mouth crashing into hers.

His arm wrapped around her back and he shot to his feet, lifting her with him. Kicking the trousers from his legs, he carried her while his kiss seared into her, the taste of both of them melding as their tongues warred with each other.

He stopped at the base of the bed, turning her around and setting her knees on the bench that lined the foot of the bed.

Gasping, she smiled, knowing exactly what he wanted from her. She bent over, sending her backside into the air as she positioned herself over the footboard for stability. The head of his shaft was lined to her slit before she could take a breath.

He slammed into her, filling her to the hilt and making her back arch. So. Damn. Thick.

Her body grabbed a hold of his cock like this was the only way they should exist. Connected. Him throbbing inside of her.

His hands wrapped along her hip bones and he plunged in and out, the slick of their bodies letting the pace go fast and fierce.

Growling with the speed and every thrust, his right hand slipped around her body, his fingers finding her nub, circling it, then pinching it. Alternating with every thrust that hit that sensitive spot hidden inside of her until her screams started to match his growls.

It took everything from her. All sense of time and place. Any ability she had to control her own body. Wholly and completely under his command, and she couldn't fight her way back into her own head—not that she wanted to.

She wanted this. Wanted everything that he made her feel. Wanted how she didn't have to think, could just revel in the savage, wicked way her body reacted to his.

Her back arched so far, her spine was near to cracking as her hips writhed against him, rabid for harder and deeper. He didn't disappoint, his cock surging thick along her inner walls, devouring the spot within her that made her jaw drop in gasp after gasp.

A tortured growl ripped into the air above her. "Come for me. Come for me now, Daph."

An order she couldn't refuse as he plunged so deep into her in a vicious demand she shatter.

She did. A thousand stars blinding the dark. Every nerve in her body fraying with the pleasure seizing her body.

One more raw thrust and her inner walls clenched savage around his shaft. His agonized growl as he came shook her down to her soul.

His hips stilled, both of their bodies frozen as his cock surging deep

within her became the only movement, his shaft expanding again and again and again with his seed.

Each wave only increasing the pleasure ripping through her.

Heaven to hell and back again.

This was too much.

She couldn't move, could barely hold herself up on her knees and was on the verge of collapse when he slipped an arm under her waist and lifted her. He moved the two of them around onto the bed and he crashed down onto his back, dragging her body atop his.

She didn't argue, didn't try to move away. Not that she could have if she tried.

She did manage to shift her head to the dip in the center of his chest between the curves of his hard muscles.

"Sleep. You need sleep." His fingers started to knead her head.

She curled in against him, her voice muffled and drowsy against his chest. "And petting me like a cat will make that happen?"

"If I'm doing it right, it will. You need to sleep."

A smile curved onto her face as he traced circles along her head, the sensation making her yawn, her eyes closing, and she fell into a blissfully heavy sleep.

She wasn't asleep for long before cool air invaded her skin, the blanket of warmth Magnus had provided absent. On her stomach, she could feel a sheet pulled up and over her backside to her waist.

Before she opened her eyes, she knew he was gone.

Gone again.

Her eyelids cracked open. Empty bed. Cold air.

A wound she rarely acknowledged existed cracked open deep within her, her youth flooding into her mind. Years of watching the women at the brothel. Their eyes as they watched the men leaving their rooms. Some eyes held contempt. Some satisfied with the coin. Some sad. Some just painfully tired. All with a glint of longing, each and every time. Longing for a better life. Better people. A better existence than the grind of scratching out a living lying on one's back every night, numbing them to everything good in the world.

Why in the hell did Magnus always leave her like a whore?

She sucked in a breath.

She thought she'd sealed that wound up long ago. Sealed it up the night she disappeared from the Filly in search of that better life. In search of anything that would take her away from Bloodwater's world.

Salvation don't exist with a nob like that, sweet Daph. Best to stay to yer own kind. Ye may not be able to trust yer own kind, but at least ye know how not to trust 'em.

Mama Layla's words twisted through her brain, a haunting from years past.

Maybe that was all she would ever be with a man like Magnus who was wealthy. Born to society. He'd lived his hardship, true, but she was not his kind. A whorehouse orphan he'd taken pity upon.

Fight if ye don't like it, sweet Daph. Fight. It's all ye got.

More words of Mama Layla's whispered from the past into her skull. Words that made her. Gave her a spine. Had always made her put one foot in front of the other. Made her endure.

If she was going to survive this marriage she found herself in, she needed to fight. Fight for her place in it—for Magnus was never going to let her in on his own accord.

She sat up, wrapping the sheet around her body, and she crawled out of bed. Walking through the moonlit rooms, she peeked into the dressing and bathing chambers connected to his main bedroom.

No Magnus. Bath untouched.

Her feet heavy, she moved out into the hallway, walking down to Sasha's bedroom to check on her. Her sister was still sleeping—flopping about in the bed—but sleeping.

She closed the door and made her way down the stairs to the main level of the abbey and she checked rooms as she passed them. The drawing room, the library, the breakfast room. When she got to the study, she could smell the fire that had been burning and she walked into the room.

The study was a wide, square room, but sparsely furnished just like most of Thorburn Abbey. A desk with two chairs that looked like they had been stolen from the dining room on either side of it. A bookcase along one wall with just one of the many shelves holding a few books above a row of ledgers.

The one piece of furniture that looked like it belonged in the room was the long brown leather sofa sitting in front of the fireplace. It had a frilly,

stained white ottoman not nearly the quality of the sofa in front of it. Functional, but far from matching.

Clad only in his trousers, Magnus lay splayed out on the sofa, the coals of a fire glowing just beyond him.

Silently, her bare toes freezing on the cool stones of the floor until she got to the worn carpet, she moved across the room to stand in front of him.

His nose wrinkled at her presence, as though for one quick moment he sensed her, but he remained asleep. Pulling the sheet higher around her shoulders, she sank down to sit on the edge of the ottoman next to the sofa, staring at him, watching him breathe, noticing how long his dark lashes were as they brushed across his face. Studying the way his chest lifted and fell with each breath. How the lines of muscles cutting out from his belly refused to move with the breaths, like they were lines of marble.

Sleeping, he looked ethereal, but not at peace. A vengeful Ares dreaming of spreading horror and waste upon his enemies.

His nose twitched again, and with that, his eyes opened.

He saw her instantly—she was taking up all the space in front of him—and the smallest smile curved his lips.

He blinked, and the smile disappeared as he sat upright, concern on his face as his knees brushed against hers. “What is it? Is your sister not well?”

She shook her head. “She is fine. Still asleep.”

He rubbed his eyes, his gaze bleary, as he looked at her in the low light from the coals and the moonlight coming in the far window. “Could you not sleep?”

“I woke up and you were gone. I was cold.”

“I don’t imagine it’s much warmer down here.” His right hand moved from his eyes to scrub through his dark hair.

She didn’t want to ask it, didn’t want to be needy—because she wasn’t. Except it hurt. Being disregarded after they were together. It was what she’d watched all through her youth. The man left. He always did.

She looked down at her lap, her hands twisting in the edges of the sheet. “Why do you leave me after sex, save for that one time in the alleyway when it wasn’t feasible?” Her gaze lifted to him. “Every time, like a cull and his whore?”

His hand dropped from his head, his brows lifting. “I treat you like a whore?”

“No, not exactly. But you leave like you cannot stand to touch me after we couple. Like you refuse to acknowledge what is obvious between us.”

He leaned forward, setting his forearms to balance on his thighs, a sigh heaving through his lips like he just wanted this conversation over and done with. “Just what do you imagine is so obvious between us?”

Words that cut her to the bone.

Maybe all of what she felt between them was really nothing. Something her imagination dreamt up so that she *wasn't* a whore. So that she hadn't been bought and paid for with those marriage vows he'd offered to her.

Fight if ye don't like it, sweet Daph. Fight. It's all ye got.

No. That wasn't the end of the conversation. She wouldn't let it be.

She mirrored him, leaning forward, her look slicing into him and making him hold her gaze. “It's obvious how our bodies are drawn to one another. How when you slide into me, it's a force between us that doesn't belong on this earth. How your body curls around mine after you come, like you want your skin and bones to melt into mine. How you yearn for my touch after sex, yet within moments, you refuse yourself of it.”

He blew out a sigh, shoving his arms off his legs and sitting back on the couch. His head shaking, he ran his fingers through his hair again, pulling at the strands. His look dropped to the glowing coals just beyond her, his deep voice dipping into a slow rumble, like the earth was shifting under them. “I do leave you. I do it because I cannot afford it. I cannot afford what comes with that touch, those caresses.”

She froze for a moment, stunned that he had admitted to anything at all. Her look swept across his face, pausing at the lines about his eyes that had deepened—agony he was trying to spurn. “What comes with my touch?”

“Feelings.” His eyes lifted to her. “Feelings I refuse to have—for anyone.”

“Why?”

“Don't ask me why.”

“Tell me. Tell me now or I walk out of here.”

“Daph—”

Her hand flew up to stop him, sending the sheet to drop along her right shoulder. “Don’t worry—I’ll still be your whore until you stick a babe in me. I know my role here.”

Indignation flashed across his face and he stood, looking like he was going to stalk out of the room. And then it would be over—over before it began.

But then he pivoted, walking over to the tray on one of the empty bookshelves with a decanter of brandy and a singular glass. He poured the glass full and walked back over to her. He stood hovering, glaring down at her as he took a long sip, then he shuffled in front of her and sank onto the couch, leaning back, the glass balancing on his thigh.

It took several long breaths before he took another sip and then lifted his gaze to her. “You need to hear the real story of what happened with Bloodwater long ago.”

Her head snapped back. “What you told me wasn’t the real story?”

His shoulders lifted. “It was and it wasn’t—not the full story.”

{ Chapter 16 }

Magnus took another sip of the brandy, staring at Daphne.

Hell, she was a goddess—her dark hair loose around her shoulders, her skin glinting in the moonlight. The sheet she'd wrapped around her naked body falling off her right shoulder, just barely covering the nipple of her right breast. Her lips still plump from the way he'd held them between his teeth hours ago.

Just looking at her, he was hard as stone, ready to fill her body with more of his seed. Ready to have her writhe under him, those delicious lips parted, screaming as he made her come.

She wasn't wrong—this thing between them—their bodies did react to each other in some primal way he didn't care to explore.

It was why he needed to escape her after every time he came deep within her body.

She was a fireball that was going to scorch him to ashes if he let her, and neither one of them could afford that. Not with what he had planned and how badly it could turn for him.

It wouldn't be fair, promising her the world and then dying before he could make any of those promises come true. Plus, he didn't think he could do it—truly let her into his life. Love her. That would only lead to pain. His. Hers.

He respected her too much—how she crawled out from the life she was dealt and made her own way in the world. A kindred spirit in that regard. And the last thing he wanted her to feel was that she was a whore. Not with her past.

He could never let her feel like their child was a misbegotten mistake.

But to avoid that, it would take the truth.

He shifted forward, offering her the glass. She took it, taking a healthy swallow, her face cringing at the fire burning a path down along her tongue.

She handed him back the glass and he set it on his thigh, twisting the tumbler to catch the shards of light through the brandy.

He didn't need to lift his eyes to know that her gaze was intense on him.

Best to get on with it. It was what she was owed, knowing she could be carrying his babe at that very moment.

"I told you my half-brother—Bloodwater—was disowned by my father as illegitimate."

"Yes."

"I didn't tell you the why. Bloodwater's mother—my father's first wife—was his mistress for not but six months before she became pregnant with Bloodwater. Whether they had ever been truly married, I do not know. I only know that they lived together as husband and wife for many years until she died. Then my father married my mother."

"You've never mentioned your mother."

"No." He shook his head, taking a swallow of the brandy. Anything to stiffen the spine when his mother was mentioned. "She was not the warmest woman and she died when I was eight. Honestly, I never really knew her. I knew my governesses, but I rarely saw my mother—my father either, until after she died. She never wanted to see me—I was never allowed in the dining hall, or in the drawing room or library. Even if I passed her in the halls, she would wrinkle her nose, avoid looking at me."

A cringe ran across her face. "She was an unhappy woman, then?"

"I imagine so. Or maybe she didn't care for children. Though her disregard of me was nothing to what she thought of my older half-brother. My mother was not fond of him—did you know his real name was Terrance?"

She puffed out a chuckle with a wry smile. "No, I was not aware of that fact."

He nodded. Terrance to Bloodwater. His brother hadn't been exactly subtle with his name change.

"And when I say not fond, I mean she hated Terrance with a deep, burning passion. Maybe my father was still pining for the love of his first wife. Maybe Terrance was an arse—I don't really know. All I know is that she hated that boy with an all-consuming passion. When Terrance was seventeen, my mother insisted that my father disown Terrance as illegitimate

—and my father complied. The why, I never really knew the truth of, for the truth was always different depending on what party I asked.”

She nodded, solemn as a frown slipped onto her face. “It always is.”

“I only knew what I saw. I realize now I was too young to understand the nuances of all that was around me. When Terrance learned of what my father did—disowning him—he cornered my father and mother in the drawing room.” His gaze shifted to the red hot coals of the fireplace. “I was in there as well and I watched it all happen—I was young, four, and I didn’t really know what any of it meant, why making Terrance illegitimate would be so bad. Terrance raged—he attacked my mother and beat her, almost killing her, and then turning onto my father and almost killing him before four footmen rushed in and dragged him away.”

Magnus paused, a long sigh on his lips. “I think that was the moment in time he became Bloodwater—bathed in their blood, he saw his future and what he would become to destroy them.” His look flickered up to Daphne. “He was disowned and he made his own brutal way in the world. He became a ruler of the London underworld. And he spent most of my childhood taking every last thing from my father until all we had left was Thorburn Abbey.”

Her look fixed on him, the frown deepened on her face. “There’s more, isn’t there?”

He heaved a sigh and nodded. “My father’s experience with Bloodwater’s mother was why my father refused to approve of the woman I wanted to marry—hell, maybe it was because of my mother as well. Maybe both of them had made him hate all women and how they could destroy a man. Regardless, I was desperate to marry her—her name was Margaret.”

Her eyes went wide, her jaw going slack. “You were married before?”

“No, Margaret and I never managed to say our vows. My father refused to approve of the marriage—he told me he would disown me, just as he’d done to Bloodwater, if I married her.”

“Good heavens—why?”

“Because Margaret’s mother was a widow that had turned to prostitution, so he assumed Margaret was that as well. He didn’t want a harlot—another one of Bloodwater’s ilk—sullyng the family line. I imagine he had to take that stance to rationalize out why he originally disowned Bloodwater.”

His finger tapped along the top of the brandy glass, his voice slipping into a whisper. “But Margaret wasn’t like that. She was innocent and pure and had a heart of gold. Still, my father refused her because of his own experience with his mistress. He didn’t want my life to turn out as his did and he was convinced Margaret was just like her mother.”

“What happened?”

“I told him I wouldn’t give her up.” He shook his head, his gaze going to the heavy beams running along the ceiling. “And he cut me completely, kicked me out of Thorburn because I refused to back down. It was the first time in my life that I had ever defied him. I took what I could before he kicked me out, which wasn’t much, because I was so stupid and I didn’t have a plan.”

“You don’t sound stupid. You sound like you were in love.”

“I was.” A crooked smile flashed on his face and his look dropped to her. “But little good it did us. We had no money, nowhere to go—I managed to grab just enough coin from Thorburn to get us to London and pay for a room in a boarding house for a week. Then I thought I was so smart when I went to the one person that wanted to see my father rot in hell, thinking he would help me—if merely for revenge on our father.”

“Bloodwater.” Her eyes wide, the name came out in a haunted whisper.

“Bloodwater.” His look shifted to the side, staring at the dusty, empty bookcase to the right of the fireplace. “But he just laughed in my face and kicked me out of his brothel. That was when I realized I had come to him for help, but had brought him nothing. So I came up with the one thing I could trade for his help. I was going to tell him I would testify that his mother was indeed married to our father so he could take over the title.”

His voice drifted off, his throat closing as the memories seeped like thick tar along the edges of his mind.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, lost in the past, and he didn’t come out of it until Daphne leaned forward and grabbed the glass from his hand and set it on the floor. She slipped both of her hands onto his knees, her mossy green eyes pools of compassion. “I know Bloodwater—nothing will shock me.”

He nodded, heaving in a deep breath. “But before I could offer that trade up to my brother, Margaret was stolen from our room and brought to

the Fashionable Filly—I had only left the room at the boarding house to get us some food and that was when they pounced. Bloodwater himself stole her and brought her to his damn whorehouse and had his men defile her, again and again and again. I don't know how many times.”

Daphne's hand lifted to her throat, her face paling.

“Margaret was so gentle—so damn gentle—she didn't know how to fight. Fight them. Fight to stay with me. They broke her in the matter of two hours. Broke her down to a ghost. Broke her down to shards of delicate glass that could never be put back together. Then they dumped her onto the street for me to find.”

His closed his eyes, wishing he didn't have to walk back through the dark horror of this—he'd never told anyone this story. Much less allowed his mind to drift back into the sordid details of those memories.

“When I finally found her, she was a shell. I picked her up, took her to our room at the boarding house, but she refused to have anything to do with me. She didn't want me to touch her. To talk to her. Even though I told her, again and again, it didn't matter what happened. But she insisted she was ruined. Ruined for anything ever again. I couldn't convince her it didn't matter. I was at a loss. I even sold my mother's ring I had taken from Thorburn—the ring that was supposed to fit around her finger when we got married—just to keep our room at a boarding house. I couldn't get her to eat, to sleep. Days of that. And then I fell asleep.”

Daphne's fingers tightened around his knees, but she didn't prod him onward. Just waited, patient.

“When I woke up, she was gone. She left me a note, told me she was going to the only life she now deserved.”

Daphne gasped. “She didn't.”

“She did. She went to Bloodwater's whorehouse. I found her there, in the Fashionable Filly, in a room, dead. I walked in and she was just...” He stopped, his eyes closing as a shudder ran through his body.

The memory should have long ago faded, but it was still there, beating palpably in his chest with every thud of his heart. His next words were wooden, forced out. “Too much laudanum, one of his men said. Her body still held hints of warmth, but was cold. Clammy. Death easing into her bones slowly.”

His hands rubbed across his face, his fingers itching as he tried to

scrub the feeling of Margaret's cold arm, her cold face under his fingertips from his mind. The horror of the stillness of her body still haunting him with morbid clarity.

"My next steps were to charge up to Bloodwater's office and murder the bastard."

She jerked upright, her hands leaving his knees. "And that was right before I first laid eyes on you."

He nodded. "I tried to kill him, only I was skinny and weak and he was faster and stronger than me. And even with my rage, he had two of his men in the room with him and you witnessed how that turned out."

"I did." Her head dipped down, hiding from him. A haunting of her own.

He shifted, heaving himself upright, and he leaned forward, his hands running over hers, his right fingers pausing at the bandage that still wrapped around her left hand to keep the splint on her arm in place. Anger at himself for its very existence twisted in with his rage at Bloodwater until his blood was pounding, boiling and raging through his veins with every heartbeat. "So yes, Bloodwater is possibly the rightful heir to the title—the truth of the matter died with my father. But in my eyes, Bloodwater lost any right to the title the second he stole Margaret from me."

Daphne lifted her head, her eyes glossy with fury.

Fury on *his* behalf.

That look alone broke a ragged chasm through his chest in a way he didn't know he could be broken.

She cared. Cared enough about him to feel this with him. To let his rage flow into her until it was her own force to behold.

A glint of pure malice flashed in her eyes. "You're going to destroy him in a long and painful way, aren't you?"

"Yes." Simple, but said with the intention of a man with nothing to lose and a world of hatred aching to be unleashed.

He waited for her to admonish him for his need for revenge. Waited for her to tell him to give up his vengeance. Waited for the argument that was about to start.

She stared at him, and he watched as the anger that was roiling through her on his behalf twisted into a sharp blade of steel in her eyes, in her face. "Then we need to take down Bloodwater. I was born into his world, and

with every minute I spent under his control, I was forged for this. I know how he thinks. I know how his organization works. Tell me how I can help.”

His look bored into her for a long moment, her words cutting a sharp thin line straight through his chest.

This was wrong.

The darkness that ate through his marrow ran through her bones just the same. This was wrong and he knew he shouldn't let her get involved, but she needed this, just like he did.

Needed it for peace.

That she would sink into this darkness for him—it burrowed a vicious, seductive tunnel into his soul like nothing ever had.

He couldn't hold himself back. He tackled her down across the ottoman, his need for her more brutal than it had ever been.

He was going to wreck her in the best of ways for this.

{ Chapter 17 }

“I’m afraid to leave her.”

Daphne stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking upward from the foyer in the direction of the room her sister was still encased in. The room Sasha hadn’t left in two weeks.

In all reality, her sister should be well now—well enough, that was, to at least leave the room. The opium should have left her body days ago, the agony of the withdrawal in the past.

The distressed look on Daphne’s face was exactly why Magnus was using this opportunity to get her out of Thorburn. Get her out of her sister’s room for a few precious hours.

In the evenings, Daphne had been escaping her sister’s side to eat meals with him, which would inevitably lead to them escaping to his room—or to the study or library or one time the empty orangery—where he could strip her down and make her forget about the hurricane of rage and resentment that was her sister at the moment.

But Daphne would always leave him in the minutes after their bodies were spent, her breath still ragged as she trudged off to sleep next to her sister’s side.

The deep circles that had become permanent under Daphne’s eyes told him exactly how well that sleep had been going.

He stepped toward Daphne and grabbed her right hand, tucking it along his left elbow. “Fear not. We have the force of six of the finest guardians in the house. Not to mention the men I have guarding the perimeter.”

She gave him the tiniest smile. “Thank you for letting me choose the guardians. There are some that I trust more than others and discretion is crucial at this juncture. Bloodwater cannot know you’re alive and here, much less that your father died.” Her grip pressed into his arm. “I know that Sasha is safer now than I could have ever made her on my own.”

“Yet?”

“I’m more worried about what she’ll do to the guardians.”

His head angled to the side. He didn’t exactly disagree with the statement, not that he could voice his agreement. Daphne’s relationship with her sister was paramount.

Mouth shut on his opinions about her sister. A lesson he’d learned almost a week and half ago after a true, but ill-advised comment of his about Sasha had sent Daphne into whirlwind of defense where she’d almost physically attacked him.

Her frown deepened and she glanced up the stairs again. Her fingers along his arm twitched and he could feel her start to withdraw.

He set his right hand over hers before she could make a move. “You’re not worried about someone getting in—you’re afraid she’s going to try to leave?”

She nodded.

“The guardians have been instructed to stop that from happening as well.”

Her look jerked to him. “They what?”

“I can see just as well as you that your sister is having a difficult time without the poppy.”

“How?”

He reached out and touched the purple-tinged bruise cutting across her left cheekbone. It had appeared a day ago after she’d emerged from her sister’s room. Her sister had been screaming and railing more than usual that day. The mark on Daphne had sent his blood to boil, and only with monumental effort had he managed to keep silent about it. Daphne knew well how to defend herself. Except, apparently, not against her own sister.

“I know you went into her room without this the other day and you came out with it.” His hand paused, his fingers digging into the side of her upswept hair as his thumb traced the bruise every so lightly. “You tell me how it’s progressing.”

Her eyes closed for a long moment, her chest lifting in a deep breath. “It’s not. She’s not. That’s why I need the honey. It’s an important part of the passionflower tea that helps the pains in her stomach.”

“Then let us go and get it. I know just the spot. You can check the quality of the honey, though it is the best in the area. And you can take a breath of fresh air for your own sanity.”

“But—”

“Then for my sanity.” His brows lifted. “I promise to get us there and back posthaste, and I will converse on any topic under the sun just to entertain you.”

A smile quirked her lips. “Including your sailing days?”

His look shifted upward. While she was fascinated by his time as a sailor, the last thing he wanted to talk about with her were his days on the ship. Days that had been filled with blood and pus and fear and fleas and anger and boredom, and the blasted unyielding sun. An unending cycle that he had never grown accustomed to, not like so many of the others.

Yet those days had forged him into the killer he was. Made him rich enough and strong enough to take down Bloodwater.

Daphne had seen enough blood and pain in her life. He didn’t want to add more images of it into her brain—not when he could see that she felt everything he told her—felt it as her own.

Still, if talking about it would get her out of the abbey...

He nodded. “Even the ship days.”

She smiled and glanced up the stairs once more, her green eyes hesitant, then she nodded. “Fine. But we need to be quick.”

“We will be.”

Magnus moved them forward before she could rethink the decision.

Once they mounted their horses, Magnus set them in the direction of the beekeeper. Her arm was healing well and quickly, so he wasn’t overly concerned about her on the mare. Her ability to manage a horse was more than proficient.

Riding next to him on the wide trail that weaved through the forest surrounding the abbey, Daphne pointed forward with her right hand holding the reins. “Where is the beekeeper?”

“Mr. Douglas is at the far end of what is left of the Thorburn estate—everything not entailed has long since been sold off by my father.”

“Then the beekeeper lives on the estate?”

Magnus smiled in spite of the animosity he harbored toward his father. “No, actually. Before he lost everything of value, my father deeded Mr. Douglas fifty acres for his hives and beekeeping operation. He plants the surrounding fields with all manner of wildflowers and blooming trees that he’s found to add the best taste to the honey. It is unusually sweet when

compared with other honeys. He's been experimenting with the process since long before I met him."

"I didn't know honey tasted different depending upon the flowers."

Magnus nodded. "It is special, which is why, I suppose, my father deeded him the land. Even he could recognize genius in his midst. I spent hours with Mr. Douglas when I was young, helping him when he harvested the honey. At this time of year, we'll get the freshest honey from him—he's probably in the middle of harvest."

She nodded and quietly looked up at the sky through the branches of the trees above as her horse maintained stride for a long stretch.

They passed by an overgrown trail and Magnus pointed it out to Daphne. "That trail leads to the bathing pond put in by my great-grandfather. I think you can just make out the opening and the bath house through the trees."

She followed where his finger pointed, squinting. She nodded. "I can see the blue sky through the trees. Is the pond large?"

A smile came to his lips, remembering his youth wading in the waters. Catching fish and frogs. "Large enough. I spent a good amount of time there when I was young. Though I haven't had a chance to trudge through the trail to investigate it yet. We could stop and check it out."

Concern cut across her eyes as she looked to him. "I—"

"Want to get back to your sister." He nodded. "I understand."

She nodded, her gaze on the branching trail until the horses passed it. Her look went forward and she inhaled a deep breath, then looked to him with a smile on her face. "Thank you. I feel like I can take a breath out here and it actually reaches into my lungs."

Magnus glanced at her profile, relieved to see a healthy pink returning to her cheeks. Her horse nickered and shuffled a step to the side and she easily guided it back on course. She reached out with her bandaged hand to pat the side of the mare's neck.

She looked to him. "Why do you have so many horses? There have to be twenty or so in the stable."

A pang cut across his gut. Of all the things that had been taken from him in his childhood, the raiding of his father's stable had stung the most.

He made the mistake of looking at her and his mouth was moving before he even thought to curb the words. "We lost them all when I was a

child. Bloodwater had hired men to creep into the stables late at night and set the horses free. We had twenty-seven. Most of them disappeared. Three we got back from the nearby village after people had found them. We found two killed in the woods.”

She blanched, repulsed. “Why kill them?”

“They were the ones that would hurt the most losing. One of the horses that was killed was a sire—his lineage was impeccable. His name was Hercules and he was my favorite, a proud Arabian with deep bay coloring. He would nudge me constantly in the neck for attention, would do anything for me, even though I was a skinny whelp as a boy that had no business mounting a stallion that big and strong. But Hercules would do anything I asked of him—jump any barrier that was in our path.”

He heaved in a breath as the sweetest smile had replaced the horrified expression on Daphne’s face. “Your eyes, they soften when you talk about the horse. Do you know that you had the kindest eyes years ago?”

A crooked grin crossed his lips. He wasn’t sure that was the compliment she thought it was, for his kindness was nothing more than a weakness that ruined his life.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t remember loving much of anything as a child. But those horses...those horses I loved.”

“So you’ve been collecting horses to replace them?”

“Once I had the money and the means to do so, I tracked down as many of the horses as I could—or at least their offspring.” He nodded toward her mare. “Aphrodite, there, that you sit upon, she was Hercules’s last offspring. The dam was impregnated with her when we lost them all and had been sold to a farmer in Suffolk. It was pure happenstance that I even found her—we were delivering contraband barrels of rum to the false floor in this farmer’s barn, and I walked by the dam in a stall. She was old but recognized me right away. I bought Aphrodite and her mother that day. They were the first horses I found and I kept them at a stable in Kent until my father died and I moved them here.”

She smiled, genuinely enjoying the story.

It was nice to talk about something other than Bloodwater with Daphne. It seemed almost every word said between them in the last weeks had either been about her sister or Bloodwater. How her sister was faring. His plans for Bloodwater and all of the information Daphne knew of his

operations that would help him—which was a lot. How the start of his plan—his first strikes against Bloodwater had been progressing.

Magnus pulled up on his reins as they broke through the path in the forest onto a clearing with a cottage and barn centering it, tall fields swaying beyond the thatched structures.

“This is it?” Daphne looked to him.

“It is, but I can already see Mr. Douglas is not here. His wagon is gone—probably into the village to deliver honey jars.”

They approached the cottage and dismounted. Magnus checked the cottage and, finding it empty, he motioned Daphne to follow him into the barn after taking off his coat and waistcoat and draping them over the saddle of his horse.

Rolling up the sleeves of his lawn shirt, he led her into the dark of the barn filled with a jumble of honey bags hanging from the rafters, jars, bowls, honeycombs, pieces of wood, knives—a mess, but an orderly mess he remembered well from his youth.

Magnus pointed to one of the hanging bags, plump and dripping honey from the bottom of it into a wide bowl. “There, that one looks ripe and ready—we’ll just have to squeeze it.”

He grabbed an empty glass jar and walked over to the bag.

Daphne looked up at him. “Are you sure we should be in here?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “For how much free labor Mr. Douglas got out of me as a child in here helping him with the harvest, I am positive he wouldn’t object.”

Her eyebrow lifted at him as he handed her the jar.

“Don’t worry, I’ll add in several nice fat coins the next time he delivers to the abbey.” He motioned toward the bag. “Hold the jar under the tip where the honey is already dripping.”

She did as instructed and Magnus squeezed the bag, honey starting to stream out. He always hated the sticky part of this, but the odd satisfaction of squeezing the honey out of the honeycombs overrode his hatred of sticky hands.

As he squeezed the bag, he caught Daphne’s eyes on the other side of the bag, and damned if he couldn’t look away. She looked relaxed, almost happy as she watched the honey ooze into the jar, and an inordinate stroke of pride filled him in that he had been the one to put that look on her face.

For as resilient as she was, her steely exterior encased the softest of hearts. He'd witnessed it time and again. Defending the baby. Not giving up on her sister. Saving his life.

She was going to be an admirable mother to his child.

One he hoped he lived to see.

Hoped.

Well, hell.

He hadn't hoped for anything in a long time. Not since he was an idiot in love and that stupidity had fully ruined his life.

"Magnus." Daphne screeched his name, her elbow flailing and he looked down to see globs of the honey running over the top of the full jar, seeping onto her hand and coating her fingers.

His hands jerked away from the bag.

"Sorry. I wasn't watching."

"It's fine." She laughed, looking down at honey still dripping through her fingers. "Is there a stopper?"

His hands coated in honey, he went over to the ledge by the front of the barn and grabbed a stopper. Stepping back to Daphne, he took the bottle from her and pushed the stopper into place.

She immediately set her dripping fingers above her mouth, mirth still curling her lips. The honey splattered both into her mouth and on her face.

Laughing again, she started licking her fingers. "This is the best honey I've ever tasted. No wonder you brought me here." Her tongue swiped along the length of her middle finger and his cock jumped, for it looked just like the motion when her tongue was sliding up the length of his shaft.

Her green eyes bright, she looked at him as she continued sucking her fingers. "Where can I get this off of me?"

He pointed out the open doorway of the barn. "To the stream—I need to get it off of my hands as well."

She started toward the bright sunshine peeking in through the doorway, looking over her shoulder at him. "I don't think I can let you wash any of it off, for how good it is. Let me lick it all off first."

A laugh rumbled up from his chest. "You can lick any part of me that you want to, Daph."

She giggled, rushing ahead of him and out into the daylight.

Making sure the stopper was fully in place on the jar, he ran after her.

The stream was half a furlong away from the barn and he was directly behind her as she dropped to her knees by the stream and dunked her right hand into the running water, using the tips of her left fingers beyond the bandaging to scrub off the stickiness. She looked to him as he knelt down onto the grassy bank next to her.

“No, you don’t.” She scolded as he started to dip his hands into the water.

She grabbed his right wrist and lifted his hand, her tongue darting out to swipe the line of honey along his forefinger. Not satisfied with a simple lick, she dipped his finger into her mouth, her tongue working along the skin.

Hell and brimstone, he’d never felt anything so simple be so erotic. With each swirl of her tongue, he could feel the phantom touch of her taste buds on his already rock hard cock, softly teasing the contours of the muscle. Sparks of fire drove straight up his arm from her mouth and then dove downward to twist the tortured nerves in his balls.

She moved onto his next finger, then the next and the next. Switched to his other hand. Riveted, he couldn’t take his eyes off her, the ravenous hunger in his cock gnawing at him to act. But no. This was more fun.

She finished off with his thumb, her look searing into him as she popped the tip of the digit out of her mouth.

She knew exactly what she was doing to him.

The sight of it, the feel of it, had his balls pounding with every heartbeat, ready to burst.

“You missed a spot.”

“I did?” She grabbed both of his wrists and flipped his hands over, searching.

“No, here.” He twisted his hands around onto her wrists, taking care on the bandages and sling that still wrapped around her left arm. His stare full of intention, he lifted her arms above her head as he leaned over her, pinning her down onto the grassy slope next to the stream.

He hovered over her for a long moment, just enjoying the flush on her cheeks before he dipped and licked the spot of honey that was stuck along her cheek. “Hmmm. Better than I remember it.”

He kissed his way up to her forehead to the small indent just above her left eyebrow that held a splotch of the honey. “And here.” A soft kiss, then a lick to make sure he got it all. She laughed, her body squirming under

his.

“And then I don’t think it’s quite fair you stole all my honey, so I’m just going to have to take some of it back.”

With that, he descended onto her lips, his mouth and tongue insistent on breaching hers. Her giggle bubbled into his mouth as she parted her lips and his tongue met hers, the sweet coating of the honey still easy to taste.

Leaning on his right elbow, his right hand kept her arms captured above her head as he deepened the kiss and trailed his left hand down to her waist.

She had opted for a frilly white shirt tucked into a riding skirt for the ride. Good fortune. It was easy to pull the shirt free of the skirt and slip his hand up along her waist under the fabric. He pushed aside her loose shift and his fingers cupped her breast fully, his thumb swirling around the nipple until it was a taut peak, straining under his touch.

He was rewarded with a guttural moan vibrating from her into his mouth.

He wanted her slow for a change. Slow and sweet like the thick honey she’d just devoured on him. Their bodies always turned so rabid for each other, clothes were usually ripping and their bodies crashing into one another, desperate for release.

But in this moment, under the clear sky, with the sun warming them through the crisp, early fall air, he wanted to stay here, slowing down time—for both her sake and his.

Her body arched up into his hand on her chest and while he loathed leaving the heft of her breast, he needed her naked. He pulled up to loosen and drag off her skirt and boots, then slipped her shirt and shift up and over her head. The full of her body open to the elements, her nipples tightened as a cool waft of a breeze rippled across her skin.

She smiled, wanton, up at him as her right hand lifted and she dragged her fingertips down along the V of his lawn shirt where the tip of the serpent ink poked into view. “You too.”

Happily.

He stripped off his shirt as her fingers went to the buttons of his trousers. Kicking off his boots, he discarded his trousers. His knees dug into the grass on either side of her and he sat back on his heels, pausing for a long moment, his look raking over her body.

She was in her element. The green of the grasses around her matching her eyes, making it look like she'd just been born of the earth.

A gift from nature.

He heaved a breath, struck at how satisfyingly painful it was to look at her. "You're an almighty goddess."

She grinned, her eyes sinking in on him. "Does that make you my god?"

He chuckled as his hands went down on either side of her, crawling up along her body as he hovered over her. "If you're screaming my name in a few minutes, it does."

"Challenge laid out."

"Challenge accepted." Ignoring his straining cock, he collected her hands once more, pinning them above her head with his left hand as he dipped down, his mouth consuming hers.

His right hand dipped, his fingers spreading along her body, curving around the swell of her breasts and rolling her nipples between his knuckles.

Sliding lower, his hand dusted across her belly, making her gasp as her body tightened when the tickle hit her. He smiled against her mouth. He loved that about her, that sensitive spot between her belly and her hip that got that reaction every time.

Down to her folds, and his fingers slid in to take long, lazy swipes along her slit. He found her nub just as his head dipped down to her right breast, taking the nipple in between his teeth at the same moment he made his first swirl around the bud of her sex.

A gasped mewl and her body instantly writhed, contorting under him, trying to break her arms free.

He didn't let her go, only increasing the pressure on both her nipple and her sex.

The mewl turned into a guttural moan. The raw edge of the sound exactly what he wanted to hear. His fingers were soaked with her need for him, but he wanted to hear the moan, for it meant her screams were not far behind.

He took several more swipes along her slit, then dove his fingers into her, his thumb still attending her nub as he worked her left breast.

A soft bite to her nipple and her body bucked, a panted scream echoing into the crisp air.

He pulled up, shifting his knees along her inner thighs and he fisted his cock, setting it at her slit.

Leaning down over her, his mouth met hers in a scalding kiss as he plunged into her.

Fucking yes.

Right there.

The place his cock was happiest, seated deep within her. If his shaft could disengage from his body and set up camp deep within Daphne, he imagined it would kill for the chance.

Her hips gyrated in a circle under him and he was reminded that she was very much on the edge and still pinned down, under his control.

He pulled out and drove back into her, and her face, her body, melted under him, ecstasy running across her features.

Her legs lifted to entwine about his thighs and she clasped his body against hers with every deep stroke he sank into her. But every time he pulled out, he held at the apex, determined to elongate her pleasure—his singular goal at the moment—whether she wanted it faster or not.

He needed to eke out every last soft moan, every last scream from her.

He kept the pace even, only speeding when her screams demanded more of him. “Harder. Faster. Magnus. Hell. Magnus. Faster.”

He obliged everything her body needed, no matter how brutally he had to restrain himself, for he was aching to explode, ready to set himself free. But he liked this even more—she did too. She liked being restrained, liked it when her body writhed under him, in control but not.

Her screams grew agonized

“Mag—Magnus—let me—let me—”

Not yet.

The angle could be even better.

He released her wrists and sent an arm under her lower back, lifting her up as he angled himself above her, his shaft sliding against her hard nub with each thrust of his hips. Bloody perfect.

As he pounded into her, her right hand clawed at him and her inner walls clamped hard around his cock.

He swiped her clit as he sent one hard drive deep into her, meant to shatter her. She broke.

Her body fractured, tightening and quivering everywhere at the same time as a scream pierced her lips.

His balls contracting, ready to burst, he drove three brutal strokes into her before he exploded fully, his seed flooding into her hot and furious. Her inner muscles a hungry beast, they clenched around his throbbing cock, milking every last drop from him.

Keeping his arm under her lower back, he rolled over, dragging her with him. Her body sank limp onto him and he threw a hand out, his fingers stumbling in the pile of clothes for her skirt, and he dragged it across her backside to keep the heat of their bodies captured against her bare skin.

Her face curled into his chest, her panting breath hot on his skin. “We need to get back.”

“Or you need to relax for a few more minutes.”

She tilted her head up, setting her chin on his chest. “My sister.”

“Your sister can wait five more minutes.” He ran his right hand down along her back, kneading the long muscles tight along her spine. Moving upward, her muscles got tighter and tighter toward her neck, and he danced his fingertips deep into the knots, determined to smooth them into oblivion.

With the softest mewl, her head dropped back down, her nose burrowing into the warmth of his chest, the ink of the serpent curling about her head to protect her. He could feel her body melt, losing the battle against the onslaught of his fingers. “You haven’t been sleeping well.”

“How do you know that?” Her voice was throaty, sleep sneaking up upon her.

“I know because you’re always leaving my bed at night to go and watch over Sasha. You don’t even stop in your bedroom—just go straight to hers.”

The sigh of a deep breath right before sleep overtook her. And just when he thought she’d fallen to sleep, the heat of her exhale spread across his chest. “It’s easier than watching you leave me.”

The words slipped out warbled, half whispered and she fell silent, her breathing going slow, steady. Asleep.

He doubted she even knew she’d just said that out loud.

Brutally honest, whether she knew she’d just been so or not.

He’d told her weeks ago why he had abandoned her after sex, and this was the result. Her whispered confession hung in the air, hammering

about in his brain as he stared at the sky and the white fluffy clouds ambling by. He dwelled on her words, his gut twisting, folding in on itself until it was a tiny, hard ball.

He had left her after sex, time and again, without apology. And this was her defense. Be the first to leave.

So obvious and he hadn't even realized it.

Worse yet, the truth of the matter was that it had begun to bother him each and every time she left their bed after sex. His fingers would stretch out, touching the cold sheets she'd vacated and wishing they were still warm with her body.

Fuck.

Had he just sputtered out the words "*their* bed" in his mind?

When in the hell had that happened to him? What in the hell had happened to not getting involved?

The guttural instinct to toss her off of him and leave grabbed him, but he held steady against it, his fingers absently continuing to knead every muscle he could find that still held vestiges of angst balling the hard strands.

He wasn't going to wake her. Not when she needed this—just a few short minutes away from her sister and the chaos Sasha had created.

Plus, he didn't want her to wake for his own sake. Not when he had ludicrous thoughts of a future that would never be running rampant in his head. Thoughts of her laughter filling the halls of Thorburn. Thoughts of a life unfolding out before him with Daphne at his side, fierce and loyal and with love in her mossy green eyes. Love for him.

The white clouds above shifted, turning wispy, like a magical fairytale, and he stared at them, mesmerized.

He didn't even realize it when his eyes drifted shut, just the same as hers.

{ Chapter 18 }

Magnus woke up slowly, dread invading his chest.

A warm body on top of him. Daphne's warm body. Supple. Curled in like a kitten.

He liked it. Loved it, even, the feel of her asleep on top of him. The exact thing he'd been terrified of.

It wouldn't do.

He jerked, rolling her body off of his and she startled awake just as her backside hit the ground.

Blurry confusion flashed in her eyes as she looked at the stream and the field surrounding them.

"We need to get back." His voice curt, his harsh words punctuated the air.

Instant hurt—a blatant wound cutting across her green eyes—should have made him pause, but he couldn't stop himself. He quickly grabbed his rumpled clothes from the pile on the ground and jabbed his limbs into his shirt, trousers, and boots. Pushing up the sleeves of his lawn shirt, he jabbed his thumb toward their horses tied near the cottage and picked up the jar, rinsing the honey off the outside of it in the stream. "We need to get back."

"Oh...yes." Daphne's eyes started to focus and she looked to the cottage and then to him. "Of course."

He turned away, walking toward the horses, not even waiting for her to get to her feet, much less put her clothes on.

He needed distance from her. Distance to right his head.

The ride back to the abbey was silent, save for the last five minutes when Daphne asked him about the latest surge of his plan against Bloodwater. "The Singsong brothel—did it get broken up as planned the other day?"

Thank the heavens, this was exactly what he needed—the focus on Bloodwater and all his plans to destroy the man. Tangible. Vicious. It was in that realm that he operated best.

He nodded, his look staying forward. “It did. And his two sons that you told me about—both have been crimped onto ships set for the West Indies. My men got them outside that tavern on Morgan’s Lane that you told me about. And the three brutes he had running the Singsong have been...*disappeared*. The women from there have scattered, some going to one of his other four remaining whorehouses, which already have too many women at them after the fires at the other two brothels last week. Reports are, that a number of the prostitutes are happy to be out from under Bloodwater’s thumb. All that information you’ve told me that we’ve planned around—it’s been invaluable.”

He wasn’t underrating her worth in the matter of taking Bloodwater down. The small army of men in London he’d hired for the mission had been all the more successful because of her. Daphne’s knowledge of Bloodwater’s empire and how it was run—the vulnerable points of it—had been spot on. He’d made much more progress in the last fortnight than he would have without Daphne’s assistance.

“Good.” The word came from her, slightly strangled.

She still wasn’t sure what had just happened between them this afternoon.

He couldn’t blame her.

It wasn’t as though he had a good grasp on it himself.

All he knew was that with her lying atop him he’d felt something strangely like love—like he would tear the whole damn world apart for her if she asked him to.

But no. Love was never part of their deal. And it never could be.

That was a decision both of them had agreed upon.

Even after what she’d said about him leaving her after sex and the obvious hurt it caused—she’d been so damn vulnerable—he couldn’t change how he needed to think of Daphne. Couldn’t change what she needed to exist for. She was to be the mother of his heir. The protector. The one that would hold life together until their child came of age.

She couldn’t be more to him, no matter how he wanted to sink into everything she was.

They brought the horses directly to the stables and walked up to the abbey.

Coming in through a rear door of the abbey, Daphne mumbled

something about making the passionflower concoction for her sister and she shuffled off toward the kitchens with the jar of honey. She didn't look at him. Not directly.

A pang of guilt cut through him as he watched her disappear down the dreary hallway that led to the kitchens. Her shirt and skirts were still askew, grass and spots of dirt from the bank of the stream still clinging to her clothes.

His breath held in his chest, he resisted the urge to follow her and wipe away evidence of their afternoon. He shook his head.

Resolve.

Only resolve would make this as kind as it could be to her. He couldn't let this thing between them turn into more. Even if it already had.

"My lord."

He spun to Lindon. "Yes, Lindy?"

"There is a visitor in the drawing room that has requested to see Lord Thorburn."

All of his muscles instantly tensed. No one visited Thorburn. And he'd kept the staff to a minimum and sworn to silence in order to keep his presence unknown. For all but the few people that needed to know in order for him to take the title, his father was still alive and Magnus was the lost son, long since disappeared.

Magnus's head tilted down, his stare on Lindon. "My father?"

Lindon shrugged. "I can only presume. The lady is a distant relative and was quite insistent. Said she would wait as long as it took for his lordship to see her. I did tell her it might be possible, as I imagined you would want to know who has come a'sniffin." The last words were said with a sailor's accent that slipped into Lindon's speech—a clear sign he was agitated. Lindon had become a master at haughty looks and perfect high-born speech patterns. "She would not reveal what matter she wished to discuss with his lordship—she said it was personal for his ears only."

A distant relation? He had no distant relations.

Magnus glanced down the hall past Lindon. "I'll look in on the drawing room, see what I can get out of the lady. Her name? Old? Young?"

"A Miss Simone. Young."

His mouth curled into a frown. He'd never heard the name. Though he guessed it was possible she was a far-off relation that he'd never heard

about.

He left Lindon, walking through the corridors to the main drawing room. There were two other drawing rooms in the abbey, but the main one was the only one with furniture at the moment, so it was an easy guess as to where Lindon had stuck the woman.

He stepped into the drawing room to find the woman standing, looking out the wide front window of the abbey that overlooked the long gravel drive.

At his footsteps, she turned to him and his entire world dropped out from under him.

Margaret.

His dead fiancée.

Except not dead.

Alive, standing in front of him.

Her eyes went to huge saucers at the sight of him, a gasp choking down her throat.

“Magnus? But you—you’re dead.”

“Margaret? But you’re dead.” The words croaked out of his throat in response.

They stared at each other for long seconds. Neither moving, neither talking.

Both just desperately searching each other’s face for evidence that what was standing in front of them wasn’t a dream.

Margaret was the same beauty that she’d always been. Older by a few years, but that had only turned her into a woman rather than the waif of a girl he’d once been ready to sacrifice his entire life for.

His heart hammering a savage hole in his chest, he broke first, striding across the room and stopping in front of her. His hands had balled into fists stuck at his sides so he wouldn’t grab her, wouldn’t shake her to make sure she was real.

For she sure as hell was.

“Margaret—you’re alive. How is that possible? You were dead—I saw your dead body. Held your cold hand to my lips.”

Her face was quickly turning pale, her bow-shaped lips opening and closing as she either tried to gasp for air or to force out words—he wasn’t sure which. “Laudanum—too much—I was near dead for days. How are you

alive? You were killed.”

“Bloodwater didn’t manage to kill me. But I got crimped onto a ship.”

Her face crumbled, horrified. “But he said you were dead...he said...” Her words trailed off as revulsion reached deep into her blue irises, turning them cloudy.

Magnus stilled, every one of his muscles turning to ice. “You’ve talked to Bloodwater?”

“I...I...”

“You’ve talked to Bloodwater?” He repeated, his words taking on a hard, desperate edge that cut through the air between them.

Her head started to shake, her hand lifting and claspng over her mouth. “I...I...”

He lunged forward, grabbing her upper arms, shaking her. “You’ve talked to Bloodwater?”

Her hand fell from her mouth and her eyes crinkled, tears springing forth as she nodded. “I—I work at the Fashionable Filly. I live there. I have since...”

He stilled, the blood in his veins turning to lead. “Since I disappeared.” The words were flat, disbelief taking every emotion out of his body until he was a shell left with nothing but empty words.

He’d disappeared and she’d become a whore.

What else could she have done?

Stuck in London. Already ruined because he wasn’t strong enough to protect her.

A failure like no other.

His head a muddied mess, slowing his thoughts, he fought to order his mind.

Margaret was alive. He’d left her. She’d been a prostitute for the last four years. Bloodwater’s prostitute.

She stepped toward him, the confusion in her eyes seeping away, her eyes narrowing on him. “You thought I was dead?” Her voice hitched.

“I did. I never would have stayed away had I known.”

“No.” Her head shook. “No, I don’t suppose you would have.”

Steps echoed down the hallway behind him. It wasn’t until they drew near that his mind cleared, starting to work once more.

He turned around just as Daphne poked her head into the drawing room. “Magnus, there you are, I was—”

Her words cut off as she looked past him to see Margaret staring at her. Her look flickered between the two of them, curiosity on her face as she clutched a teapot that held the concoction for her sister. She’d met his main man directing his assault on Bloodwater in London, but she knew full well no women were on his payroll.

“Not now, Daphne.” His words came out harsh, scolding, but he couldn’t rein them in. “I will speak to you later.”

Daphne’s head snapped back. “Oh.” A weak smile came to her face as she looked to Margaret. “My apologies, I did not mean to interrupt.”

She backed out of the room, reaching out to close the door as she left.
Fucking hell.

He heaved a breath and turned around to Margaret.

The frown on her face set him on edge. He’d always hated that frown. Would have done anything to flip it.

She forced a smile onto her face as she met his eyes. “Who was that?”

“That was no one.”

“I see.” She nodded, stepping closer to him, her chin tilted down as her eyes went big looking up at him. So close, her body was begging him to touch her. “Your no one is very pretty.”

Every nerve in his body tensed, his mind still twisting about in a whirlwind. “What are you doing here at Thorburn, Margaret?”

“That?” She flipped her hand in the air and took a step around him, her shoulder brushing against his arm. She walked over to the window, her eyes pinned on the drive. “Your brother sent me here. There have been several happenstances in London with his holdings that have been suspicious. He wanted to make sure his father is still ill, and that the earl wasn’t the cause of the recent mishaps. I didn’t believe it possible, as the last time I visited Thorburn your father looked to be on his deathbed.”

What in the hell?

He schooled his face, his mouth drawing to a thin line. “You’ve come to Thorburn?”

“I have. I have watched out for your father, as best I can for the last few years.” A snarl appeared, then disappeared just as quickly from her lips.

“Not that the man deserved any of my attention after what he put us through.”

Magnus walked across the room, stopping next to her to study her profile. “You would like me to believe you have had the best interests of my father at heart?”

“I have, whether you believe it or not.” Her face turned toward him, her look eating into him. “I know he was misguided on how he cut you off, but I have taken pity on him ever since he has been confined to bed.”

“How did you even get in to see him?”

“I told the butler that I am a twice removed cousin.”

Dammit. Lindon never mentioned a relation visiting his father. Though he wouldn't. He didn't put much stock in women and the power that they actually held in this world.

She turned fully toward him, her arms crossing over her ribcage, pressing against the delicate green-and-white striped carriage dress she wore. Expensive. Far beyond a whore's wages. “I didn't think your father had it in him to recover—but now. You. Here.”

Her mouth clamped shut with those words, the thinly veiled accusation that it had been him that had attacked Bloodwater's brothels dangling between them.

His stare on her turned hard, even as all he could think about was how miserably he'd failed her. The instinct was visceral to wrap his arms around her and pull her tight to him like he'd once done. Protect her from the world when he had no right to do so after leaving her to the mercy of Bloodwater for the last four years.

But he held back. He couldn't explain why, but he couldn't do it.

Her bow-shaped lips pursed, her eyebrows lifting. “Is your father here?”

“My father is dead.”

She gasped, her eyes going wide. “I am sorry.”

He inclined his head toward her. Probably ill-advised to tell her, but he wasn't about to lie to her on the matter.

Her look dipped down between them. “How long has it been since he passed?”

“It does not matter. All that matters is that he is gone.”

She nodded, more to herself than to him. Her gaze lifted and what looked like the smallest sliver of hope flashed in her eyes. “I should excuse

myself. I need to be getting back to London.” She started toward the door and he followed her. She flashed him a smile over her shoulder. “Seeing you, it has muddled my thoughts. You were dead, and now you are not. I am not sure what to think.”

“I would prefer it if you didn’t think anything at all, much less mention my arrival at Thorburn to anyone, including my brother.”

She inclined her head to him. “Of course, as you wish.”

Magnus opened the door for her and they moved out into the foyer.

She gave him a trepidatious smile. “But you realize he will find out soon enough that you are alive—what with your father’s passing.”

“Then let him discover it on his own. No need to hasten the knowledge his way.”

She paused at the front door of the abbey, her lips twisting to the side as she studied his face. “Can I come back here, so we can talk, Magnus? For real? This is still such a shock to me and I feel as though I haven’t handled it well.”

“I have not done much better, Margaret.” He hedged, his tongue heavy in his mouth. “But it is good to see you alive. Healthy. I have lived for four years regretting every step I took toward your death, and to see you here alive, it is a shock for me as well.”

She smiled, genuine at him. “I—”

A sudden scream from above cut Margaret off and both of them looked upward to see Daphne chasing her sister along the hallway at the top of the stairs. Sasha running fast in only her shift, she was steps ahead of Daphne with screeches at her lips. They both disappeared past the upper landing, Sasha’s shrieks echoing as she receded into the west wing of the abbey.

Hell. That was the last thing he wanted Margaret to see.

“Ignore that.”

She glanced at him, then stared at the landing above them. Her genuine smile had faded, her lips now pulled back in a tight, forced smile. “Of course. It looks like you are managing some things that I am not privy to.”

“I am.”

Her stare stayed on the empty landing above for an extended moment, her look suddenly thoughtful.

He could always read her—see when her mind was digging into a thought, dissecting it. Just as she was at the moment.

She spun to him, the bright smile back on her face. “It was good to see you, Magnus. Alive. Healthy. It has made my heart happy.”

“Mine as well.” He opened the front door for her. “We will talk soon.”

“We will, I will make sure on it.” She moved to the open doorway, but stopped in front of him, going to her tiptoes to kiss him. Gentle, her lips brushed across his like the sweetest summer breeze. “Be well.”

She moved out of the abbey, the thoughtful look even more prominent on her face.

Dread filled his chest at that look.

While she didn’t appear like she wanted to throttle him for abandoning her, she was obviously a different person now than she once was. A person that had connections to Bloodwater.

He closed the door and stilled, his forehead leaning against the heavy ancient door, his breath seething in and out.

Margaret alive.

The elation of that cut hard against the fact that much had happened in the last four years. Much that would now have them in very different worlds.

And suddenly, everything he had planned for Bloodwater now hinged on what Margaret was currently thinking—and how much harm she intended to cause him.

{ Chapter 19 }

Stepping out of her sister's room, Daphne rubbed the throbbing bruise along her left bicep.

Courtesy of her sister after she'd tackled Sasha deep in the west wing of the abbey.

Trying to escape again, Sasha had railed at Daphne for leaving her alone for so long in this "monstrosity" of a prison as she'd called it.

Daphne said a silent apology to the walls surrounding her for her sister's ungracious assessment. The abbey had grown on her. She liked it here, even with its barren walls and echoing hallways. There was a haunted heartbeat to the place that made her feel alive in a way she'd never felt before.

Of course, she had usually been living amongst the rafters or at the boarding house, so she'd never had many true homes to actually compare it to.

After tackling Sasha and dragging her back to her room, she'd spent an hour talking Sasha out of the manic state she was in, and finally got her to drink the passionflower tea she'd made.

Another hour later, Sasha had finally fallen back asleep and Daphne was more than ready to turn her over to Georgie, who would be on guard outside of Sasha's room that night.

As much as she didn't want to admit it, Magnus was right.

Her sister was exhausting her.

But it would get better. It had to. It was already better now that the guardians Magnus had hired were here and able to take some of the load off of her.

The drama her sister had created earlier had one silver lining, and that was the fact that Sasha had kept Daphne's mind off of what had happened in the drawing room.

The disaster of those moments flooded into her mind, filling her chest with a heavy, sticky muck that weighed down her steps toward her

room.

Whoever that lady had been in the drawing room with Magnus, she was beautiful, and she had been looking at Magnus like he was a dripping side of beef set in front of a rabid dog.

Fine that Magnus didn't want to introduce her to the woman. Fine that he'd snapped at her. She could live with that. Impolite in the least—an active insult in the worst. But fine. She didn't need to know everything in his life.

What stung was that she could still hear them talking after she'd closed the door to the drawing room.

Heard the woman ask who she was.

Heard Magnus say that she was “no one.”

No one.

He didn't want the woman to know he had a wife. And there was only one reason for that.

Then, when she was running after Sasha, she'd passed by the foyer as the woman was leaving. She'd stopped running after her sister to get help and had doubled-back to the foyer just as the woman lifted herself up to Magnus, kissing him.

He didn't deny her. His eyes had even closed, sinking into the moment. And the most peaceful look had washed over his face.

A dagger straight to her heart that she'd thought she had protected sufficiently enough against such an onslaught.

She was never going to like Magnus, much less love him.

Yet in witnessing that one kiss, she realized just how terribly she'd failed on both of those accounts.

Hell, she'd had an inkling of how she had failed earlier in the day when she was naked, lying on top of him by the bee keeper's stream and she'd fallen asleep. He'd mentioned how she always left his bed after coupling to go to Sasha, and all she could think about was that it was to protect her own heart.

For in truth, she'd been leaving his bed because it was easier than watching him leave her after sex. But that was a fact that she was planning to hold close to her heart for the rest of her life. Magnus had had the love of his life, and it had been tragic. She couldn't ask for more from him.

She just needed to fortify those steely defenses she thought she'd had

around her heart. Sex. That was all he wanted from her.

And truly, that was solely for the purpose of putting a babe in her belly.

After that was achieved, he would have no reason to visit her bed. To eat meals with her. Talk to her.

She had to be ready for that day, for it would eventually dawn.

Daphne shuffled into the darkness of her room, relieved to see that Joan had already stoked a fire in the fireplace for her. One less thing she had to deal with.

She really needed to get rid of these bandages and splint. Her arm was nearly healed—well enough that she could reasonably be without it. At least for the night while she was sleeping. She knew she couldn't risk not having the splint on around her sister, for Sasha would smash her arm into the wall if she thought it would help her escape and get back to London and her opium.

Daphne sighed as she trudged toward the dresser by the open drapes on the far wall. Her look transfixed on the moonlight sending shadows along the edge of the forest around Thorburn, she started to unwrap the bandage wrapped around her arm. The land here was magical, full of mystery at every turn, like the pixies of old had invaded the forest and blanketed their mischievousness all over it.

Or maybe it was just that this wasn't London. Wasn't the dreariness of all the wretched and poor people. The filth. The sick. The death. The lecherous. The corrupt. The stench.

She dropped the end of the bandage from her arm onto the top of the dresser and removed the splints on either side of her forearm.

There. Relief. Air on her skin. A delight in this otherwise bleak night. She stretched her wrist back and forth, the muscles aching but happy to be moving.

"Is it healed?"

She jumped with a squeal, whipping around with her hand over her heart. Magnus sat in the chair across the bed from her, in the dark shadow of the corner along the wall of the door.

She swallowed down the fear that had choked her throat. "Magnus. How long have you been sitting in here?"

"A while." He stood up, moving toward her in the shadows and he

stopped in front of her, picking up her left arm.

With his right hand long under her forearm to hold it up, the fingers of his left hand ran lightly along the bones in her forearm. “The bones seem straight and your arm is no longer swollen.”

She stared up at him as he stared down at her arm in the scant light from the fireplace. The left side of his face was bathed in shadows, while an orange glow from the fireplace warmed the right side of his face.

The concentration in his eyes took her aback, as though he actually cared whether her arm healed correctly. Actually cared about her beyond sticking a babe in her womb.

A complete opposite to what she’d overheard between him and that woman.

“Who was that in the drawing room?” She hated that she needed to ask the question, but she wasn’t an idiot. She needed to know what she was protecting herself from—for both the child she could possibly be carrying and the steel walls she needed to reinforce around her heart.

He hedged his words with a long breath, not looking at her. “That was a ghost, back from the dead.”

“A ghost?”

His look, darkened by demons she had no means to identify, lifted to her. “That was Margaret.”

“Margaret?” She repeated the name in a strangled whisper. “As in...” Her words lodged in her throat.

He nodded, his gaze going back down to her arm still in his grasp. “As in my dead fiancée. As in the woman Bloodwater killed. But then it turns out she survived it. She was cold when then they told me she’d died—so cold—but she had been breathing, just enough, and I hadn’t known it. She is alive.”

Her stomach turned over, bile chasing a hot trail up her throat.

His great love alive. *Alive.*

She jerked her arm from his grasp, her feet shuffling backward until she hit the wall by the window, the peach velvet drapes crushing behind her spine.

Magnus stayed where he was, rooted to his spot on the floor, his look wary on her, like she was about to jump out of the window.

She’d never succumbed to hysterics, but at the moment, with her gut

spinning on her and all of her nerves fraying about like they were going to explode out of her skin, she was as dangerously close as she'd ever been.

Instead of hysterics, instead of letting out everything that was screaming to escape from her body, she doubled over slightly, pulling into herself.

This was the moment she was garbage.

Once again, rubbish. Trash to be tossed into the pile of muck beyond the stables. Or maybe Magnus would do her the courtesy of delivering her back to London. Back to Hector.

Survive.

She'd survived the worst of the people around her in the past. She'd survive this as well.

"You look like you're going to be sick." He didn't move toward her, his stony voice unchanged.

She shook her head, refusing to look at him as she wrapped her right arm around her belly. "No. I am fine."

She could feel his stare digging into her, yet he didn't say a word.

Fine. She would say it.

Steeling herself, she needed this to be over as quickly as possible. She lifted her look to him. "You told her I was no one."

"You heard that?"

"I did. I had just closed the door." She wasn't about to apologize for overhearing his words.

"What else did you hear?"

"Nothing. I was more concerned about getting up to Sasha."

He nodded.

"But I did see you kiss her goodbye. She looked...happy."

"I think she was as shocked seeing me as I was in seeing her. We both thought the other was dead."

Survive.

Survive no matter how she wanted to crumple.

She pushed her back against the wall, straightening her spine, but she couldn't quite pull her arm away from her stomach. It was the only thing holding her back from vomiting. "But neither of you is dead. Fate is twisted, sometimes. Taking people apart, putting them back together."

"Fate is shit."

Despite everything inside of her dissolving into a gooey, quivering pile of ash, she scoffed a chuckle. Fate was a cruel shit, sometimes. All the time, it seemed. She only had to wait for it to rear its ugly head when she fell into the slightest bit of normalcy.

Normal. Like being a wife.

Normal. Like adoring her husband's hands on her body.

Normal. Like having her sister back with her—screams and terrors and all.

Her head turned, looking away from him, staring at the low flames in the fireplace. "It is that."

She hadn't even felt this life slipping away through her fingers, slowly, in a way she would have known it was coming.

This was just an explosion of dung. Her life upended once more. She was garbage again, sent straight to the trash heap.

"I will go quietly." The words croaked out of her throat in whisper. Her eyes closed, fighting back tears she refused to shed. No tears. She'd never shed them before Magnus. She couldn't afford to now. She had to salvage something. "I am sure Hector will have another job for me soon. Please, though, I just need enough to get Sasha somewhere safe, maybe an institution until her head is righted. I will ask Hector if he knows of somewhere. I could go ahead tonight to find him and make arrangements, if she could just stay here with the guardians for another day or two. Please." She hated having to ask him for anything, but when it came to her sister, she couldn't afford pride.

She would have already left Thorburn if not for her sister.

His footsteps thudded across the floor. "What in the hell are you talking about, Daphne?"

Her eyes popped open just as he stopped in front of her, using his height to glare down at her. "Margaret. Your love. The annulment."

"Who said anything about an annulment?"

"Oh. She's to be your mistress, then? You will move her in here? I don't think I—"

"Stop—just stop." He grabbed both of her shoulders, his fingers digging into her flesh and her look dropped down between them.

She couldn't look at him, couldn't watch his face when he told her to leave, for she didn't want that image to haunt her head for the rest of her life.

He shook her. “Where in the fucking world is your mind right now, Daphne?”

“I cannot live here with your mistress. I understand you love her, but I cannot do that. I thought you would want the annulment as the first option. It would be better.”

He leaned down, setting his face in hers. “I don’t want an annulment. She’s not living here.” His hands dropped from her shoulders, his arms flailing out wide as he stood straight. “Hell, Daphne, I just found out she was alive hours ago, and you already have her living here?”

Her look snapped up to him. “You aren’t throwing me away?”

“What?” The word thundered out of his mouth, then a breath seethed out of his mouth as his hand ran over his face. “Throwing you away? Why would I do that?”

“Because I am no one. Your words, not mine.”

“I couldn’t tell her who you are,” he spat the words out, frustration pitching his low voice into a rumble.

The ire rose in her own voice. “Because you’re still in love with her.”

“No, to keep you safe.”

Her right hand swung upward. “Except you hired me for exactly that—you hired *me* because I can protect the child I could be carrying. You hired me to be a guardian. Not your wife. A guardian. You lied to her to keep the child I could be growing safe.”

His lip snarled and he leaned down to her, his breath on her face. “No, I lied to keep *you* safe.” He stopped, jerking upright and taking a step back from her. “You’re tired and I cannot even have this conversation with you right now. You’re killing yourself to save your sister, and it’s messing with your head. Go to bed, Daphne.”

He turned around and stalked out of the room.

She didn’t say a word to stop him.

{ Chapter 20 }

Her head spinning, Daphne cracked her eyelids open, breaking the crust of tears she'd refused to shed last night. Tears that had leaked out in her dreams.

Her eyes bleary, she looked out the window she'd not bothered to pull the draperies on before falling into bed. Rain beat down on the pane of glass, dreary, dark skies as far as she could see.

Her head still hurt from going over and over and over every word Magnus said to her last night.

Every word he didn't say.

The main message that rose to the top, curdled like spoiled milk, was that he still wanted her to produce an heir for him, and that he planned on making Margaret his mistress—assuming she would be open to the idea.

And why wouldn't she?

Daphne could see when the woman left how she'd looked at Magnus. Like she would happily jump into bed with him at the slightest indication it would be welcome.

Daphne wasn't about to be thrown away like rubbish in an alleyway. She still had the security that she could keep her sister safe.

Even with that, it still felt like she'd been just dragged through the dung pile and left to rot there.

Her limbs heavy, she pushed the bedding off her legs and went to the armoire. Magnus had supplied her with so many choices in clothes filling her dressing room, she hadn't known how to manage them all, so she'd grabbed just a few practical dresses and kept them for easy access in the armoire. She dragged a blue day dress on, quickly combed and plaited her hair, and then rewrapped the bandage along the splint on her left forearm.

Out of her chambers, she veered straight toward Sasha's room, but after peeking inside to find her sister sleeping, she quietly closed the door and backed away. Sasha was almost always sleeping—sleeping like she hadn't slept in years and had to make up for all the lost dreams.

It must be earlier than she'd thought. It'd been so hard to tell with the rain.

In the slippers she'd tugged on, she descended to the dining room, which was...empty.

She wasn't that early. Cook always had her favorite breads ready for her early in the morning.

Her brow furrowed, she made her way down into the kitchens, only to see cook busy working on the evening meal. She could see a few pieces of brioche sitting on a plate in the middle of the servants' table in the long room that adjoined the kitchen.

Joan walked into the kitchens, coming to a stop when she spied Daphne.

"Joan, what time is it?"

"It is half past one, m'lady. His lordship said not to disturb you."

Half past one? She had never slept in that late. Not in her whole life. Heat started to burn her cheeks. "Why on earth not? What about my sister?"

"We handled her this morning. Me and Percy and Flora—the guards his lordship brought here."

She frowned. "Did she give you much trouble?"

Joan waved her hand in the air, telling Daphne that if Sasha was trouble, Joan wasn't about to tell her about it. "All was fine, m'lady. Your sister is asleep once more."

"I saw that."

Joan pointed over her shoulder. "There are still a few pieces of brioche for ye, m'lady. I made sure to swipe them for ye and told the servants not to touch them."

She smiled. She did like Joan—she was discreet, efficient. In fact, she might make a very good guardian with some training. Of course, she would have to be willing to kill if it came down to it, and Daphne hadn't ascertained whether or not Joan had that in her or not. "Thank you for that. I am rather hungry."

Just as she said the words, a meaty hand reached out to grab the brioche from the plate in the middle of the table. From her angle, she couldn't see past the wall as to who was sitting at the table and grabbing it. She nodded to Joan and then rushed into the next room to save her bread from someone else's mouth.

Her hand slapped onto the table and the man attached to the hand looked up to her.

“Callum?” His name squealed out of her mouth, the instant smile on her face uncontrollable. “What are you doing here?”

He laughed, dropping the brioche, then stood, shoving the bench backward with the back of his legs as he came around the table toward her. “Daph—you are a sight for sore eyes. I’ve been on my way down here since I got word from Hector that he was pulling in guardians around you. Days I’ve been on the roads nonstop.”

He pulled her into a giant hug, lifting her off the ground and swinging her around.

Her laughter filled the room as she hugged him, then she groaned through the laughter, her palms on his chest as she tried to push him away.

“You’re soaked like a wet dog. Kind of smelly like one, as well.”

He laughed, hearty. “And now you are too. Let me hug you, lass. It’s been too long.”

Ah, hell. She was already wet. With a laugh, she wrapped her arms around his neck and gripped him tight.

Callum. Her best friend. Her usual partner in jobs for the Guardians. The one that could always make her laugh. One of the only ones that would still play her in cards even though he knew he would lose.

Her heart lifted from the ashes and started to beat again.

His arms started to slacken around her and she would have none of it, her right arm tightening even harder around his neck.

He chuckled, setting his mouth next to her ear. “That bad, eh? I would have thought a fine place like this suited you perfectly. You need to tell me more about what Hector dragged you into.”

She shook her head, her chin rubbing against his shoulder, not even knowing where to start. “Cal, I finally got my sister back.”

“You did? That—”

His words cut off as she was physically ripped out of his arms, dragged by the waist.

Her back slammed into a hard chest, the arm across her belly an iron rod that squeezed her far too tight.

Magnus.

“Who in the bloody hell is this?” he snarled in her ear.

She couldn't see him directly, but from her crooked angle his glare was blazing like a thousand suns directly at Callum, attempting to incinerate her friend on the spot.

She shoved at Magnus's arm holding her in a vise against his body, her toes not touching the ground. "Magnus, stop. This is Callum—my partner."

His arm only tightened harder across her stomach, cutting into her air.

She twisted, looking up at him. "Callum is a guardian—my usual partner. I told you about him."

It took a long heartbeat, but Magnus snorted out a seething breath and loosened his hold on her. Her toes dropped onto the stone floor.

As soon as she found her balance, she twisted fully, taking a step away from him and setting herself between the two men. "Callum has been travelling days to get here. For me. To help us. So please, greet him with the respect he deserves."

Magnus refused to look at Callum, his stare running up and down her body. "You're soaked. You need to change."

Her hand landed on her hip. "Really? Now is when you decide to order me about?"

Magnus's mouth twisted and then his glare shifted to Callum. "Thank you for coming." His dagger eyes dropped down to her. "Let me assist you in getting dry clothes on."

He looked again to Callum. "I assume you have a change of clothes as well, or shall I call for assistance?"

Callum leaned against the table as he looked to Daphne, then glanced at Magnus. "Aye. I can handle myself."

"Good." Magnus glared at her, words spitting out through gritted teeth. "Shall we?"

Callum met her eyes, his eyebrows reaching high. She shook her head slightly. His interference at this point would take whatever madness that had seeped into Magnus's skull to a new level.

She motioned toward the doorway, moving ahead of Magnus and up the stairs. Weaving her way through the abbey toward her room, she felt Magnus behind her, his breath seething. Sucking in and out audibly like a caged tiger she'd once seen at a menagerie in Hyde Park.

Yet he didn't say a word.

Not that he had to. She could feel the fury palpating off of him in sheets, just like the pounding rain outside.

Not that he had anything to be angry about. He knew Hector was sending the list of guardians she'd requested. Callum had been on top of that list.

She entered her room, Magnus still a burr poking into her back.

Her movements jerking, she twisted her right arm around her back, popping free buttons of her dress. Lurking behind her, Magnus slapped her hand out of the way, tearing open the buttons. She stilled, her head bowing forward as he lost his patience and fabric tore as he yanked apart the last few buttons. His fingers jabbed through the ties of her short stays just the same.

She restrained her voice until it was eerily calm. "This seems uncalled for."

"Is Callum the man?" His growl so low, his words vibrated through her skin.

Her look whipped to him over her shoulder. "The man? What are you talking about?"

"Was he the one you had an affair with?"

"What? No." Her head shook. "Callum is my partner in most of everything—but he's not a lover. He's a brother to me."

He grunted and yanked the wet dress and stays down her body, his hands going up to do the same to her shift before she could step away from him.

"It looked like a hell of a lot more than a brotherly hug."

Ignoring her suddenly current naked state, she spun around, her stare biting into him. "You don't know a thing about it."

"I know when an ass is manhandling my wife."

"Cal isn't an ass, and you need to calm down."

"Calm down?" Rabid, primal arrogance sparked embers into his eyes that were about to explode and torch both of them.

In the second she was about to back away from him, he pounced, grabbing her around the waist and twisting her onto her bed.

Instinct tore through her and she kicked at him. Her foot knocked into his shoulder, but it didn't slow him, and he grabbed her right calf, then her left thigh, holding her still on the bed.

Before she could gain purchase with her hands on the bed to shove herself away from him, he dove forth, spreading her legs wide, his mouth connecting with her slit.

His tongue swiped out, frantic, curling around her nub and feasting on her with all the raving angst she'd seen exploding in his eyes. Her frenzied fingers in the coverlet slowed, her hips angling up to him on their own accord.

Bloody hell.

Straight to her core every time damn time he touched her, turning all of her nerves into his slaves. He lapped at her juices, pulling moans from her. Worked her body into a frenzy, his hands roaming up to her nipples, pinching in sync with his tongue rolling around her bud.

His mouth stayed ravenous on her as he tugged off his coat and waistcoat, and then came one moment of agony as he pulled away from her to tear the shirt off his torso.

A quick breath and his mouth was back on her, digging deep through her folds as his left hand slid down her outer thigh, only to curl inward, his fingers dancing along the sensitive flesh of her inner thigh. His hand reaching the crux of her below his chin, he slid one finger into her, then two, pressing on her inner walls until he found the spot that made her jaw jerk open with a gasp and a moaned scream.

He continued to work her nub with his tongue, pumping his fingers in and out of her, then added a third digit, stretching her.

Her screams interspersed with gasps that let no actual air into her lungs, yet somehow, she grew louder until she was panting, begging him for release with every exhale that wasn't a screech.

His tongue swirling around her bud, he looked up at her, the heat in his eyes piercing her soul. Then he lifted his head slightly, removing his tongue and his fingers from her body. "Who am I, Daph?"

She was so...damn...close.

"What the hell?" Her hands dug into his hair, trying to drag him downward and send her over the precipice she was desperate for—a precipice he had mercilessly driven her toward.

He held fast against her hands, his look not shifting off of her, the intensity in his gaze burning a streak straight through her chest. "Who am I?"

"Magnus. Magnus. *Magnus.*" The last name came out tortured.

“And what am I to you?”

“Oh, hell, Magnus—”

“What am I?”

“My husband.” The words screamed, every nerve in her body vicious in its desperation for release.

He smiled, wicked. “Good. Good, Daph.”

He dropped his mouth, sucking her nub in-between his lips, his teeth raking lightly over the ravaged flesh, and he pumped his fingers deep into her—sensations coming from opposite directions to converge in a firestorm.

Everything she needed.

Her fingers ripping at his hair, her body buckled with release, his name a scream on her lips. Again and again with every fresh wave of ecstasy making her body shudder.

With the orgasm ripping her apart in every wicked way, Magnus pulled up, ripping open his trousers and dropping them, his straining cock jutting forth, angry and ready for her.

Grabbing her legs and pulling her to the edge of the bed, he bent her legs up and rammed into her, the onslaught of his shaft so deep in her it drove her orgasm into dizzying heights—so high she lost all sense of gravity and sight and place and time. In and out, with each one of his drives her body splintered in ways she didn’t know possible.

Faster, his body straining with every stroke until a roar vibrated from low in his chest and he pulled from her, holding his cock, sending his seed all over her belly, her chest. His hand followed every stream, rubbing the hot white cum into her skin.

She knew, in a disjointed way, he was marking her—branding her in the only way he knew she would understand.

He moved over her, balancing on his left arm as he continued to massage the essence of him deep into her skin. Directly above her, his eyes met hers, the ferocity in them still burning as hot and desperate as it had been when they first came up to her room. “This is me, engraving myself onto every inch of you. Because you are mine, Daph. Mine.”

She should hate his words—hate him for claiming her like a crazed barbarian. But she didn’t hate it—not more than she loved it.

Against everything she thought she was and believed in, his words sent a weird sense of belonging deep into her gut. Like somehow, she had

just found a home. A home where she wasn't about to be tossed out as rubbish. A home where she was, of all things, cherished.

Her hand lifted, her fingers threading through his dark hair, her voice a warble. "Does that make you mine?"

He exhaled, a grimace on his face as his words came rough and tortured. "It makes me whatever you damn well need me to be."

{ Chapter 21 }

Sliding down onto the bed next to her on his side, Magnus wiped the wet cloth across Daphne's chest, removing the remnants of his cum. His head propped up with his left arm, he cleaned her skin gently, his focus on the delectable swell of her breasts which narrowed down to her waist before flaring out again along her hips. Every curve and dip perfect and he was having a hard time keeping his tongue off her flesh.

He shouldn't have done it. Taken her as harshly as he did. Marking her with his seed as he did.

A deranged, visceral reaction to seeing that beast below manhandling her.

He'd been thoughtless—a slip into the darkness of his soul—but he couldn't quite apologize for it, for he meant everything he'd just done to her. He would have slit his arms and smeared his own blood all over her, letting it seep into every one of her crevices—marking her like the pagans of old—if he'd truly unleashed himself.

Not that she would have resisted.

He was finding his wife had layers upon layers that he had yet to discover, and she hosted her own shadows of darkness that weren't entirely unlike his own.

She twisted onto her side to face him on the bed and her hand slipped into his hair. Her fingernails raked against his scalp, crackling spikes of pleasure. He leaned into her hand, shifting his left arm flat and laying his head on his bicep, his stare on her.

“You need to treat Callum with the respect he deserves, Magnus.”

“I don't want to talk about that oaf.”

Her fingers came forward, her nails running along his hairline and tracing down his jawline. “I didn't figure you to be one for jealousy.”

“I'm not.” He sighed, swiping the wet cloth across the curve of her upturned hip. “Not until today.”

A cat-eat-mouse grin edged onto her lips with his admission. “Then

stifle it. Callum is one of the best guardians there is, and I'm sure you had to part with a whole lot of coin to get him here."

He did—more than it took to put any of the guardians on his payroll. But he didn't want to hear it, didn't want to think about the man that had just had his arms wrapped around his wife.

"I'm finding I have a hard time stifling much of anything around you. Jealousy was just the latest emotion to break free."

She puffed out a chuckle. "Well, I'm glad the damn has broken, but there is nothing to be jealous of. Callum is a brother to me—nothing more. We've seen a lot of blood and bones breaking together—sometimes others, sometimes ours. And he's always had my back, never left me behind. He's protected me just as I've protected him."

He grunted, sitting upright. "I don't want to hear it, Daph."

She followed his motion, her hands landing on his naked thighs. "Except it happened. Just like everything else happened in my life, this did too. Callum has been a big part of my life—my rock—for a long time."

A glare he couldn't control set on her. "That doesn't mean I want to know—to hear—about another man touching you. About another man protecting you when it should be me protecting you."

Her mouth twisted, annoyance flickering to life in the gold flecks of her green eyes. "No. You do not get to scream foul at this point. The second you decided to go down this path with Bloodwater—that vengeance was the ultimate goal—you put into motion that my future needed to be protected. That was your choice, and if you're serious about protecting me and whatever may be growing in my womb, then Callum is the one I need. No one will protect me like he will."

He dragged his hand over his face, hating her logic but having no argument against it. "Except it should be me."

"Should it?" She shook her head and moved off the bed, going to the armoire in the corner and pulling free a fresh shift and day dress. She walked back over to the bed, tossing the dress onto the mattress next to him and wiggling her body into the chemise and pulling on her short stays. "Revenge is the most important thing to you. There is no margin around that. I have understood that from the very beginning and I've never asked you to veer from that course. But I have a responsibility to the babe I am either carrying right now or will carry in the future. And as hard as it may be to swallow,

keeping me safe will be the most important thing to Callum.”

He sat up, wrapping his arms around her to tighten the ties on her stays. “Others can keep you safe.”

“Others aren’t as invested in me as he is.” Stays secured, she stepped to the side of him and picked up the dress, slipping it over her head and jabbing her arms through the holes of the short sleeves. “I am his family.”

“I am your family.”

She scoffed a chuckle, her head tilting to the side with her eyebrows high and she turned away from him, righting her skirts. “Margaret may have something to say about that.” The words came muttered, barely loud enough for him to hear.

But he heard them perfectly well. “Margaret? What the hell are you talking about?”

Her jaw shifting to the side, she stared at him for a long moment. “I saw you kiss her back, Magnus. At the door when she left. You didn’t push her away. And you told her I was no one.”

“Daphne, that isn’t fair—”

“No,” she yelled, her arm swinging wide. “I was no one—no one to you.” She heaved a sigh, her arms lifting wide at her sides. “So let me be...no one. Concentrate on your vengeance.”

She stalked out of the room, the back of her dress hanging open.

Her footsteps went to the right out the door, straight to her sister’s room.

Hiding.

Hiding away with the sister that she had no idea how to save. The sister that had her undying loyalty, while he...he had nothing of her.

Only what he took. Only what he demanded. Only what he marked.

He kicked the frame of the bed with his heel, a snarl on his face.

Fine.

Let her hide.

Let her button up her own damn dress.

{ Chapter 22 }

In front of the crumbling bathhouse off the trail Magnus had pointed out to her, Daphne kicked at a stone on the edge of the nearly empty bathing pond, watching it fly through the air and plunk into the dark water that had collected with the heavy rain from the morning.

Enough water to coat the bottom, but too little to be anything more than giving life to the decay and rot that coated the ground of the long-ago forgotten pond.

One moment.

That was all she'd had. One fleeting moment where she'd thought, maybe, just maybe, it was her turn to find a real place in this world. One where she was wanted and desired and respected.

She'd seen it in Magnus's eyes when he'd claimed her like a dog spraying a tree.

She'd *felt* it in that moment. She'd had a home with him. She wasn't destined for a pile of garbage.

A glorious moment that she tried to reach out and grab, and hold onto with everything she was.

A moment that was over the second she'd thought about it and remembered exactly what path Magnus had set for himself. A path of destruction that he may or may not survive.

A path she could never veer him from.

Not that she wanted to.

She wanted Bloodwater to pay just the same as he did.

But she didn't want it to happen at the expense of losing Magnus.

That was where they differed. He was willing to forfeit his life in pursuit of the revenge. She wanted him alive—not a ghost to haunt her dreams. Not as the father that her child would never know.

So she did the only thing she could—get out before she was tossed out.

Leaving that moment of belonging to wither and die before it could

even flourish.

She'd avoided Magnus for most of the day, hiding in her sister's room, and once the rain had dwindled down to a sprinkle, she didn't waste a second in looking to escape the abbey. She'd darted out to the stables and had a horse readied for her. The stone walls of Thorburn had become too much—suffocating her at every turn. Her sister. Magnus.

Everything she couldn't right, no matter how hard she tried.

This was the only spot she could think of—the only spot she'd seen where she could have a modicum of privacy to set her head back on straight. To crumble for a bit and then pull herself together. Reinforce the veneer she needed to keep her life afloat and her sister safe.

She kicked another rock, the satisfying plunk of it into the water echoing in her ears. Looking around, her eyes glossed over as she watched drops of rain still spilling from the leaves of the trees surrounding her in this nook of the estate. They'd passed by the pond and bathhouse on the way to the beekeeper's cottage, but she'd rushed them along without stopping.

Too worried about getting back to her sister.

And not realizing how much an opportunity to spend a quiet moment of adventure with Magnus was worth.

She had the sense that the pond and bath house meant something special to him—that it always hadn't been in such disrepair. But now the stones of the bath house had crumbled on the left side, while vines had snaked up the walls and front columns. Sections of the slate roof were missing and barren to the sky. She imagined Magnus seeing it like this would disturb him in a way he would never talk about.

At least not with her.

Her horse tied to a tree on the other side of the pond next to the trail gave a whinny and started to paw at the ground with its front left hoof.

She watched, wary, for the mare knew before her that someone was approaching.

High on horseback, Callum appeared out of the edge of the woods into the clearing around the pond.

Seeing her, he exhaled a sigh, shaking his head.

She stayed silent, kicking pebbles into the mostly empty pond as he dismounted, wrapped the reins of his horse to a limb, and walked over to her.

She didn't look up at him until he stopped at her side.

“What is with your arm, devil maiden?”

Devil maiden. He’d deemed her that the first time they were fighting in a scuffle together under a bridge by the Thames. Half buried in the muck, she’d saved his neck from a dagger by kicking up at the brute attacking him, her heel smashing into the brute’s ballocks. Dirty move, but all was fair when blades were flashing.

She lifted her left arm, looking at the bandaged splint. “I broke it.”

“I can see that.” His voice was gruff, like thick gravel crunching under a hoof. “You don’t break bones.”

Her mouth quirked to the side. “I did in this instance.”

A deep sigh lifted his wide chest and she knew what was coming next.

His eyes narrowed at her, trying to read in her face what she wasn’t telling him. For as good as she was at hiding things, he still could read her about half the time he tried.

“Did Magnus do this to you?”

“No, not directly.”

His fingers instantly curled into fists, his right hand lifting and pounding on his thigh. “I am going to kill that bastard.” He started to turn like he was going straight back to the abbey and directly toward Magnus’s jugular.

She grabbed his upper arm—really, just put her hand against it and squeezed the best she could—there was no way to grab Callum’s arm for the girth of it. “No. Magnus didn’t do it—just some random man in an alley. It was a test Hector concocted for me.”

“Hector and his damn tests.” He seethed out a long breath. “Arse.”

She chuckled. “Yes. That hasn’t changed.”

He picked up her left hand, looking at the bandage and splint wrapping her arm. Not that he could see through the bandage. “Is it healing well? Straight?”

“It is. I really don’t need the splint and bandage anymore. I put it on during the day to protect it from bumps.”

“Bumps from what?”

She pulled her arm from his grasp and turned toward the empty pond. “From my sister.”

Aside from Magnus, Callum was the only one that knew of her sister.

Knew what had happened to her—how she had been tossed away as a babe. And he only knew that because one night of cards and cognac went on far too long after two years of knowing each other.

“Why would your sister be ‘bumping’ your broken arm?”

“Sasha is trying to leave.”

“Get out of Thorburn? Why in the world would she want to do that?”

Daphne wrapped her arms around her stomach, then glanced at him.

“She wants to go back to London. Back to the whorehouse.”

His head shook, his brows drawing together. “And why?”

“She’s hooked on the poppy.”

He sucked in a breath. “Well...hell. How long has she been here?”

“Weeks—it should be out of her body by now, but she keeps on fighting me to get back to it. She doesn’t stop. She runs anytime she gets a chance.”

He nodded. “Give me some details—Hector’s message said to come here, that you needed protection, but that was about it. What in the hell are we protecting you from?”

“Bloodwater. Magnus is his half-brother and my husband is determined to burn him and his empire to ash.”

Callum nodded without the slightest eyebrow twitch. Very little caught him by surprise. “Lofty goal.”

“It is that.”

“And why did you marry the man?”

“It was my chance to get Sasha out of the Filly. My only chance. And she needed to get out of there. I don’t know how much longer she would have lasted.”

“So you saddled yourself with a man for the rest of your life—a man that let Hector have your arm broken—because you—”

“He wasn’t fine with my arm being broken. In fact, he was furious that it happened.”

At that, Callum raised an eyebrow. Though his mouth remained admirably closed.

“He was furious. And his attention to my arm has been constant since it happened.”

“What does he get out of the marriage?”

“An heir.”

His eyebrow lifted higher. “He wants to ensure the line of the title in case his plans don’t go as planned?”

For as brawny as Callum was, some thought him a bit slow. That was the farthest thing from the truth. Callum saw most of the angles, most of the time.

She nodded. “That is the plan.”

“Which is why he’s so keen on having you protected by a thick line of guardians.”

“Yes. I put the list of requests into Hector myself.”

He grinned. “I can only assume I was top on the list?”

She laughed. “You *were* the list. But I added a few more names to placate Magnus.”

He nodded, scratching the scruff along his jawline that several days of travel had produced. “Now that I know the why, tell me where everything currently stands.”

“I’ve been helping him plot Bloodwater’s demise.”

“A bonus in a wife.”

“Exactly.”

“Has he begun dismantling Bloodwater’s empire?”

“Yes. He started with the brothels. He’s managed to break up three of them so far. And gotten rid of some of Bloodwater’s most loyal men. The most prolific gambling dens are next on the list—to overextend the bank at each one with dealers we plant in them until there is mayhem. Things have started to be uncomfortably unstable in Bloodwater’s world, according to reports.”

Callum nodded. “Are you with child yet?”

“I don’t know. My courses have always been random.”

“I am aware.”

She swatted his arm.

His countenance sobered. “Seriously, Daph. Do you want out of the marriage? Now, before there is a child involved? I can make it happen.”

“How can you do that?”

“Let’s just say Hector owes me a number of favors. I’m sure he had contingency plans in place in case this ill-advised union didn’t work out.”

“He did, but now...it has been too long.”

“Or is it that you have grown fond of your husband?”

Her look snapped to him. “Why would you say that?”

“I followed you up to the room he forced you into earlier—you didn’t think I was going to let him manhandle you like he was?”

Her eyes went wide, her lips drawing inward in a cringe. “Which means you...”

“Stood outside the door and heard much of what was going on inside.”

“You’ve always had a problem with respecting other’s privacy.”

“Have I?”

“Yes.”

His shoulders lifted. “I heard what I heard. And what I heard told me not to interrupt and save you from his clutches. I can only assume that is part of the reason I see such conflict on your face at the moment?”

Biting her lip, she nodded. Damn him for being too observant.

“So, what are you going to do about the man, about the marriage?”

She exhaled a sigh, no answer on her tongue. “I don’t know.”

“You know not choosing action *is* action.”

Her eyes lifted to the still grey sky. “I am aware.”

“You want my opinion?”

“Not really. But give it to me anyway.”

“What I heard in that bedroom went way beyond a man wanting to impregnate someone. That was feral. And feral means feelings—on both your parts. You might do well to finally embrace feelings you never allow yourself to.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know it took me two years and countless hours of working with you on jobs before you even started to look at me with a modicum of esteem.”

“You exaggerate. It didn’t take that long.”

“It did. You don’t let anyone into your mind, or your heart—ever. You run away before anyone can breach that thick, stony fortress around your heart.”

“I didn’t with you.”

“Yes. But I am also the big brother you never had. A spot I had to scrape for and earn with countless injuries protecting your hide.”

“My hide?” Her eyebrows went high.

He grinned, nodding.

“Your point in all this?” she asked.

“In one month, your husband appears to be pulling more emotion out of you than I’ve ever seen. I know you love me, but it is a cautious, reserved love. Not a love that will break your heart. What I saw in five minutes—what I heard with you and him—I’ve never seen you like this.” His finger lifted, swirling in the air at her. “Which begs the question, what are you doing out here all by yourself, Daph? Running away from him? Because that’s the only thing you know to do?”

She glared at him, her tongue stuck hard between her molars.

Well...blast it.

She hated when Callum had a good point.

And in this, he just may be right.

{ Chapter 23 }

Staring out the window from his study, Magnus's stare didn't shift from the stables.

He knew Daphne had gone for a ride two hours ago—escaping Thorburn. Escaping him.

He also was aware that her friend, Callum, had saddled his horse and gone to look for her an hour and half ago.

It was taking everything in him not to charge out there, mount a horse, and track them down.

From what she'd overheard in his conversation with Margaret, coupled with the kiss she saw, it was no wonder he'd sent her into an apprehensive spiral.

Sent her thinking she was about to be thrown away.

He'd let her think she was no one, when that was the last thing she was.

But he had done that.

He wasn't accustomed to having to explain his actions to anyone, and it rankled something deep in his gut that he was now responsible to someone to do so.

Still. He'd been wrong.

He should have instantly told her that what she'd seen, what she'd heard with him and Margaret was nothing. Nothing but a shadow of the past, wisping in like the sparse fog of a memory from long ago.

He was a different person. And Margaret sure as hell was too. He'd figured that out in the first two minutes with her.

"M'lord. You have a guest." Lindon stepped into the study.

Magnus turned from the window, his eyebrows cocked.

"Miss Simone has returned. She is in the drawing room."

His gut instantly clenched. Not in a good way.

Why would she return not but a day later? There was nothing for her here. Unless she was here for his help. That, he would do. He owed her any

favors he could produce on her behalf.

He nodded to Lindon. "See her into here, please."

Lindon wrinkled his nose, but nodded. Magnus had told him exactly who Margaret was after her last visit, and Lindon had not taken kindly to being duped during her earlier visits to Thorburn to check in on his father.

Magnus went to the brandy on the sideboard and poured a glass, taking two swallows. He stared down at the cuff he'd rolled on his lawn shirt. He wished he'd donned his waistcoat and coat after leaving Daphne's room hours ago to bury himself in work. But it had seemed a waste of motions when brooding was the only thing truly on his agenda.

He set his half empty glass down when Lindon reappeared with Margaret. She wore a light pink dress that cut low across her chest—it bespoke of both innocence and seduction—a feat of opposites.

Pink was always a good color on her, soft against her pale skin and light blond hair. She looked like the gentlest flower.

"Mag." She breezed into the room as Lindon pulled the door to the study closed, but then left it slightly ajar. A direct hint to him—Lindon would never actually tell him he was making a mistake by letting Margaret into the inner sanctum of the abbey. No. He'd just much prefer to leave the door open. Silent protest.

Margaret stopped in front of him, her hand reaching out and landing flat on his chest, her middle finger wipping onto his skin above the V of his shirt. "This may be too soon, but you said we could talk more. I haven't been thinking of anything other than you since I left here. You have consumed all of my thoughts."

He nodded stiffly. "I have been thinking of you as well. I apologize for not speaking with you longer the other day—the shock of seeing you alive had me...unsettled."

Her palm brushing across his chest, her fingers curled into his lawn shirt and she leaned in, angling the top slope of her breasts more to him. "Does that mean you've missed me since I left here?"

He needed to stop this before it went any further.

His palm landed on the back of her hand and he wrapped his fingers around hers, gently tugging her hand off of him. His look strictly at her blue eyes and not veering down to her cleavage, he sighed. "Margaret, I cannot do this—what you are thinking."

“Just what do you believe I am thinking?”

“My favorite color on you? Your breasts nearly popping out of that fabric? The color you added to your lips? You’re not here for a friendly chat.”

“But I am,” her voice purred. “And why would I think that it couldn’t turn into more? This is you, Magnus—you and me. Both alive. Together again.”

“Except we’re not. We cannot be together.”

Her hand pulled away from his grip, though she didn’t take a step away. “Why not? You remember how we were—I know you do. I can see it in your eyes when you look at me. How it was when we used to meet at the stables. Those summer nights after the rain, when the air was sticky and you would peel off my dress, your skin hot on mine. I remember it. Remember it too well.”

She moved closer to him, her breasts brushing across his chest.

He took a step to the side, shaking his head. “You cannot be here, Margaret.”

“Why not?”

“I’m married.”

“Married?” Her voice pitched high. “What? How did that happen? You’ve been a ghost for the last four years. How does a ghost marry?”

He moved to the sideboard and picked up his glass, taking another sip of his brandy as he avoided looking at her. “It doesn’t matter how it happened. Only that it did. I thought you were dead and I married.”

She followed him across the room, her eyes pinning him. “But if you had known I was alive?”

He shook his head. “Margaret, don’t do this.”

“What if you had known I was alive?”

His shoulders lifted with a heaved sigh and he looked to her. “What do you want me to say? I would have come for you had I known you were alive? Of course I would have. Of course I would have moved heaven and earth for you. But I didn’t know. You were dead. I mourned you for years. Raged at the world more than I had right to for that fact.”

“Good.” She smiled. “Which means I’m not still dead to you.”

“And I’m happy for that fact. Happy that you’re alive. Happy that you survived.”

Her smile stretched broader, her right eyebrow lifting. “Which means you would still want me in your life—maybe not as your wife. Maybe as something else?”

He paused for a long moment, staring at her, weighing all the discord that was raging through him at the moment.

And all the scales settled with Daphne. The weight of her so heavy in his soul, he knew in that instant that there would never be room for anyone but Daphne in his life. She was in his soul, had taken every one of his breaths, had burrowed deep into his marrow until she’d become a part of him—a part of who he wanted to be.

“Also not an option.” He set his glass onto the sideboard and fully turned to her, his voice hard. “We had our time, Margaret. We had a fleeting young love that flamed to ash, burning us both to the bone. It is sad and regrettable what happened to us, but it is what it is. And what it is, is lost to the past.”

“But—”

“No. There is no phoenix here. No resurgence. Life killed the boy I was when I loved you.”

“And now you’re a man?” A pink flush that matched her dress started chasing up her neck and stretching to her cheeks.

His lips pursed. “I’m a demon at best. And I will never be able to love you like that boy I once was did.”

“Kiss me.”

“No.”

“Prove it to me. I will only accept it if you prove it to me.”

Without warning, she jabbed several steps toward him and went to her toes, wrapping her hand around his neck. She kissed him, her eyes closed, her mouth opening on his, prodding him for more.

The second she touched him, he stilled, turning to stone. Refusing to kiss her back, to give her the slightest hope.

Several awkward seconds passed before her mouth pulled away from his with a small grunt in her throat. Her eyes opening, she took a step back. “You are right. There is nothing there.”

He nodded.

Her lips pulled to a thin line. “I never would have guessed you could become passionless, Magnus, but there it is.”

He inclined his head to her. “Thank you for understanding. But I know I failed you those many years ago. So be assured I will do whatever I can to help you in whatever way you need. In that regard, I am yours.”

“I don’t need your help, Magnus, save for one small favor.”

“Whatever it is, it is yours.”

A hard glint flashed in her eyes. “I need the girl.”

His brow furrowed. “The girl? What girl?”

“Sasha. I don’t know how she made it here, but I saw her yesterday—saw her running up there with that woman—Daphne, you called her—chasing Sasha.” Her eyes rolled to the ceiling. “That Daphne is your wife, isn’t she?”

What in the hell did she want with Sasha? If Margaret worked at the Filly, they would know each other. But why would she care? He ignored the last part of her comment about Daphne. The last thing he was going to do was discuss his wife with Margaret. “Sasha? What do you mean you need her?”

Her lips pulled back, annoyed. “I need her. I need to bring her back to London and you are going to give her to me. You just promised me you would give me whatever I need, and I need her.”

“What the hell are you about, Margaret?”

She glanced down, smoothing the front of her dress. “I’m here on behalf of Bloodwater.”

His gut dropped. He hadn’t allowed himself to consider that a real possibility—that she had a closer relationship to Bloodwater than just being a harlot at the Filly. “Bloodwater has you doing his bidding?”

“I do work for the man. And Sasha needs to come back with me. Bloodwater thought it might be more gentle if I came here for her and brought her back.”

“Back to the whorehouse she was dying in?”

Margaret’s head snapped back, struck at his words, then her face went pinched and she nodded.

He scoffed a coarse laugh. “You bringing her back is gentle? You’re willing to destroy Sasha’s life for that blackguard?”

“Not just for Bloodwater. For me. She’s my charge. In my whorehouse. You stole her away from me, not just from Bloodwater.”

His words cut hard into the thick air between them. “Your

whorehouse?”

“Yes. The Fashionable Filly. Bloodwater has me managing it, and I worked damn hard to get myself the madame position.”

Fucking hell.

This was the last thing he thought he’d ever hear from her mouth. Especially after her brutal induction into Bloodwater’s trenches. She’d been sucked so far into Bloodwater’s ruthless world that she hadn’t even blinked as she’d made the request for Sasha. Like it was the most normal thing in the world.

And now Bloodwater knew he was alive and back at Thorburn.

He turned to the sideboard to grab his glass and he swallowed back the rest of the brandy.

Setting the tumbler down on the marble counter, he stared at the empty glass.

Let the fucking games begin.

He turned his head, his eyes steely on Margaret, and for one second, he searched—searched for the girl he once knew. The shell was the same, but he couldn’t find the slightest shred of the innocence she’d once possessed in her eyes.

His voice went hard, immovable. “I cannot let you take her.”

She moved, sidling next to him. “You can. Just like you left me in Bloodwater’s hands. You need to leave Sasha to us just the same.”

“No.”

“Why not? Do you love her? You loved me but you left me. You can do it again.”

His hands crumpled into fists. “No. She is my sister-in-law.” He bit his tongue. Too much damn information.

Margaret’s brow furrowed, her head cocking to the side. “Sasha doesn’t have family. Her mother was a whore before her. She is just the same.”

“You’re not taking her.”

“Magnus, the girl is already gone.” Her voice dipped into softness, the same voice she used to turn to when she was trying to convince him of something. “You do her no favors by taking her out of the life she knows at this point. I need her and you owe me this.”

The door to the study creaked open at that moment, soft footsteps

thudding into the room. He turned in unison with Margaret toward the door.
Sasha.

Shit.

She looked at Margaret, a smile playing at her lips, then her gaze shifted to him. “Don’t fight this, Magnus. I want to leave. I want to go with Madame Simone—I want what she has.”

Sasha hadn’t given him the courtesy of saying more than one word to him since she’d arrived here at Thorburn. And now he was expected to listen to her?

His look cut hard into Sasha. “What Margaret has for you is a never-ending field of poppies and men lined up to use your body until it is worthless—you cannot really want that.”

“Damn right it’s what I want.” Sasha moved toward him, her look intense on him. “I love those poppies. If I have to trade my body for them, that’s my decision. Not yours. Not Daphne’s. She hasn’t listened to me once since I was brought here. Maybe you will. I want out. Out of here. I want to go back to the opium—I love it more than anything.”

His eyebrow arched. “You love it more than your sister?”

“I do.” There wasn’t even shame in her voice. Just desperation.

He grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her across the study away from Margaret, his voice in a whisper. “But Daphne’s done everything in her power to save you—to save you from this life. The life you both planned to escape from. You’re out. I can keep you out.”

Her head shook, her cheeks lifting in a cringe that wrinkled around her sunken eyes. “Except it’s too late. Daphne knows she was too late—she’s just not willing to admit it.”

His words ground out through clenched teeth. “She’s not going to let you go.”

Sasha twisted her hands upward, grabbing onto his forearms and squeezing them. “Then you need to make her.”

“I can’t do it.”

“You can and you will.” She stared up at him, stringing together the most words she’d said since coming to Thorburn. “Daph was always meant to get out of the life—our life. She was always better than me, stronger, smarter, could fight where I couldn’t. Her father’s blood in her. She was always destined to escape the rookeries. To escape Bloodwater. To escape my fate.

Our mothers' fates. And now that she has, you need to make sure she keeps it. That she doesn't get dragged back into my world of decay. She needs to be the story we tell for hope. Because without hope..." Her voice hitched.

"Without hope...breath doesn't matter...nothing matters."

"Except Daphne has hope enough for both of you," Magnus spit out, desperate to change her mind but having no idea how to do so. "You just need to try—try harder. Longer."

Sasha's head shook, a sad smile crawling onto her lips. "The pain—it is too much—too deep. I will never be past that moment my mother was killed in front of me. It tortures me. Endlessly. It is a scene that plays again and again in my mind and I cannot get rid of it no matter what I do. Years, it has been, and it is still all I think about. The pain of it—it is a part of me that I'll never be free of." Her voice slipped into a crawled whisper. "I've told Daphne it, time and again, but she doesn't listen and she'll never believe me. But there, at the Filly, I can be free of the pain. It may only be hours at a time, but I can be free of it. It's the only way, when I am lost to the poppies." Her look sank deep into him, the torment of her soul flickering in her eyes. "She will never let me leave this place, but you...you can."

"I cannot let you leave." No matter what, he couldn't do that to Daphne.

"Please, Magnus. I will only ever exist—I will never live. Can you understand that? And the brothel—the Filly—that is where I need to exist. Not in a place where I will only tear down pieces of Daphne until she is a shell of the woman she's become." Her hand reached out to him, grabbing his arm, pleading. "Please, Magnus. Let me do this while I still have the tiniest spark of feeling left in me—let me use it to give her the life she deserves, without me to ruin it for her." She leaned into him, her voice dipping to a whisper Margaret couldn't hear. "He cannot know—he cannot know Daph is alive."

"Sasha—"

"You see? You understand? She doesn't want this—she wants the Filly." Margaret grabbed Sasha's arm, pulling her from his grip and stepping in front of her, blocking him. "We are going to walk out of here, Magnus. And you are going to do nothing to stop us. Sasha wants out of here. And you owe me this. You abandoned me—abandoned me to those jackals, and I had to survive. This is how I continue to survive. I bring her back, or Bloodwater

will unleash hell upon me. And then he'll unleash hell on you.”

Before Magnus could say a word, Margaret spun, dragging Sasha out of the study.

He could have stopped her—physically could have stopped both of them. But that would have only been temporary.

Margaret and Sasha were lost to a world he wouldn't wish upon anyone. Bloodwater's world. Both wanted it. Both needed it in some macabre fashion.

And that, he couldn't stop.

But he could keep his wife safe from Bloodwater. This was the way. If he kept Sasha here, Bloodwater would come for her—the vicious bastard never let any of his property go—and he would find Daphne.

He couldn't let that happen.

So he let Margaret drag Sasha out of Thorburn.

He now had bigger things to worry about.

{ Chapter 24 }

Callum's logic still bouncing about in her head, Daphne trudged up the stairs at the abbey toward Sasha's room.

It had taken her another two hours away from the abbey before she'd come to terms with what Callum had told her.

He was right. She had been running—running from the quandary she'd gotten herself into. She'd signed up wholeheartedly to be Magnus's wife, to have his heir, to help him decimate Bloodwater by any means possible.

And now that was the last thing she wanted.

She didn't want Magnus to die in his quest for revenge, which was a very real possibility if he continued on with his plans. Bloodwater was brutal, unpredictable, and had been tearing people apart for years. She'd seen it. Lived it.

It was the hardest thing in the world to admit to because it would destroy every one of those steel walls around her heart and leave her in a quivering, vulnerable mess—but what she wanted was Magnus alive and in her bed. Alive and making her laugh with his ridiculous stories of life on the sea. Alive and keeping her sane when her sister was driving her to bedlam. Alive and growing old with her, making Thorburn a true home.

She wanted him.

Wanted a life with him.

Wanted him *alive*.

Alive to meet the child she was probably carrying at the moment.

She hadn't confessed it to Callum, but her courses were late by nearly a fortnight. True, the stress of the situation could have altered her schedule—she hadn't been lying when she'd said her system was always fairly random.

But for how she and Magnus were at odds, their bodies had always been in wanton accord. Every day. Multiple times a day.

It would actually be pretty bizarre if she wasn't already with child.

She shook her head, her hand clutching tight onto the stairway railing.

She wanted her husband alive, not in the ground because destroying Bloodwater was more important than anything.

It wasn't. Not for her. No matter how much she wanted to see that bastard pay.

She just didn't know how to make Magnus see that. And that was the thing that truly struck fear into her raw, vulnerable beating heart. She knew he wouldn't give up his revenge for her.

And that stung.

Stung deep.

Still, she had to try. Stop running and try to make Magnus see another path. A path where they were together and nothing was able to tear them apart.

She wasn't sure what that looked like, but she wanted to figure it out—with him.

First, though, she needed to check on Sasha.

The first thing she noticed when she got to the top of the stairs was that the guardian, Georgie, wasn't at his post outside of Sasha's room.

Unsettling, but maybe Sasha was elsewhere in the abbey. Or maybe Georgie had stepped into Sasha's room for a moment.

She walked into Sasha's bedroom.

Odd stillness, when usually there were screeches at her or moans gurgling from Sasha's lips as she slept.

The bed had been neatly made.

Daphne's look shifted to the sitting area across the room.

Magnus sat in silence by the fireplace in the wingback chair she'd taken to sleeping in when she was in there watching over Sasha.

Without a word from him, her gut dropped. "Magnus? What are you doing in here? Where is Sasha?"

He stood, the look on his face grave.

Her legs turned to jelly and she reached out, her hand fumbling for the wall to lean against as she staggered to her left.

"She's gone, Daphne."

"What? Well, get her back. Where did she go? Why haven't you gone after her? How could she get out? Out past all the guardians?"

He winced slightly, like he hated everything he was about to do, then his face turned cold. The chill in his eyes foreign to her. “She went back to London. I let her. Margaret is the madame at the Fashionable Filly and Sasha was one of her girls. She saw her upstairs when she was leaving here, and she came back for her per Bloodwater’s request.”

Her legs buckled and she slid down the wall, her head shaking. “No. No—you couldn’t have.”

“I did. I let her go. Sasha came down on her own accord and asked to leave with Margaret. I didn’t stop her.”

No. No. No. No.

Impossible. He couldn’t have—couldn’t have betrayed her like that.

Everything in her body recoiled at his words, her stomach flipping, ready to heave. “How could you do that? How could you not stop her? Stop your love—your whore of a love. You gave her my damn sister.”

His lips snarled, his look eating into her. “Margaret has not been my love for years, and never will be again. And I let Sasha go because that was what she wanted. It’s everything she’s wanted since she got here and you haven’t been listening to her. You were killing yourself to save her and she doesn’t want to be saved—never even asked for it. There is only one thing that she is alive for, and it isn’t you. She said it herself. It is too late for her.”

“Of course she would say that.” Her voice pitching high into a scream, she clawed her way up the wall to her feet. “Of course she would—and you were idiot enough to listen to her? How could you do that to me?”

“I didn’t do it to you. I didn’t have a choice.”

Her legs back under her, she barreled at him, her hands slamming into his chest, beating him. “You had a choice—you know you did. You gave your whore exactly what she wanted and you left me with nothing—nothing.”

He grabbed her wrists, stopping her from pummeling him. “Daphne—he knows. Bloodwater knows I’m alive. Knows I’m here. I didn’t have a choice because I didn’t want him coming here. Didn’t want him finding you. I am trying my damndest to keep you safe and out of his sights. Margaret knows I’m married, but she doesn’t know exactly who you are. I cannot chance Bloodwater finding you here. I gave up your sister to protect you.”

She tried to twist her arms out of his grip, her whole body writhing. “Don’t give me that excuse—you did it because you wanted her gone—gone

from here since the start.”

“No—and I would like you to remember who got her from the Filly in the first place.” He leaned over her, growling. “And I am having Callum take you from here. Possibly to Scotland.”

“No—”

“You cannot be anywhere near me until what happens with Bloodwater happens. I’ll not risk you.”

She yanked at her arms, trying to squirm out of his grip. “But you’ll risk your damn self?”

“It was always the plan—the plan you helped me formulate. It is just at a faster pace now that he knows I am in England. I don’t have time to take apart his empire brick by brick like we planned. I have to go for the throat, kill the beast before the beast can get to me. It’s my only choice now.”

She froze, a deathly stillness coming over her, her years of being a guardian overtaking all impulse to scream and yell at him.

She took one long moment to get an even breath into her lungs and she looked up at him, her voice calm. “You are right. I need to leave this place. Callum will know where to go to hide me. I will go and pack, if you could please find him and apprise him of the situation.”

His head jerked back at her sudden docile compliance and his eyes narrowed at her. “What are you planning, Daphne?”

“I am planning on surviving. And I cannot survive here. You said it yourself.” Her words were casual, like she was talking about taking a walk in a park. “So I will leave with Callum. I wish you the best of luck with Bloodwater.”

His fingers fell away from her wrists and her arms dropped to her sides.

His stare ate into her, trying to read her. But she’d already erected an impenetrable wall of callous nonchalance to protect herself from him.

His voice went gruff. “I will find you when this is finished.”

She nodded, backing away from him. “A promise that is not necessary. I will see you or I will not. This is where we part ways. Be well, husband.”

She turned and walked out the door and turned into her room.

Silent, Magnus followed her, yet he didn’t veer into her room, his footsteps receding down the hallway presumably to find Callum.

Standing next to the doorway, she waited until he had disappeared into the bowels of the abbey before she stepped out of her room, sliding silently through the corridors to an outer door and making her way down to the stables.

It didn't matter what she wanted with Magnus anymore. Which meant there was only one thing left to do.

Get her sister back.

{ Chapter 25 }

The darkness was stagnant around her.

Still and stale.

Not like it should be at this time of night, in this area of London.

Drunks should be roaming. Carriages bringing gentlemen home from their clubs and mistresses. Whores walking the streets, tired from the night of men pounding into them against alleyway walls. Young pickpockets creeping in and out of shadows, ready to take advantage of anyone soused enough to pass out in the lanes.

Yet it was still, with only the occasional carriage rolling past.

Like doom had fallen over the rookeries and everyone was safely ensconced inside their hovels, hoping it didn't come for them.

It didn't bode well for getting into the Fashionable Filly, but Daphne was going in, hell coming for her or not.

She patted down the blades she had strapped to her body. Arms, legs, hips—she had raided the armory at the headquarters of the Guardians of the Bones for plenty of steel, strapping it to her body under the ragged clothes of a pickpocket that had convenient holes for grabbing steel when needed.

From her perch in the attic of the building across the way from the Filly, she'd seen Bloodwater leave the brothel, getting into his carriage. Probably on his way to kill Magnus.

Her gut twisted at the thought, the sudden pain of it pulsing up and through her chest.

No.

She shook her head as she turned away from the opening in the attic wall and a lock of her hair fell from the cap she had tucked it under. Her hands jerking, she shoved the hair back under the cap as she made her way down to the street, her feet hitting hard with every step, as if she could magically change what had happened by stomping about.

When she couldn't.

Magnus made his choice.

Betrayed her.

She couldn't waste another moment thinking on him. For he obviously hadn't been thinking of her when he'd let Sasha walk out of Thorburn.

Daphne stepped out into the street, snaking her way through the alleyways and shadows around the Filly, noting where the exterior guards were in position and trying her damndest not to think about Magnus.

Even if his fate was killing her inside—pieces of her she had never known existed charring into ash.

Bloodwater had the upper hand—namely, an army of men on his payroll. Not that Magnus didn't have a slew of men working for him, but he had ruined everything of their carefully laid-out plan to dismantle Bloodwater piece by piece until no man held loyalty to him. It would have been the best way—Bloodwater would have never known where the threat was coming from.

A perfect plan until Magnus had ruined it—ruined it by entertaining his old fiancée and letting her into their home.

Correction. *His* home.

It was never hers. Not truly.

He had never loved her like he did Margaret. That was clear.

In the shadows of the alleyway behind the Fashionable Filly, she straightened, steel snaking down her spine.

Salvage what was salvageable.

Get her sister out before she couldn't.

From where it was strapped to her wrist, Daphne slid a small dagger into her palm, ready to take out the guard that stood inside the side door—used for only the richest customers that demanded absolute discretion.

If she was lucky, once she'd made it inside, Sasha would be in her usual room—hopefully they hadn't already given it to a new girl. Or Daphne would end up spending precious time searching room after room for her sister.

She rotated her left wrist in a circle now that it was free of the splint to test the motion, then paused to take a deep breath.

The air not fully reaching her lungs, her feet started moving, charging for the side door.

Breath wouldn't help her now. Only action.

Her hand reached out for the handle of the door and just when her fingertips touched the cool metal, a mass of a dark black cloak swooped in on her from the shadows.

Arms twisted around her body, brutally locking her forearms to her sides so she couldn't swing her dagger. The cape fell around her, shrouding her in suffocating blackness.

Panic set in as she was wrenched into submission and then lifted—carried half crooked—bouncing against immovable bone and muscle with every running step.

She kicked her legs, only to have them tangle into the cape and trap her further against this mass of a man.

A door opening. Closing. Stairs.

Every jab of a heel into the steps shaking her, rattling the teeth in her head.

Another door slamming closed.

Her body tossed, flying through the air.

“No, you damn well don't.” Words growled, they vibrated into her ears, slamming into her chest.

Magnus.

How in the hell did he find her?

Her body hit the wall and she crumpled down into a ball, the blade knocked out of her hand.

The room they'd landed in was dark, only a scant sliver of light coming in from the lantern lit outside on the building he'd taken her into.

Not that she needed light to see what was on his face. She already knew.

Rage. Disgust. Murder.

Better to go on the offensive.

She scrambled to her feet, her voice hissing. “Blast your pompous interference—what the hell do you think you're doing?”

“What I'm doing?” His words cut through the air like blades, slicing into her.

She charged at him, her hands ramming into his chest. “What? Did I get in your damn way? Are you going to go in there to kill Bloodwater? He's not even in there, you imbecile.”

She spun away, ready to flee him, and he grabbed her arm, jerking

her to a stop and yanking her into him. He twisted her toward him, grabbing both of her upper arms as he leaned down, his face harsh in hers. “I’m here for you, Daphne. You’re not in my damn way because I’m here for you—not Bloodwater.”

Her head snapped back, her look searching his face, searching the bits of white in his eyes. “What?”

“I’m here for you—not Bloodwater.” He shook her, his fingers clamping down so tight on her arms she thought her bones might crack. “You cannot disappear on me like this—not again and again and again. You said you wouldn’t do that ever again. You lied and you disappeared on me. On. Fucking. Again.”

A roar seized him and he shoved her away from him—probably the only thing saving her from his wrath.

She stumbled backward, her spine ramming into the wall behind her.

It took her a moment to catch her breath enough for words. “I only left before you could leave me.”

“You’re so damn sure I was going to leave you?”

Her arms swung wide as she yelled back at him. “Everyone in my life leaves me—everyone. I have been tossed aside by everyone that ever should have loved me. By the ones I loved. So yes—yes, you were going to leave me. Don’t tell me differently. Don’t claim you weren’t going to do so.”

Three quick steps and he was to her, his hands slamming into the wall on either side of her head, trapping her, frustration sending a low, deadly vibration into his voice. “I am not your father, Daph. I am not going to toss you into the mews.”

“But you will leave me. Go our separate ways eventually. You assured me of that fact early on. And you were just about to throw me away once you knew Margaret was alive—throw me away one way or another.”

He heaved a breath, his head shaking for a long moment. His eyes lifted to her, his stare singeing into her as his voice came out oddly curtailed. “Our separate ways?”

Her voice dipped down a notch, not because she wasn’t angry, but because he suddenly looked unhinged. His anger, she knew what to do with. But sudden restraint? She wasn’t sure how to interpret it. “It was the agreement—it’s what you wanted. You never made any secret of that fact.”

“Except what if I don’t want that anymore?” His right hand fisted

and crunched into the wall next to her. Fighting himself as he was fighting her. “What if I want you? What if I love you?”

She scoffed. “What if? You tell me ‘what if,’ Magnus—for I haven’t had a damn voice in anything that has happened to me in the last month.”

He nodded, seeming to calm himself. “What if?” His words hitched, pausing when they came out rough with more vulnerability than she’d ever heard from him.

She puffed out a breath, trying to calm her voice. “A ‘what if’ isn’t reality. Lots of things are ‘what if.’ But that is all they are—stupid hopes that have no business existing. I know that too well. I know not to take any stock in them.”

“Fine.” He heaved a sigh, his head tilting back, his face toward the ceiling for long breaths. Slowly, his chin tilted downward, his stare on her as he exhaled a long breath. “The ‘what if’ is that I love you, Daph. That’s reality. I love you. I want you. I don’t want us to separate when all of this is over. I want you in my bed. Every day and every night. I want children with you. Not just one heir. I want a gaggle of little feet running about. I want to watch you as a mother. Fierce and loving and kind and protective and making laughter fill the rooms of Thorburn. I don’t just want that, I need that. That’s reality.”

Her jaw went slack, dizziness setting into her head. “You don’t know what you’re talking about—you don’t mean it.”

“Don’t mean it?” His eyebrows stretched high. “Are you ever going to realize the wonder that you are? I have never meant any words more in my life—I’ve never wanted to fight more for anything in my life.” His right hand cradled onto her cheek, his thumb sliding under her chin and holding her head up so she couldn’t look away. “I found my way home—but it was never that. Not a home. Not until you stepped foot into Thorburn. You’re my home and I don’t even know how you damn well did it, but you did. You are. My home. My everything.”

Even through the darkness in the room, through the shadows playing across his face, she could see it. Truth.

Truth she didn’t want to see, didn’t want to believe in, because it would crack open all that she had forced into a dark, deep iron-clad box in her soul all these years.

Hope. Love. Fate.

None of those things had ever been her friends. She'd given them too many chances and they had always failed her.

Yet Magnus stood before her, his gaze serious and intense and waiting for her to crack just the slightest bit open for him.

She didn't think she could do it, no matter how much she wanted to. *Fight, sweet Daph. Fight. It's all ye got.*

Mama Layla's voice, a whisper in her head. If ever there was a time to fight for what she wanted this was it.

Her left hand lifted, her fingers curling around his wrist just to the left of her head. "You told me once you had me figured out. That all I needed was my sister."

"Yes."

"You were wrong."

"I was?"

"I need you, Magnus. I just never wanted to admit it. Not to myself. Not to you. For if I admitted it, it would be real. And there would be wanting and longing and love and pain involved. And I don't think I can stand the pain of you throwing me away."

"I would never throw you away, Daph."

She swallowed hard. "Except you are throwing me away if you die—if your revenge on Bloodwater means your death, then you *are* throwing me away. Vengeance is the most important thing for you, and if you die it will be just the same as if I'd been tossed into the mews, half dead, among the rubbish and the rotting cabbage again. Only it will be worse than what my father did to me, because I gave you the power to throw me away. And if you took that power and you still chose to throw me out, that would..." She choked back a sob. "That would be the end of me."

"Why does it have to be one or the other? Why can I not love you and want to destroy Bloodwater at the same time?"

Her shoulders lifted, a caustic laugh bubbling up from her throat. "It doesn't—heaven knows I want him dead—gone—just as much as you do. He has taken everything from me. But I don't want it at the cost of you. At your death."

A slow smile spread across his face, his teeth white in the shadows. A smile so heartrendingly happy it made her brow furrow.

Her nose wrinkled at him. "What? Your death makes you happy?"

“No.” His fingers tightened along her cheek. “You make me happy. You love me in spite of yourself. You love me even if you cannot manifest hope around it. You love me.”

She stilled, his words sinking into her chest. Into her soul.

She couldn’t deny it.

“I do.” Her lips parted, the breath of realization seeping out of her lungs. Realization that her destruction was in his hands.

So she would have to do what she was best at. Fight. For him.

Her stare met his. “I do. And I will follow you down. If that is where this is taking us, I will follow you down into the bowels of hell so I can pull you back out.”

His mouth crashed down onto hers.

A kiss that took a hold of every one of her nerves from toe to tip. Everything he was invading her—the warm sandalwood scent of him, his body pressing hers against the wall, his fingers digging under her cap and into her hair, his tongue diving into her mouth to taste her, his left hand running up and down the side of her body, not touching anything fast enough.

The essence of him seeping into her body, filling her soul like it had never been.

Needing his skin, she unclasped his cape, shoving it off his shoulders, her hands splaying across his chest.

A rumbled moan shifted from deep in his chest and the vibration of it nearly sent her to her knees. A sound of fulfillment, like he had just found the one thing in the world that would make his life worth living.

But then he froze.

His tongue, his breath, his hands all stilled.

It took her a long, haze-filled moment to open her eyes, confusion on her face.

Confusion that tripled when a flash of silver near his head flickered into her eye.

She focused in on it.

The end of a pistol aimed at his head.

In that moment, the cold steel of another pistol met her temple from the opposite side.

Slowly, his head drew back from hers, his eyes set on her face. Eyes telling her not to panic.

“He wants ye alive—the both of ye.” A brute to the right of Magnus barked out in a low, scratchy voice, like he’d been choked one too many times in his life. “But we be willing to bring in yer dead bodies as well if yer thinkin’ of movin’ wrong.”

Her head still, she glanced to her left and to her right, taking in the size and shape of the two men in the room with them holding pistols to their heads.

Magnus’s eyes shifted from her face to the pistol on the left side of her face. She mirrored his look to the pistol on his left temple.

He gave a slight nod—all the direction she needed.

She swung out, knocking the arm of the man holding the pistol to Magnus’s head. A gun instantly went off—the one she knocked or the one he did she couldn’t tell—could only feel the pain the sound of the blast vibrated into her skull. A quick scan of Magnus’s head told her no bullet had hit him as he’d grabbed the arm of the man holding the gun to her head.

Thank the heavens.

Instantly in attack mode, she broke away from Magnus and kicked out with her leg toward the man on her right, making contact on his knee and sending him downward. In a quick move, she clamped her hands together and swung at his chin as he went down, knocking him into the wall. He landed flat on his face, not moving.

Magnus had already downed the man on her left—dead or not, she wasn’t sure. Not that she cared. Bloodwater always had the most vile, brutally evil men working for him. One less in the world was a favor on the side of all that was virtuous.

Heaving, she looked to Magnus, her voice in a whisper. “Where are we?” She hadn’t even thought to ask earlier.

“In a building down across the street from the Filly.” Magnus grabbed her hand and pulled her to the door. “I rented out this room a month ago. I usually have someone on watch in here.”

They ran out into the hallway only to be greeted by five—no—eight, more brutes rushing at them from the stairwell. She glanced over her shoulder to see a wall at the end of the corridor. Dead end.

She looked back at the barrage of men bearing down on them. More. Too many to count.

Shit.

All of her muscles tightened, ready for battle, and she went to pull blades, but then an arm cut across her chest, slamming her back into the end wall of the corridor. Magnus.

Magnus smothering her against the wall, his back to her, hiding her. Protecting her.

She wouldn't have it.

If they were going down, they were going down together.

She dropped straight down from his back and then sprang up at his side, diving forth low, her fist catching the bullocks of the first brute to reach them. It doubled the ass over, but another was right behind him, his hand digging onto her scalp to grip her hair.

In the next breath, her head smashed into the wall.

The world vanishing from view.

Magnus's roar echoing from far away until she lost everything, disappearing into blackness.

{ Chapter 26 }

Magnus's head lolled to the side.

"Bloodwater."

Daphne's voice, hard and cold.

Shit—she was awake. He'd been battling every second during the last hour for consciousness, keeping the one eye he could see out of open for just this moment. And now he'd missed the damn second it happened.

He'd needed Daphne to see him before she saw anything else.

Not Bloodwater with a vicious gleam of bloodlust in his eyes. Not the six brutes stationed around them in what looked to be a crypt deep under the Fashionable Filly. Not the blood-soaked stone walls that leaked moisture and the thin sheet of water on the stone floor seeping into his boots. Not the four torches along the curved walls casting haunting shadows across the room.

And especially not the table that sat next to them with a row of silver tools lined in the middle of it that were only meant for one thing—torture.

He'd needed her to see his eyes—eye—to make sure she knew he would get her out of this, one way or another. Never mind that they were both bound to chairs facing each other. Both beaten to hell. Too far from each other to touch, even if their arms and legs were unbound.

He was going to get her out. Alive.

But now this. Bloodwater in front of him, blocking her view of him.

Not that she would recognize him. He knew his nose was broken, possibly his left cheekbone as well for how much it had swelled. The blood had dried along his face, forming a hard crust that caked his skin.

Rabid madness had overtaken him when he saw Daphne's head smashing into the wall and he'd taken down five of the brutes rushing them in the hallway.

Little good it had done.

The last four blackguards had jumped onto him all at once. Knocked him out.

He'd woken just as the last rope tying him down was knotted.

His stare on the back of Bloodwater, he twisted his wrists under the binds locking his forearms to the arms of the wooden chair. Tight ropes, cutting hard into his skin. He had to loosen them. The binds around his ankles to the chair had loosened slightly, but he had been working his legs up and down since they'd tied him down.

He glanced at Daphne's feet twitching. They hadn't bound her legs to the chair like they had with him—just her arms. Underestimating her, which was a good thing.

Bloodwater straightened, his hand falling away from Daphne's face where he had presumably shaken her into consciousness. "'Tis good yer awake, pet. This would be no fun without ye. Plus, I need to see the whites of yer eyes."

Bloodwater stepped to the sides of their chairs, standing between them, just offset enough so he could look at both of them at the same time.

Magnus quickly scanned Daphne's face. Both her eyes were open, the bruise on her left cheek had darkened and swollen, but the blood flowing from the cut on her temple had ceased. The best he could hope for. His heart had been ripped out of his chest, barely beating, small parts of it being carved away with every labored breath she took when she was unconscious.

But at the moment, he wished to high heaven that she hadn't roused.

Daphne's look never veered from Bloodwater—not once did her eyes flicker Magnus's way. No, they followed Bloodwater's movements carefully as her chin tilted up. "Why?"

He crossed his arms over his chest, just above his slightly portly belly. He'd gone soft since Magnus had last seen him, years ago when he'd easily crushed Magnus. And his weird Scottish-Irish-English rookery accent had only become more pronounced—a far cry from the halls of Thorburn.

Bloodwater's forefinger flicked outward, pointing from her to Magnus. "I have questions for ye and yer man."

Daphne finally gave Magnus a cursory look and then directed her attention back to Bloodwater, her voice chilly. "I don't know that man."

He chuckled. "No? Ye didn't marry the bastard then, aye?"

Her mouth clamped closed.

"Exactly, pet. I know everything ye been up to. Where ye been for the last four years."

He leaned forward, clamping down one hand on her arm and stretching his other hand out onto Magnus's arm. "And ain't we a pretty little family, reunited?"

Magnus stared at Daphne, willing her to look at him.

She refused to do so, her stare set boldly on Bloodwater. And why not? She knew the man better than he did. She'd lived under his terror for a good portion of her life. She knew enough to be wary of every motion he made, every flick of his wrist, every blink of his eyes.

Bloodwater glanced from her to Magnus. "Now that I have the attention of both of ye, I have a question that has been gnawing at me for the last four years." His fingers gripped hard onto Magnus's arm, and Daphne's fingers flinched, for he was doing the same to her arm. Death hung ominous in every word he said. "I want to know, years ago, which one of ye killed my boy that night?"

"It was me." Both he and Daphne shouted out the statement in unison.

Fuck. Mouth closed, Daph.

Bloodwater froze, his face twisting, morphing into rage. His hands snapped away from both of their arms and he drew himself to his full height, gritting out words as red mottled his face. "What was that?"

"It was me." Again, both he and Daphne yelled the words at the same time.

Damn her. Damn her trying to save him when he was trying to save her.

A sharp chuckle, then another spitting from Bloodwater's mouth as he shook his head. "Well, ain't this a pretty little party. Both of ye thinking yer the hero." He spun to Daphne, shoving his pockmarked face into her bloody one. "Let me tell ye, pet, there ain't no heroes in our world. I'd think ye likely know that from yer time under my roof. When I clothed and fed ye fer years. And this is how ye repay me? Ye lie to me? Try to leave the room I had all lined up fer ye? And not just that, ye took sweet Sasha out of my mix. Ye know how much money I lost on her in the last month?"

"Money is not an issue, brother," Magnus barked out, trying desperately to draw his attention away from his wife. "You let Daphne go. Let her go and I will fill your coffers with more than you could make in ten years on the girl."

Bloodwater whipped around, spit flying out of his mouth as he yelled. “Shut yer stinking face, ye dung heap.” He pointed back at Daphne. “This is a conversation for me and my wee Daphne. This one betrayed me after all I done fer her, so we are going to have a conversation.”

He turned back to Daphne. “What do ye say, pet?” He paused, stepping over to the table next to their chairs and slowly touching each and every one of the silver implements ready for torture.

He got to the end of the table, then doubled-back and grabbed the pliers with the long handles. He lifted the tool to Daphne. “I think one fingernail for every year ye hid from me. That seems fair in my estimation. Plus, ye’ll fetch a better rate with yer face intact. No one cares on a wretched finger.”

Bile flooded up Magnus’s throat.

Daphne, however, didn’t flinch. She stared up at Bloodwater, hatred simmering in her eyes, but she didn’t cower, didn’t cringe. If anything, she looked bored by Bloodwater’s threats.

She’d been trained well by the Guardians.

“Do what you have to do, Bloodwater,” she said simply, her voice betraying no emotion.

Magnus wasn’t quite so calm, his words cutting out, desperate that his demon brother not touch Daphne. “You’ll never find out what happened to your son that way. You touch her and you’ll never know.”

Bloodwater looked back over his shoulder to him. “Ye have something more to say, little brother?”

“I have a lot to say, but it stays locked away if you touch one finger on her.”

Daphne’s eyes flickered to him, narrowing, annoyed he was interfering. Instantly, her eyes went dead again as she looked up to Bloodwater. “Or is it that I have something to say? Try me, Bloodwater. You’ve wanted to do this for years. I know you have. I know you’ve heard the whispers—that I was still alive, that someone saw me. A ghost. But you never could find me. And that rankled you to no end.” Her head nodded toward the pliers in his hand. “Try it. My forefinger looks ripe. See what you can get out of me.”

“Enough of your blasted diversions, wench.” Anger spiking, he spun back toward Daphne, his hand flying up and he backhanded her across the

jaw. “Ye always were too smart for yer own good.”

Her head went slack, her eyes closing, and Bloodwater turned around, swinging at Magnus’s jaw just the same.

The impact brutal, spots of bright white flashed across his field of vision. But all he cared about was that Daphne was unconscious again. Better that than playing whatever in the hell game she was playing with Bloodwater.

Bloodwater grabbed Magnus’s hand. “I’ll just have to spend my time with ye, then, little brother.”

He forced Magnus’s middle finger long and clamped the end of the pliers onto his nail, yanking hard until there was resistance. Then he pulled slow.

Slow for pain. Lots of it.

Magnus seethed in a breath and bit down on his tongue, falling into the distant world in his mind he’d used to survive the pain he endured on the ship—broken bones, swords slicing through him in battle. The world where he could watch what was happening to him, knew the pain coursing through his body, but suffer it without breaking.

He stayed in that state, his stare on his fingernail tearing away from his skin, watching the blood flow. Pain wasn’t about to kill him. It never had before.

His nail popped free and Bloodwater’s arm jerked back. He held up the bloody nail in front of Magnus’s eyes. “I’ll take ‘em from ye, then, before I take them from her. Unless ye got something to tell me, brother.”

No answer, he just glared at Bloodwater.

“It was me.” Daphne’s voice jabbed into the air.

Fuck.

Magnus scrambled to get his mouth open, to get back fully into his body and a savage barrage of pain bit into him. His teeth clenched, and he ground out words louder than whatever it was that Daphne was trying to say. “Don’t listen to her—it was me. I killed him.”

“Bloodwater, you know me.” Daphne’s words stepped over his, strong, rational. “You’ve known me since I was a babe. You know I don’t lie. It was me.”

Bloodwater took a step back, a cackle of evil crackling from his mouth. “Both of ye want to die? I can just do that. Or ye can name the other person as the culprit.”

Daphne finally looked at Magnus straight on, her lips pulled inward in a hard line as much as the bloody cut across her mouth would allow. They stared at each other, neither willing to give in and say it was the other.

She wasn't about to give him up.

He wasn't about to give her up.

"Then both of you can die." Bloodwater tossed the pliers down to the ground and stalked toward the table, his hand reaching for a dagger curved like a sickle.

"Bloodwater, what are you doing? Stop—what have you done to her?" Bursting in through the small opening into the torture chamber, Sasha's voice was a shriek.

Margaret was directly behind her.

Sasha rushed across the crypt, crouching over in front of Daphne, her left hand running across the blood dried along the side of Daphne's face and to the bruise on her other cheek as her shrieking voice filled the room. "How could you do this—Daphne hasn't done a thing to you—nothing. You take and take and take. And she has not done a thing to you."

Bloodwater grabbed Sasha by the hair on the back of her head, yanking her away from Daphne and slapping her across the face. "I'll not take that harpy from you."

Margaret stepped behind Bloodwater, running her hands up and over his shoulders. "Filmore, please. Sasha is no good to us if she's bruised—by your own orders." Her voice soft and placating, Margaret rounded Bloodwater, sliding in between him and Sasha and he dropped his grip on Daphne's sister. Margaret's voice purred. "If you need to hit someone, hit me. You know I am always ready to assist you in whatever you need. We can get the whips."

Bloodwater grabbed Margaret's chin for a moment, looking like he was about to strike. Then his hand fell away from her chin. "Ye know I cannot do that. But ye need to leave, bird. This isn't the place for ye. Ye don't want to see the blood that will be spilled."

Both of her hands lifted, capturing Bloodwater's face to make him look at her. "Why spill any blood? He's your brother and she's nothing to you—a street rat you once took in. Nothing more."

That was when Magnus saw it—just beyond Bloodwater and Margaret, Sasha had already slipped a dagger into Daphne's right hand and

with another dagger was sawing at the rope tying Daphne's wrist to the chair. Her skirts hiding all of her actions from the brutes lining the crypt as she bent over her sister in shocked outrage.

Margaret continued on, prattling in front of Bloodwater. "Why care? Unless you want her? That would make me jealous. And you know how I get when I get jealous. Maybe I should stay down here, just to make sure your eye isn't wandering. I will do that—slit her throat myself if you think to stick her in your bed. For I cannot think of it, much less watch it. You know how I cannot stand another looking your way. And I know how they want you—want what you can do—your body. Your power."

Daphne's right arm lifted, free from the binds, and she quickly slid the dagger in along the ropes securing her left arm. With as little movement as possible, to not draw any of the eyes that were currently fixed on Bloodwater and Margaret in the middle of the room, she tore through the last of the ropes tying her down.

Free.

Daphne bent over, like she was curling into Sasha's embrace, but her left hand dipped, snaking out another dagger from her calf under the ragged trousers she wore. Thank the gods she was a quick healer and her arm was back in working order. Whispering something into her sister's ear, Daphne pressed the dagger into Sasha's free hand.

His breath held for one long moment as everything in the crypt was suspended, and then Daphne pounced.

She sprang up from her chair, her arms wide, and she tackled both Margaret and Bloodwater to the ground. She landed on top of both of them and the men around the room surged toward her as Sasha jumped over the flailing feet rolling on the ground. Sasha shoved the dagger Daphne had slipped her into his right hand and sliced free the ropes along his wrist with her own dagger. The rope cut within a second, he bent over and sliced free both his legs by the time Sasha had cut through the rope on his left hand.

Just as he bolted out of the chair, Sasha collapsed on him, a scream on her lips. Magnus caught her, rolling her to the ground only to find a blade stuck in her back and one of Bloodwater's brutes grasping at it to get it back in his hand.

His hands quick, Magnus sliced up with his dagger straight across the brute's throat.

Another body dropping to the floor and Magnus found Daphne.

Bloodwater had found his way out of the pile of the three of them, but Daphne had only made it to her knees. Bloodwater lunged down at her with the sickle-shaped dagger in his hand.

Pure, visceral reaction, and Magnus sprang, diving between Daphne and Bloodwater.

Silver flashed in front of his eyes and Bloodwater's dagger nicked his neck, then drove straight down into his body along his collarbone.

Vicious pain spiked down into his chest as he fell backward onto Daphne in the exact moment she jabbed her dagger upward, the tip of it driving into Bloodwater's neck.

Bloodwater reared upward as Magnus's dead weight landed on top of Daphne, his back crushing down onto her. Daphne's knife had embedded deep enough into Bloodwater's neck to stop him, but he still moved, still staggered, his hands grasping for the handle of the knife.

Half of a second to decide fate and Magnus kicked up, the top of his boot swinging and driving the full of the blade deep into his brother's neck.

Blood spurted out along the knife instantly. Blood everywhere, gushing down onto Bloodwater as he flailed about, trying to grasp the dagger.

All to no avail.

Bloodwater stumbled to his knees. Dropped. His last breath gone before his face hit the floor.

"Magnus—shit." Daphne crawled out from under him, her hands frantic on his shoulder where Bloodwater's blade was currently embedded into his body.

Magnus couldn't give her any heed.

He was looking up at the five brutes of Bloodwater's still in the crypt, bearing down upon them.

When a king of the underworld fell, there was never a peaceful change of power.

Power went to the strongest.

The most willing to trade their soul away for riches.

And he was looking at five men that had sent their souls to hell a long time ago.

Five men looking at opportunity.

The one walking out of this room alive would take over, and

everyone knew it.

And any one of these brutes needed him and Daphne dead if Bloodwater's empire was to be parceled out. And Margaret was still in the room, on her hands and knees, frozen as she recognized the danger just as he did.

Bearing down against the pain deep in his shoulder, Magnus rolled to his feet, his hand clutching his blade, ready to defend Daphne to his last breath.

Next to him, Daphne quickly understood what was happening and yanked another blade hidden in her clothing, twisting around and setting her backside against his.

Ready to defend him to her last breath.

His heart shattered and reforged into impenetrable iron in that instant.

He hadn't been wrong. She was his home. His home in this life or in the next, it didn't matter. What mattered was that he'd found her and realized it before it was too late.

Footsteps clunked outside the chamber on the stone floor, coming closer—fast. Two sets of feet—no, three. Four.

Hell—more of Bloodwater's men coming for them.

His stare solid on the brutes moving in on them, his head turned to the side, even though he couldn't afford to look at her. "To the death, my love?"

A quick chuckle, light and airy came from her mouth. "I rather like to be alive, husband. But yes, to the death."

The footsteps outside the chamber reached them and Magnus glanced at the entrance.

The most wondrous sight greeted him.

Callum.

Callum with three of the other guardians he'd hired to protect Daphne rushing into the room. Pistols and blades bared.

Magnus spun to Daphne, grabbing her body and crashing her to the ground, covering her from the melee. Smothering her against her will and her hands shoving at him, but he wasn't about to let a rogue bullet find its way into her body.

Grunts, screams, two shots, and it was over.

Callum heaving in the center of it all, a maelstrom of destruction on

his face.

All of Bloodwater's men littering the floor.

Callum looked at him. "More guardians are up above securing the place. Daphne under there?"

With a grunt, Magnus rolled over onto his back, letting Daphne up to breathe.

Callum glanced at Daphne, looked her over, then caught his eye. "Well done. Except for that dagger sticking out of your shoulder."

With those words, Magnus lost his sight, his limbs, and then his mind.

Everything in him leaving for a blank world where he didn't exist.

{ Chapter 27 }

Deep into the night, a single candle and the fire in the fireplace the only light, Daphne sat between the two beds that she'd had moved into this room.

The London townhouse where she'd been for the last week had been courtesy of her father via Hector.

Her sister in one bed.

Magnus in the other.

Both with deep knife wounds that were determined to steal them away from the earth. Steal them away from her.

Sometimes their ragged breaths came and went in unison, almost lulling her to sleep. In other moments, their breaths were disparate, warring with each other. One fast and panicked while the other was even and hopeful. Then it would flip.

Two people she would trade the world to save, and neither any closer to opening their eyes than they had been seven days ago.

Still, she'd dripped soup into their mouths. Held water on wash cloths to their tongues. Begged them loudly and begged them softly to wake up.

To live.

Neither one was listening to her.

So she didn't leave them—couldn't—for she wasn't going to let either one of them slip into the next realm alone. She was going to be there, clutching their hands, telling them to fight to stay until the very last breath.

A soft knock preceded the door to the bedroom opening. During the last three days, Callum had started to knock softly and peek his head in without an answer, just in case she had fallen asleep. Which she didn't do, no matter how he tried to get her to lie down.

He'd even brought a skinny chaise longue into the room and fit it in the corner for her, hopeful she would try to get some sleep, but she had yet to use it. What little sleep she'd gotten was in this hard wooden chair between

the beds, and only when her body revolted against her bleary eyes staying open.

“Daph?” Callum half stepped into the room, his voice low.

For how she hadn’t slept, hadn’t left this room, Callum had set up camp outside the room in the hallway, eating and sleeping there, refusing to leave in case she needed him. She’d never loved him more.

She turned around toward the door to face him. Usually, he was bringing her food that she refused to eat, but his hands were currently empty.

“You have a visitor.”

Her eyebrows lifted. She had no one that would be visiting her. Much less one visiting her at this time of night in a room shrouded with impending death.

He cleared his throat. “It is your father. He has asked for just five minutes of your time.”

She shook her head in an automatic response. She always shook her head where her father was concerned.

“I know. Yet the man has come here several times every day, asking to see you. I have put him off until now. But as I fear for your own sanity at the moment, maybe now is the time for you to see him.”

“You are worried on my sanity?”

“I am worried about a host of things.”

“He has been here every day?” Her eyes dipped as she inhaled a deep breath. She would refuse, as usual, except...except she was looking at the death of two of the most important people in her life.

Her look lifted to Callum. “Send him in.”

Callum inclined his head and disappeared out the door.

She turned her chair sideways, enough to face the door. The three-legged shuffle of her father’s feet and cane clunked into the room.

His limbs moving slowly, her father creaked his way in, closing the door behind him. He looked about, unsure, then wobbled three more steps into the room until he was halfway between her and the door. Standing awkwardly as his weathered hands piled atop his cane and he leaned forward on the gleaming black wooden stick to take weight off his rickety legs.

“Daphne.”

“Lord Orelin.”

“I have been concerned for you.”

Her eyes shifted to the beds on either side of her. “All the concern should be for my husband and my sister.”

At that, her father looked at the two people silent in the beds. He inclined his head. “As is right.”

She exhaled a breath. He wasn’t here to argue with her, as had been every interaction that she’d ever had with the man. Her fingers flicked out from her lap. “Thank you for arranging this townhouse for us to stay at. And for the many surgeons and doctors you have sent through. I thought Hector had done all this, until I learned he was only the messenger.”

A strained smile came to his thin, weathered lips. “I am happy to help. And this place is yours for as long as you should need it. Forever, if need be.” His wiry eyebrows drew together. “In all honesty, I bought it for you long ago.”

Her eyes popped open, the weariness in her body momentarily forgotten.

She looked around. She hadn’t noticed much when they had brought Magnus and Sasha into the home—she’d truly not looked up from their bloody wounds for days. Callum had ushered them into the townhouse while juggling the discussions with the two surgeons that had come in with them.

If this room was any indication—large and spacious with thick mahogany paneling on the walls and an ambitiously carved plaster grape vine motif stretching to all corners of the room on the ceiling—then this was a particularly nice specimen of a London townhouse.

Her voice warbled, suspicious, as she looked back to her father. “Why would you do that?”

His shoulders lifted, weary, remorse searing through his greying green eyes. “You know why.”

She didn’t. “Guilt?”

He chuckled. “Yes. Guilt, I suppose. But more so because you are my daughter. Whatever you may think of me, I do want to take care of you. I always have.”

She instantly bristled. This. Again. “I’ve told you a hundred times, I don’t need to be taken care of.” She stilled, stopping herself, and her eyes closed. Arguing with him would only take away energy she didn’t have to spare and she was so damn exhausted as it was. “Though I do appreciate your help in this instance.”

“Daphne.”

She opened her eyes to him. “Yes?”

“You need to know what happened on the night your mother died.”

His voice, for once, didn’t have the scratch of age echoing in it. Strong. Like he really needed her to listen to him.

Her mouth parted with a wicked intake of breath. Why now? Now, of all times?

Maybe because she was captive—she wasn’t about to leave Magnus or Sasha, and this home was his property.

She stared up at him, her mouth pulling to a tight line, knowing she was trapped and hating him for doing so. She was at her lowest, and this was what he brought to her.

He took her look for what it meant and lifted a hand, placating.

“Please, just hear me out.”

Her head tilted to the side with a sigh. “Fine.”

He nodded and shuffled one step toward her. “My wife was a bitter, bitter, vicious woman and her soul is better off in the ground with her.” A glint of anger vibrated across his green eyes. “She wasn’t always so, but she became so over the course of our marriage.” He paused, heaving a sigh.

“Though it was not all her fault. I must take fair blame for what she became—I was not a good husband.”

“I can imagine.”

His lips pursed for a moment with the barb, but then he continued on, the story he needed to tell overriding his instinct to chide her for rudeness.

“That night, your mother, Victoria, came to my doorstep for help with you—my child—in her arms. My wife invited her into our home and brought her up to the drawing room. What my wife hoped to accomplish, I do not know. She knew I had a mistress—several. I do not know what Victoria and my wife talked about. I only know that when I came into the drawing room, my wife was swinging a fire poker at your mother. And your mother was curled over into a ball, protecting you with her body. Victoria took one hit that I saw, probably more, before I rushed into the room and grabbed my wife, stopping her, holding her back—I had her arms pinned down, I was sure of it.” His words slowed, haunted. “Your mother made it to her feet and rushed out of the room. That was when my wife slammed the hook of the poker into my leg.”

He stopped, heaving a whistling breath. “I fell back and she got free of me. She ran out after your mother. Caught her at the top of the stairs.” His eyes closed, his head shaking. “And she pushed Victoria. Shoved both her and the babe—you—down the stairs.”

His top hand balancing on the cane shook as he grimaced, then continued on. “Victoria wrapped you so securely into her body that you weren’t injured, but your mother...Victoria cracked her neck. She was dead by the time she hit the landing.”

Daphne winced, her grief instant for what her mother must have been thinking—feeling in those moments. Did she know death was coming for her? Did she realize what a mistake it was depending on a man such as her father?

Her look narrowed at him. “And what did you do?”

“Nothing right by you.” His gnarled fingers curled tight over the top of his cane, halting the tremble in his hands, but he met her glare. Took it willingly.

“My wife made our butler get rid of Victoria’s body and clean the blood, while she scooped you up and said she would take care of you. She disappeared for a spell. I didn’t think to stop her—I had crawled to the top of the stairs and I was looking at my dead mistress, shock and horror freezing me in place.”

His eyes closed, his head shaking as he lost himself in the memory. “Later, my wife told me she found you a home. Paid the family off to take you. I was in pain for weeks, unable to walk, for the hook of the poker had splintered my shin. But that is no excuse. I should have checked. Should have come for you. And then...then it was just easier to forget. Easier for me. Easier for the guilt. I pretended it never happened—the coward’s way out.”

Bile slipped up onto her tongue, her stomach roiling, as she was unable to comprehend how she was related to this man. How he could be so weak.

“It wasn’t until years later that the woman that raised you—Miss Layla Hodwell—cornered me at a brothel and told me how she’d found you in the mews left to die.” His voice hitched. “That you had become her daughter. By then, it had been ten years, ten years I could never explain away, and you had a mother. So I let things be. I could never bring you into my home with my wife—she would have killed you. I could never let her

even know you were still alive for fear of what she would do. Instead, I had people watching you from afar.”

Her right eyebrow lifted. “Mama Layla...she never told me she talked to you.”

“I asked her not to. It was clear that she loved you and she didn’t want my interference. But she did want me to know you were alive—I imagine she was trying to protect you in case something happened to her.”

“That sounds like her.”

He shuffled closer to her, his cane almost bumping into her knee. His top trembling hand reached out to touch a lock of hair along her temple. “You look so much like your mother. But your eyes—your eyes are mine.” His arm dropped away, his palm resting atop his hand gripping the cane. “I wasn’t the man I needed to be in those moments. In those many years. I was weak. And my actions—lack of actions—will always haunt me.”

She stared at him. A broken man. That was what was before her. A man broken by time and age and regret. A broken man looking for the slightest wisp of mercy from her.

She wasn’t sure what she had for him in her heart, but for his help during the last week, she found she could offer him the tiniest grace. “Yet Hector said you have been full of action when you found out what happened to me—us—the situation we are in.”

He glanced at Magnus and then at Sasha. “It is nothing—too little. I cannot ask for your forgiveness for my lack of action in the past.” He waved his hand toward the two beds. “But in this, I can have action. I can help you try to save the people that make your world. To even have that chance—to save the people that mean the most to you—it is a gift from the fates. So I will help you in any way I am able to.”

She nodded, her look drifting down, her mind not able to fully process all that he had just told her. A story that she wished she’d known years ago.

A story she’d never let him tell her.

He’d been the villain in her life for so long, she didn’t know what to think of him at the moment.

He coughed, then cleared his throat. “Can I stay?”

She looked up at him. “You do not need to. I am afraid I have no conversation in me. I just need...time...to think on what you’ve said.”

He shuffled over to the chair positioned against the wall near the door. "I'll just sit here, then. Sit with you in silence for a spell if you don't mind." He made a slow turn and his body bent, creaking, until he was seated.

She looked at him, and nodded, then turned her chair back to Magnus and Sasha.

Hours he sat in the room with her in silence. Awake. Keeping the silent vigil. Until his cane slipped from his fingers and hit the floor. Sleep had come for him, so he excused himself to leave for his townhouse with a promise that he would return tomorrow.

She stared at the closed door for long minutes after he left.

It hadn't been...horrible, talking with him. Sitting with her father.

He was trying to make amends, she understood that. And for the very first time in her life, a sliver of her heart wanted that as well.

She turned around in her chair, leaning forward, her stare on Magnus's chest for long minutes, then shifting over to Sasha's chest.

Their breathing had fallen into step again, their chests rising and falling in unison. Ragged breaths, with lungs that didn't want to pump more air.

Her heart was now so shriveled from the pain of sitting between the two of them on the edge of death for so long, she could almost feel how her own heart was turning to ash, ready to stop the beating that made her blood flow.

She reached out with her left hand, sliding it around Magnus's hand, then her right hand moved to grab her sister's hand.

Holding onto both of them as hard as she could.

In the next moment, in a second of both miracle and tragedy, one set of eyes opened, while breath ceased for the other.

{ Chapter 28 }

Caught on the dank floor of the crypt, water splashing all around him, Magnus reached up to stop it—the damn tip of the dagger pointed directly at Daphne’s heart.

Lunging. Stretching.

His muscles too slow. Too weak.

The blade slammed into her chest, bones cracking. Gurgling. Blood. Blood dripping down on him. Her body falling into him, sending him into the sheen of water.

Nothing he could do. Nothing he could stop.

Water, blood, blinding him.

His eyes popped open, a scream on his lips.

A room. A bed.

Callum.

Callum shooting to his feet, his chair flying out behind him to hit the wall.

Magnus was out of the bed instantly, roaring, his arms swinging, tackling Callum. His fists catching a chin. A temple. Screamed words flying from his lips. “Where is she? Where is she? Where is she?”

Callum’s spine cracked into the wall, his hands flailing, trying to catch Magnus’s wild arms before they did more damage. Screaming something back that Magnus couldn’t hear, couldn’t comprehend.

Only one thing roaring along his tongue. “Where is she? Where is she? Where is she?”

Black dots filled his eyes. His head spinning. Blood. His arms slowing down. But he kept swinging, kept yelling. “Where is she? Where in the hell is she? What did you do with her? Where is she?”

“Magnus—Magnus—stop—stop.”

Hands landed on his back, clawing up to his shoulders. Small hands. Daphne’s hands. Daphne’s voice.

His arms stilled.

He blinked.

Callum in front of him.

“Magnus—I’m right here.” Daphne’s fingers dug into his shoulders and she yanked him backward, using the momentum to spin him onto the bed.

He landed hard on his side, then righted himself, his hands diving for her. Arm. Hip. Wrapping around her. Wrapping around her waist. His face crushing into her belly, the wool of her dress scratching across his dry lips. His hands moving up and down her body, searching for blood, searching for the death that was hunting for her.

She heaved in a breath in his hold, her breasts rubbing along the top of his head. Her heart thudding out of control. Loud. He could hear it against her ribs in the sudden silence of the room.

His manic thoughts started to slow.

Alive. Daphne was alive. He was alive.

He’d been in and out of consciousness for days. Maybe one. Maybe two. Maybe five.

Every time he woke up on the image of her blood dripping down onto him, he would see her once his eyes opened and focused. Alive, breathing next to him.

But not this time. This time she was gone. Callum in her place.

Except she was here. Holding him. Alive. Not stabbed. Not dead.

Her fingers moved from his back to his left shoulder. “Shit.” She breathed the word out in a sigh.

Her fingers sank into his hair and she pulled his head back, making him look at her. “Wild husband of mine, you just tore your stitches.”

His eyebrows furrowed and she pointed at his shoulder where a large red spot was quickly spreading wider along the white bandages strapped around his shoulder.

Fuck the blood. He didn’t let her go.

Couldn’t let her go until his heart stopped exploding in his chest with every beat.

She sighed, her fingers curling onto his head as she leaned down and kissed him.

There it was.

She was real. Real in front of him.

His heart started to slow.

She pulled up slightly and he saw her eyes. Brutally tired—brushes of deep purple under them and red rimmed.

But the softest smile curled across her face as she looked down at him. “You back here with us?”

Us? Callum was in the room. He’d forgotten that fact. Wanted to forget that fact.

“I’m here.” His words came out gruff, like he hadn’t used his tongue in days, even if he’d just been yelling like a madman.

Her bottom lip pushed up. “The dream again?”

“Yes.”

Or so he assumed. Everything had been hazy snippets since he’d kicked that dagger into Bloodwater’s throat. Snippets of pain. Waking. Daphne crying. Her hands gripping his so tight he was surprised she hadn’t broken every bone in his hand.

“But I’m here now.”

She leaned down and kissed him again, then pulled up slightly, her words brushing against his lips. “Good. Then I need to go get a needle and thread to close that wound back up. You really are driving me to bedlam with how you keep ripping this open.”

His eyebrows dipped together. “How many times?”

“This will be the third time I’ve re sewn the original stitches of the surgeon. You really need to stop dreaming, Magnus.” Her voice dropped to a whisper as she set her mouth next to his ear. “Or at least start dreaming of us naked together, my breasts under your tongue, instead of me dying on you. And I can give you some more imagery, if it helps.”

A breathless chuckle puffed out of his lips. “I’ll take that option.”

She grabbed his arms, pulling them wide so she could escape his embrace. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

She hurried out of the room.

His look darted to Callum leaning against the wall, his meaty arms crossed over his chest.

“Have I really pulled out my stiches that many times?”

“This is the most lucid I’ve seen you, so you might remember me telling you now. Yes. The first time you attacked her, thinking you were yanking her away from a knife—hell—I don’t know, I’m just guessing that’s

what you were thinking. Maybe you thought she was the one doing the attacking.” He shrugged. “Either way, you didn’t stop until her father bashed his cane across your back.”

His brow furrowed. “Her father? Lord Orelin? What is he doing here?”

Callum motioned his head toward the door. “I’ll leave Daph to explain that one.”

Magnus nodded, his gaze going to the floor as he tried to slot into place all that had happened in the last days. “How long has it been since we were at the Filly?”

“Near a fortnight.”

Magnus winced. “That long?”

Unthreading his crossed arms, Callum pushed himself off the wall to stand in front of Magnus as his face went somber. “Before Daph gets back, you need to know—her sister died.”

His look snapped up to Callum. “What? Sasha died?”

Callum nodded. “The blade she took in the back hit her lung. It was slow.”

“Well...fuck.”

“Aye.”

Magnus closed his eyes, letting that fact sink into his brain so that it would stick in there. Already his mind felt clearer. Clean, not muddled and wrong like it had been, where he had to fight for every thought, fight for every memory.

His gaze lifted to Callum. “What was Daph doing in the other room?”

“Sleeping.”

“You got her to sleep?” His right eyebrow arched. “She’s...she’s been awake every time I’ve woken up.”

“Aye, and it’s been killing her.” Callum rubbed his jaw where Magnus had punched him. “So yeah, I got her to sleep.”

Magnus eyed him. “How did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Get her to listen to you.”

Callum chuckled, shrugging his shoulders. “She loves me.” His hand flew up, his palm to Magnus. “Wait, before you throw another fist. She loves

me like family, like a brother.”

Magnus’s lip curled into a snarl. “And? Tell me why I shouldn’t be slamming your head against the wall right now.”

“Well, one, you’re too weak to do so at the moment. Two, Daph will kill you if you tear those stitches anymore. And three, she doesn’t love me like her world depends on it. She doesn’t love me like she loves you.”

Words that made his breath catch in his throat. He looked up at Callum. Maybe the man wasn’t all bad. “Like her world depends on it?”

Callum rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Aye. Just like that.”

“Truly? Then why doesn’t she listen to me?”

Callum let out a sigh, his shoulders lifting. “Daphne has always been the oddest of yin and yang—she’s the strongest woman I know. But also the weakest. She loves fiercely, yet she doesn’t know how to be loved.”

“Then I fucking failed her.”

“I might agree.”

His glare ate into Callum. “Ass.”

“Aye. Yet you are the one she chose to set her heart upon, ill-advised or not. Though I will warn you, you just might have broken her in that scene with Bloodwater.”

Magnus winced, the memory of staring her down in that crypt, willing her to save herself and throw him to the jackals cutting into his chest. Never in his life had he been more desperate.

His voice cracked as he looked to Callum. “Broken her in a bad way or a good way?”

“I’d say her red-rimmed eyes are all the evidence you need. What you do with that...that’s up to you.”

Callum started to move toward the door, but then paused, looking out into the hallway, then looking back at him, his look murderous. “But you better make the right bloody decision about her or I will end the breath going into your lungs for good.”

With that cheery thought, Callum left the room.

{ Chapter 29 }

Daphne was silent as she came back into the room with needle and thread.

She'd passed Callum in the hallway and he grabbed her arms, stopping her as he leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Probably best if you sleep next to him from now on. You're all he wanted when his eyes opened."

She nodded, slightly stunned that Callum was saying anything at all. She'd half-wondered if he was hoping Magnus would die. Callum could hold a grudge like no one she'd ever known. And Magnus had been nothing but a thorn festering in his side since he came to Thorburn for her.

She nodded and moved on, entering the room and closing the door behind her. She'd moved Magnus to the main chamber of the townhouse with the larger bed days ago after he first woke.

A bigger bed for him, plus she didn't know that she'd ever bring herself to go back into the room where Sasha had died.

Magnus was still sitting on the side of the bed where she'd left him, his jaw set hard, like he was furiously trying to place everything around him. Everything that had happened.

He'd already peeled away the bandage from his shoulder and she set the needle and thread on the bed, then went to the bowl of water on the side table and wetted a wash cloth.

Callum had left a tumbler half full of brandy on the dresser, so she grabbed that and handed it to Magnus.

He swallowed it down in one long tip back of his head as she wiped away the fresh blood from his shoulder. A small favor—the wound had only pulled open on one end, not the whole way through.

He leaned forward and set the glass on the floor as she silently threaded the needle.

She set the curved metal tip to his skin. "Are you ready?"

"Aye."

His head turned, he watched as she quickly punctured through his

skin, setting five neat, even stitches into the flesh. Usually, she was quick and efficient at stitching skin, not bothered at all by it. Callum's skin. Even her own skin. Not so with Magnus.

With him, she had to fight to keep the tremble out of her hand.

To his credit, Magnus didn't flinch. Didn't blanch.

Pain was nothing to her husband.

Never mind that her own throat was lined with bile after every time she'd had to set needle to his skin.

She swiped clean the rest of the blood, then blew out her held breath as she sidestepped to the small table by the head of the bed and set the needle and wash cloth down.

Moving back to stand in front of him, she looked down to meet his dark blue eyes that were watching her closely—too closely.

He grabbed both of her hands, pulling her tight to him, his legs straddling the outer edges of her thighs as he stared up at her.

"I know about Sasha."

Hell.

Four simple words, said with such heartache on her behalf, they slammed into her chest and crushed her.

She crumbled, all the emotions that she'd held in check for the past fortnight barreling outward to every limb and turning her into a shaking, numb mess.

He didn't let her fall, immediately dropping her hands and grabbing her, pulling her onto his lap and holding her to his chest. Her tears finally broke free and flowed for what seemed like forever, soaking his bare chest, and his trousers below.

Her voice hiccupping, she tried to get words out. "Sh-she didn't f-fight—she didn't f-fight to stay here. The surgeon s-said she would l-live and y-you would not. But she...she just...gave up. While you—you fought."

His hand clamped onto her head, stroking her hair. "I had something to fight for. I had you."

"She had me as well."

"She did. She did." His head dropped down to hers and he kissed her brow. His voice had gone rough, hurting along with her. "But even if she knew it—and I'm sure she did—I don't think she wanted to fight death to live. She wanted to save you at the Filly, and she did. And then I think she

was done.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Daph, when she left Thorburn—she left on her own accord.” His fingers dug into her scalp, seemingly to hold her upright. “She begged me to let her go back with Margaret. She said her pain—her wounds were too deep. That they would never let her go.”

Her head shook, her breath barely able to make words. “I didn’t know—didn’t want to see how far she was gone. Didn’t want to see her pain.”

“Well, you love her—we never want to see destruction hanging over those we love.”

To that, she had to nod, her wet cheek rubbing against his chest. “My life—our lives—have never been charmed. But I thought...maybe...I hoped.”

“Ah, hell, Daph.” His lips landed on the top of her head, the pain in his voice reflecting the deep wound in her chest. “And hope couldn’t bring her back to you. It isn’t fair and it isn’t right and I am so damn sorry I haven’t been able to protect you from this pain.”

“I hope she is in a better place. A peaceful place.” She’d come to terms with it, days before it even happened. Sasha had wanted out of this life since well before Daphne had brought her to Thorburn. As much as Daphne had tried to stop it, there was no stopping it, and that was the hardest thing of all to accept.

She couldn’t save her sister.

Magnus’s right hand slipped down her back, rubbing. “But you tried. You tried so damn hard. I know it doesn’t help to soothe the pain, but you did that. You didn’t turn away from her and she knew that in the end.”

His left hand lifted, his fingers digging into her hair and kneading her scalp. Daphne curled into the warmth of him, the alive, vibrant heat that told her he was going to be fine. Finally, he was awake and his head was right.

And he had her.

All of the pain and angst of the last fortnight seeped out of body and her eyelids dipped lower and lower until she slipped into the most pleasant blackness, lacking pain and worry. Just calm.

When her eyes blinked open again, she knew she’d slept—slept for real for the first time in what seemed like forever.

All because the man currently underneath her on the bed had stretched her out and held her through it, his right arm still a solid clamp across her lower back.

Secure. Wanted. Loved.

He hadn't left her.

Her cheek stuck onto Magnus's bare chest, the faded tale of the serpent slowly waving at her with each breath her husband took.

She shifted her head along his skin, looking up at him.

His head was propped up on pillows and he wasn't sleeping. A soft smile played at his lips as he looked down at her.

"Hello, kitten." His thumb brushed a lock of hair out of where it had fallen across her right eye.

"Hello." She smiled at him. "Is it still dark?"

"Middle of the night."

"So I've been sleeping for hours?"

"About six, give or take."

"Did you sleep?"

"I have slept enough during the past fortnight to last me a good long while."

"You didn't leave."

"Move your body off of mine? That would be sacrilege. I'm not going anywhere, Daph."

She chuckled. "I'm glad you finally realize it." Her fingers moved up to trace his jawline. "So what have you been doing?"

He gave a half shrug. "Contemplating how lucky I am."

"For living?"

"For having you." The blue in his eyes sparked fiercely, warmth and kindness filling his irises as he looked at her.

Not the innocent kindness that she had seen years ago, but a wise, battle-worn kindness that only entered one's eyes after dancing with death and living through it.

A kindness she was instantly in love with.

Now would probably be a good time to tell him.

Setting her forearms onto the bed on either side of his chest, she propped herself up slightly so she could fully see his face. "I have something else I need to tell you."

He stilled, concern etching into the lines webbing out from his eyes.
“Bad?”

She shook her head. “That heir you requested of me?”

His eyes went wide, his body tensing under her.

“He is on his way.” She cocked her head to the side. “Unless he is a she, in which case, she will be delightful, but cannot take on the title so we’ll need to try again.”

He laughed, low and hearty and full of hope for the future as he squeezed her tight, then rolled them both, his face hovering above hers. “And again, and again, and again, and again until I have an heir and a slew of daughters that I’ll need to protect from ridiculously pompous suitors that will do them no good.”

She chuckled, setting her palms on his chest. “If we have girls, you do realize you will need to eventually let them fall in love.”

“Love? Never.” He dropped his head until his lips found her neck.
“Love drives people mad.”

“Are you mad?”

He kissed his way up her neck. “To bedlam and back. And every second of it has been worth it.” He pulled away, flipping onto his back, a sudden conniving scowl crawling across his features. “But I’m thinking arranged marriages. Maybe we can enlist Hector’s help.”

She laughed, flopping herself onto his chest and pinning him down.
“Don’t you dare say that—ever. Hector isn’t to come within twenty paces of my daughters—or my sons.”

“And what of Callum?”

She smirked, shaking her head. “Callum will be here so much that he will be Uncle Callum. He will probably be more protective of them than you.”

“And we explain that how?”

“We will tell them Uncle Callum overly worries because he has lived an adventuresome life, much like their father—”

“And mother—”

“And they never need to know more than that.”

He laughed, grabbing her body and dragging her down onto him, holding her tight and lying in silence for several long minutes.

His fingers suddenly tapped onto her back. “We are going to teach

them defensive skills, though, right?”

“Hell, yes.” She used her nod to snuggle deeper into his chest, her left hand running up along the hard muscles on his arm. “And how to use a dagger. And a sword.”

“Probably pistols as well.”

“And how to snap a neck. Kick out kneecaps. Properly smash ballocks for maximum pain.” She shook her head. “I don’t know how those things could possibly come in handy for them, but I feel like they should have the skills. Safety sake and all.” She looked up at him.

“Agreed.” He smiled at her and in the twinkle in his blue irises, she recognized what she had seen in his eyes the very first time she had seen him. The very thing that had stopped her cold.

She saw the world. Her world. The future.

A future that was finally hers.

Her voice choked. “Agreed.”

{ Epilogue }

Flat on his belly, Magnus crawled through the tall reeds that lined the edge of the water.

Hidden. Slow. Silent.

Stealth was key.

Prey in front of him, he stretched out his right fingers slowly, ready to pounce.

A hand shot out in front of his, cutting him off, snatching the bright green frog right before he caught it.

“I beat you, Papa. I beat you.” The high pitch voice reached his ears and he popped upright at the side of the bathing pond.

He found her, two feet to his left, her dark pigtails bobbing against the reeds as little Sasha scrambled to her feet, holding her frog-holding hand high above her head.

“Sash, I didn’t even know you were there.”

He did.

But it drew the wildest laugh from his little girl and that was the whole point.

He motioned toward the grassy area just beyond the reeds. “Let’s get it in the bucket.”

Laughter still chiming from her lips, Sasha weaved her way through the reeds to the grass and plopped the frog into the water at the bottom of the bucket.

He followed her, picking up the paper and pencil that sat next to the bucket and he dropped to his knees. “That was an admirable catch, my sweet melon.”

Her eyes on the frog swimming about the water in the bucket, she glanced up at him, her face beaming.

He lifted the paper and pencil to her. “We only keep them to record what we know about them, right?”

“Right.” She spun on her knees and wiped her frog-slimed hands

onto the grass, then grabbed the paper and pencil from him, her eyes turning inquisitive as she ducked her head over the top of the bucket.

He glanced down at the frog. “What do you see on this one?”

She considered it for a long moment. She had an incredibly logical brain and loved this part of frog-catching. “Lots of spots. Lots and lots. They look yellow.”

“Good.” Magnus nodded as she put checkmarks under the spots and yellow categories she had written on the paper in her big crooked letters. “What else?”

“The green is bright. It matches mama’s eyes.”

Magnus shot a look to Daphne sitting halfway around the bathing pond by the pavilion they’d had built to replace the crumbling boathouse. “That they do.” His finger bopped onto her freckled nose. “Yours as well.”

She nodded, her stare going back onto the frog, studying it as it swam around the skim of water at the bottom of the bucket. “Except my eyes have blue flecks in them instead of gold ones. Mama says it’s blue from you.”

“It is, sprite.” He tousled her hair, which was already half falling out of the ribbons holding her pigtails up. He wasn’t as good as Daphne at pulling her hair into the ribbons, but he tried. “Anything else you see about the frog?”

She pointed with the pencil into the bucket. “This one has longer legs than most—look how they spread. And the toes.” She bent down close to the bucket. “It has one, two, three, four, five toes.”

“How about on the front legs?”

Her lips mouthing the words, she counted silently. “Four?” She looked up at him for confirmation.

He nodded. “Sounds exactly right.”

“Why are they different?”

His shoulders lifted with a curious smile. “Why not?”

That made her pause and her brow furrowed, her lips pulling tight in concentration. He could swear he was looking at a mirror. She looked like him only when she was concentrating hard. The rest of the time she looked exactly like Daphne.

“Maybe because they sucked off their thumbs like Alfie will?”

He laughed. “Maybe.”

She looked down at the frog. “Do you think it’s hungry?”

“Probably.”

“Can I catch a bug for it? I want to see what its tongue looks like. Then we can look at the book in the library to see if it has a name.”

“Sounds like a great plan.” He took the pencil and her scientific notes from her. “Why don’t I bring the bucket over to show your sister while you catch the bug. Then you both can see the tongue. Maybe try to catch a couple different kinds of bugs. You never know what a green frog like this would like to eat.”

She nodded, her green eyes darting about, a serious hunt on her face as she started to crawl along the edges of the reeds on this side of the bathing pond, shaking the stalks to see if bugs would fly up for her.

Magnus picked up the bucket and started the walk around the pond to the rest of his family.

Family.

The word struck him in that instant. Struck him deep in his chest, where his soul and all his dreams and hopes dared to live.

This was what he had always longed for, had been building with Daphne for the last five years.

Family.

It was his. To protect and enjoy, but most of all to love.

And it all came down to the woman he was walking toward.

Daphne sat in a wicker chair next to the table at the edge of the pavilion they’d had built at the bathing pond soon after Sasha was born. The pond had been refilled and the surrounding growth under control once more, and it had become his favorite place in the world—an idyllic spot to escape to in the summer, and they tried to spend a portion of every sunny day here at the pond.

His wife had correspondence spread across the table, a quill and ink set out, her eyes and right hand busy as she cradled their five-month-old son to her breast. That boy loved to eat.

Daphne had refused a wet nurse for all of their babes, and he’d learned that her perfect breasts were even more perfect in the constantly varying sizes they’d been during the last five years.

A grin spread across his wife’s face as he drew closer, and she shifted Alfie from her chest, settling his head over her shoulder as she pulled

her dress into place over her breast. “What have you got in the bucket, dear husband?”

“Papa, what is it?” Astrid poked her head out from behind Daphne’s chair where she had been sitting on the grass, pencil in hand, drawing lines and scribbles on a piece of vellum. Their two-and-a-half-year-old had been napping in the pavilion when he’d arrived with the bucket they had forgotten at the stables and was about to be most irate with him and Sasha for hunting frogs without her.

He lifted the bucket to her. “Your sister caught the most beautiful green one, Azzie. You must come and see.”

Astrid popped up onto her feet and ran over to him, her legs faster than her body, and she crashed into him, almost hitting the ground if not for his quick hand under her belly.

She laughed, gripping the sides of the bucket and peering in. “Pretty.”

“It is that.”

“Azzie, Azzie, Azzie, I have a bug. I have a bug.” Sasha came running from the side of the pond, waving her arms in the air with her hands clasped together.

“Why don’t you help your sister feed the frog.” He leaned over to kiss Astrid’s mussed curls as Sasha plopped down onto her knees next to the bucket.

Giggling, the girls tried to coax the bug off of Sasha’s hands and onto the inside of the bucket in front of the frog.

Magnus stepped the last few feet over to his wife. His hand swept across Alfie’s head as he leaned down to kiss Daphne.

The smile hadn’t budged from her face as she looked up at him. “She’s getting quicker, isn’t she?”

“Quicker than me.” He chuckled, setting the paper and pencil down onto the table and taking the seat next to her, his eyes on his girls. “I honestly didn’t think her hands would be faster than mine with this one.”

Daphne chuckled and pointed to the papers strewn about the table. “Well then, it is a good thing Uncle Callum is coming. The girls love how fast he is with the frogs.”

“That oaf is not faster than me.” He bristled, even though he knew she was needling him. “The girls just let him catch the toads because they

think they're more his speed."

Daphne laughed, shaking her head. "He is not an oaf."

"He knows I call him an oaf with love in my heart." He flicked his head toward the letter on the table from Callum. "When is he coming?"

"Next week."

Magnus nodded. "Good. It's been a while. The girls miss crawling all over him."

"Exactly why you should have lots of love for him in your heart. You know every time he comes, he ends up entertaining the girls for hours on end." Her eyes sparkled mischievous, her look turning downright carnal at him. "And you know what that means."

Bloody hell woman.

His shaft jumped to life. Damn that just the mere mention of having his wife alone for a few hours sent all the blood in his body straight to his cock and bullocks. Hours. Hours that he could capture her out here in the pavilion, using every one of the surfaces inside the building to trap her naked body against. And then to nap with her clamped over his body—pure heaven. One thing in life he would never tire of, making sure he was by her side each and every time she woke up. All of her drowsy blinks his to hold till kingdom come.

Callum couldn't visit soon enough.

He groaned, his head tilting back, his eyes to the blue skies above. "Can he get here any earlier?"

Her eyes dipped down to the tightness in his crotch and she laughed, wicked. "Or if we tire the girls out today, I bet they'll go to bed early tonight."

His look dropped to her, serious. "I think I'll have them run back to the abbey. That should exhaust them."

She laughed.

He heaved a sigh, trying to get control of his cock before it started throbbing in pain. "Anything else of note?" His fingers flicked over the papers.

"Just this." She picked up a letter, handing him the delicate parchment. "Which is of particular interest."

He unfolded the letter, scanning the swooping wide script that took up the full of the page.

“Well, damn.” His eyebrows lifted. “She is doing it.”

Daphne nodded, her hand curling around the back of Alfie’s sleeping head as she kissed the fuzz atop his crown. “Yes, and I am happy for her.”

“I just never thought Margaret would give it up—all of her independence—all her girls at the Filly.”

After Bloodwater had died, it had been at Daphne’s insistence that he’d even gotten involved in helping Margaret. Daphne knew well the life in a whorehouse and what it took to survive one. She never faulted Margaret for doing what she had to in order to survive.

That Margaret had helped to save them from Bloodwater was all Daphne had needed to know in order to embrace his past love. And what she wanted for her new friend was for Margaret to have control of her own life.

Layers—his wife had a thousand of them.

They had both been surprised when Margaret hadn’t wanted to leave the life, all that she had created at the Fashionable Filly and the love and loyalty of all the women. It had been Daphne that had suggested they buy the building for Margaret and present her with enough seed money to run the Filly as she saw fit. Margaret had hired some exemplary guards for the women, and the Filly had become one of the premiere brothels in the city.

So it had been a surprise when Margaret had met a man from America that had made his fortune in beaver pelts. The man had fallen hopelessly in love with Margaret and had been trying to convince her to marry him for the last two years.

Daphne winked at Magnus. “Love will do that. The wedding is in a month and a half.”

He pointed to the letter already written and sealed with Margaret’s name on it. “We are attending?”

“Of course we are. I told her we would be in London in a month so I could help her with any arrangements she needs help with.”

Magnus nodded, his heart swelling with pride at his wife.

It was odd, the friendship that his wife had struck up with Margaret, but he didn’t question it. Daphne’s heart, for as much as she had always tried to keep it a secret, was a magnet for people. She understood strife and hardship because she’d lived it herself, so could meet anyone in the place that they were at without judgement.

Including a hate-filled, vengeance-ridden man that was looking for

death, that she'd turned into a man with hope, love, and purpose.

A squeal came from the girls in unison. "He ate it. He ate it. He ate it," Sasha yelled.

Astrid laughed, clapping her hands. They both scurried off to the grass along the pond's edge to find more bugs.

Magnus kept a solid eye on them, his legs coiled in case he needed to run and intervene. Sasha had remarkable balance, but Astrid was another story.

It didn't take long before Astrid caught a bug between her hands and Sasha quickly came over to her, holding her hands over her sister's so the bug didn't escape as they awkwardly scurried back to the bucket with their hands twisting in between them.

"Mama, Mama, come see. Come see the tongue," Sasha called out.

Daphne smiled and Magnus shot to his feet, aching to take his sleeping boy for his own. He knew Daphne loved it when the babes were sound asleep on her chest, so he rarely interrupted. But the truth was, he loved it just as much. Maybe even more. He just didn't have the milk-filled breasts that allowed the milk-drunk haze to set in like she did.

She carefully extracted Alfie from the slope of her torso and slid him onto Magnus's chest.

A slight hiccup in the babe's sleep, and then his thumb slipped back into his mouth, his body calming.

Moving as little as possible, Magnus sat, leaning back in the chair and stretching his legs out long in front of him as Daphne hurried to the frog bucket.

His wife, his girls in front of him.

His boy asleep on his chest.

He knew what this was washing over him.

He'd had to get accustomed to it at first, years ago when it had first happened.

And now it was a daily occurrence if he was lucky, yet he still marveled at it each and every time, ever grateful for it.

Peace.

All thanks to one moment deemed by fate. Fate, that he imagined was still laughing at him, a smile wide on her face.

* * *

Oooo, I'm so excited to dig in and write Calum's story next! I may be spinning this one off onto a new series, be sure to sign up for my [VIP List](#) to get release news. I'm pretty sure it's going to be a doozy!

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Thank you for allowing my stories into your life and time—it is always an honor!

~ K.J. Jackson

<http://www.kjjackson.com>