


BLADE OF SHADOWS
BOOK 2

A central skull is the focal point, surrounded by several golden roses. The entire scene is framed by intricate, golden, ornate scrollwork and floral patterns. The background is dark, and there is a subtle mist or smoke effect around the skull and roses. The text is overlaid on this scene.

DARKNESS
OF
TIME

SARA SAMUELS

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*“We are heros. We are villians. We are monsters. Come closer,
dear reader. Fear not. Let me
ignite the path that you may choose.”*

CHAPTER ONE



Olivia

Waking up next to a dried human corpse in a lush, green forest wasn't how I liked to start my morning. Especially when the corpse was dressed in a torn, blood-stained blue wool jacket, white breeches, black shoes, and a black, taco-shaped, bicorn hat like a soldier. His parched skin was stretched tight to his bones in a gruesome leer.

I jack-knifed to my feet with a screech and stared in horror at the deceased body beside me.

The cadaver stared back at me with lifeless eyes sunk deep into his skull.

Were any other bodies about?

My dagger lay in the leaves near where I'd landed from my time travel in ancient Rome. I snatched it up, sheathed it on the thigh opposite to where my Glock sat, and scrambled backward from the dead man, keeping watch for branches and logs. Wherever I'd landed was so not Rome. And my two time-traveling companions, Roman Alexander, the love of my life, and Marcellious Demarrias, Roman's sworn enemy, were nowhere in sight.

"Roman!" I called, cupping my hands around my mouth.
"*Roman!*"

Not a sound.

"Marcellious!"

Nothing but the whoosh of wind to leaves met my ears. I stopped yelling, trying to catch my bearings, surrounded by thick, abundant trees. The quietude gave way to the resumed twittering of songbirds and other forest dwellers rustling through the branches. My heart galloped in excitement. This forest reminded me of the Cougar Mountain region where my father and Lee had lived when I'd left them.

Could I have returned home?

I stumbled through the underbrush toward the rushing sounds of water. Pushing aside a branch, I encountered a waterfall I'd never seen before. The waterfall tumbled from a kind of stone that I knew from Washington State. And the trees differed from the forest where Lee and Papa lived. Instead of the fir and cedar trees, here I stood amid oak-hickory and pine.

No, this was not near my home—or in the same century if the dead guy's attire was any indication.

I spun in a circle, scanning for signs of my companions.

“Roman? Marcellious!”

Still a big fat nothing.

Panic wound its way around my windpipe, strangling my voice. Where could they be? Did I leave them in Rome? Were they now dead in the Colosseum? Or what if I did everything wrong? What if I messed up on the daggers and switched them with each other? I'd probably made the biggest mistake of my life by time-traveling us all together, and now they are nowhere to be seen.

My mind began to fog over from fear. This wasn't good. What had Lee taught me? Panic led to pain and peril. I had to get a grip and move logically if I wanted to find Roman and survive. If Roman was in this century, I'd find him. I just needed a plan.

First, I had to figure out where I had landed.

I retraced my steps back to where I'd awoken. As disgusting as it sounded, I had to search the dead guy for supplies. The only things I had brought from Rome were the clothes on my body—a long linen stola and sandals. And, of

course, my weapons. Depending on what century I was in, having different clothes might be the difference between life and death.

Flies buzzed around the body as I rolled it to its side. I had to swallow back the bile that shot into the back of my throat.

A cloth haversack wound around the guy's back. I gingerly picked open the bag and looked inside. A simple metal cup and pewter plate and the oddest pocketknife lay inside. The handle, elaborately painted with roses, looked fashioned of bone and shaped into a woman's shin and dainty, booted foot. It folded neatly over the blade.

I glanced at Dead Guy. It had probably been a keepsake from his wife, meant to comfort him on long cold nights.

Poor guy. Poor wife. She probably doesn't know he's dead.

Further digging in the sack revealed a three-tine metal fork, a knife, a hard biscuit, and some kind of dried meat wrapped in canvas. I removed the food and sniffed it for signs of spoilage. It didn't smell foul, so I stuck it back in the bag and maneuvered the cloth rucksack from Dead Guy's body.

A round, wood cheese-box-type canteen also hung around his lifeless form. I took that, too.

Mosquitoes were already eating me alive. While I didn't think donning the military jacket was a good idea, I might do well to remove the corpse's shirt. And maybe his pants. Definitely his boots.

I took a deep breath to gather courage. Then, I rolled Dead Guy back and forth to get off the bloody shirt. I could wash it in the creek below the waterfall. The boots and pants were next.

I searched around for anything else useful. If Dead Guy had possessed weapons, or even ammunition, whoever had killed him had likely taken it. So, I threw the haversack across my shoulders, held the clothes at arm's length, and trekked back to the waterfall.

R.I.P. Dead Guy. And thanks for the food and clothing.

I scrubbed the pants and shirts at the river below the falls, rubbing them against the rocks to free them from blood and Dead Guy's stank. Then, I laid them over branches to dry in the sun. I also emptied the dregs of the canteen and refilled it with fresh water.

When I was growing up under Moon Lee's tutelage, besides fighting, he'd taught me survival skills, taking me into the woods and leaving me alone for days. I knew I'd need to find water and make a shelter. I'd also learned to light a fire by friction, monitor the birds' sound for signs of disturbance, and other valuable skills.

Right now, the birds were contentedly living their lives.

Which meant neither Roman nor Marcellious was lumbering through the woods. At least not anywhere close to me...

I crouched by the water to give myself time to think, get oriented, and form a plan. And for the shirt to dry so I could wear it.

Time travel did a significant twist to one's mind. A year ago, I'd lived in Seattle, Washington, in the 21st century. On a fateful day, I'd learned I was a so-called Timeborne. Then, later that same day, I was transported to ancient Rome by my mentor Moon Lee. I'd met the love of my life in Rome, Roman Alexander, a gladiator and Praetorian guard to the emperor. I'd also met his sworn enemy, Praetorian Marcellious Demarrias, whom I believed to be Roman's fraternal twin.

Now I was here, wherever the hell *here* was.

How could I be in one time and place and then in another without knowing where I was or what century I was in? It was like dying and being reborn as an adult. So darn freaky... And I didn't have the benefit of growing up in whatever culture I was in; no parents or loved ones to guide me. If Roman were here, we'd figure it out together. But I had no idea where he was.

Fingers of despair squeezed down hard on my heart at the thought of losing him. What had I done wrong? In Rome a

short time ago, I'd said the sacred words, tossed Marcellious and Roman their daggers, and then... I'd disappeared, but what had happened to them?

I'd thought I'd be so noble in reuniting two brothers, but I'd only managed to lose both and transport myself to who knew where.

Before I could slide too far into doubt and self-pity, I rose and checked the clothes. They were damp but tolerable. I pulled the sturdy off-white shirt over my head and tugged it into place around my stola. Then, I removed my sandals and donned Dead Guy's boots. They were a little big, but they'd suffice in protecting my feet. I tucked the coat and pants into the haversack strap and took off downstream.

I trekked until I came to a road winding through the trees. A distant horse's whinny and the clopping sound of hooves had me sliding behind a tree for cover.

Several wagons rolled toward my hiding place, accompanied by men dressed in the same attire as Dead Guy. They must be American soldiers.

I scanned my memory for history courses I'd taken, but sadly, the types of uniforms men wore back in the day hadn't made the cut by my brain. In truth, I hadn't paid too much attention to American history. I only knew the Americans wore blue. But from what century? The 1700s? The 1800s?

Shrinking behind the tree, I kept my ears cocked as the wagons creaked and groaned past.

Several men spoke in a distinctly Southern drawl, like that of Kentucky or Missouri.

The horse-drawn carts and soldiers thinned down to a few stragglers at the end. One of the remaining carriages held a man, appearing in his late fifties, dressed in a simple white shirt and gray woolen pants. Grim-faced, staring out with vacant eyes, he didn't look like a soldier. He looked like more of a captive.

But the last coach held a sight that wrenched my heart.

Two women in their twenties were tied to the wagon and forced to trot behind it. Their high-waisted, sage-green dresses were filthy with grime and torn in places. Both women were crying.

I let out a sigh. Why did I always find myself in situations like this? When I'd lived in Seattle, I'd trained women and kids to defend themselves from harm. Since I'd lost my mother early on to something I now knew as "the darkness," I vowed to help people fight for their lives if needed.

In Rome, I'd trained a young guy named Anthony to fight off his mother's lover, who happened to be Marcellious.

When someone was in need, I simply couldn't help but defend them. And these two young women were clearly in need.

Five soldiers marched behind, in front, and to the sides of the wagons with the women and the man.

I had sixteen bullets left in my gun. I removed my weapon from my thigh, took aim, peeked around the tree trunk, and shot the soldier in the rear through the head.

He flew backward, falling to the ground in a spray of blood and brain matter.

The young women screamed.

His companion lifted his rifle and aimed in my direction. I stayed crouched, out of sight.

I took him down next. Now I only had fourteen bullets. I sheathed my gun at my thigh and thundered out of the trees to remove the remaining three guards. I dispatched them with kicks to the head, face, and belly using my martial arts skills—except my movements were slow and sloppy. It had been a long time since I'd trained, and it showed.

Several soldiers raced toward me.

Two held their rifles aloft, aimed at my head.

"Well, well, who do we have here?" the shortest of the two drawled. "Looks like this woman wants to be a savior today and save this poor family. Who the hell are you?"

His barrel chest puffed out as if he were in charge. A mop of greasy, dirt-colored hair hung beneath his bicorn hat.

“Nobody you’d know,” I said, my hands in the air.

“Are you with them?” He swung his rifle at the man and the two women.

“No.”

“You are now.” He motioned to the other soldier who trained his rifle at me. “Rusty, tie her up with those two.”

Rusty, the taller soldier, shoved me toward the back of the wagon.

I considered taking these two out, but since eight more gun-toting men glared at me from a short distance, I thought better of it.

Rusty removed a rope from the back of the wagon and used it to tie my wrists behind me. Then, he cinched the middle of a sisal sash around my waist, the same as had been done to the two other women, and secured it to the wagon.

The two captives trained their gazes on me with wide, fearful eyes.

“What in thearnation are you doing with an American soldier’s belongings?” Rusty said, indicating the haversack, the canteen, and the coat and pants. His face was covered with dark scruff, and he peered at me with beady gray eyes.

I faced him directly. “I took them off a dead man. Figured he had no use for them, so....”

I shrugged.

“Did you kill him, too?” He spat out a long stream of brown spittle, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“No, sir, I did not. My family is all dead. Shot through the head by the British,” I lied. “I was wandering through the woods looking for shelter and came upon him.”

He narrowed his eyes as he considered my story. Then, with a grunt, he waved to one of the wagon drivers and said, “Head on out. We’ve got the situation under control.”

As he fell behind us with the other guy, I was jerked along by the creaking wagon.

I glanced at my companions and smiled.

One of them, the taller of the two women, was a striking beauty with long, golden hair the color of a wheat field. With bow-shaped ruby-colored lips, sapphire eyes, and a heart-shaped face, she'd be on the cover of a magazine in the 21st century. Only now, her hair hung unkempt and unruly around her dirty face.

The other, who looked much younger, bore a sullen face with pouty lips. Her unruly blond hair bounced around her head in ringlets. The lines between her forehead and her pinched expression hinted at her misery.

The taller woman glanced at me, positioning herself between the shorter woman and me. Then, she looked over her shoulder at Rusty and the other soldier.

I did, too.

The two men were chatting and laughing about something.

I didn't see any reason to be in a good mood.

"My name's Emily. This is my younger sister Charlotte," she whisper-hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

"I'm Olivia," I whispered.

"Why'd you try to help us? You only got yourself in worse trouble," Emily said.

"Is there a problem up there?" Rusty called.

"No, sir," Emily said.

"Then shut yer damn mouths," he called.

Emily and I stayed quiet as the late-day sun beat down on my head. I grew hot and sticky beneath the long-sleeved shirt and long stola. As I walked, I thought of Roman.

Where are you? Give me a sign that you're wherever I am. Are you in a vast forest, too?

I knew it was foolish to be trying to connect with him psychically. For all I knew, he could have landed in Egypt in 1332 BC at Tutankhamun's temple, a Shinto shrine in ancient Japan, or some other random place. Roman had told me that the dagger was said to guide its user to where they were needed. Why on Earth would I be required here? And why wouldn't Roman, at least, have been sent here, too?

These thoughts weighed me down, making my legs heavy and lethargic.

We tromped along until the soldiers behind us started talking and laughing again.

"The man in that wagon ahead is my father," Emily whispered.

"Oh," I said, yanked from my thoughts.

"They've accused him of a lot of bad things. Horrible things." Emily's voice drifted as if caught in a web of sad memories. "I know he didn't do those things."

"I see," I said, once again thinking of Roman. In Rome, Roman had killed for a living. It was what he had to do under the emperor's employ. Sometimes people did terrible things, but it didn't mean they were intrinsically evil.

I glanced over my shoulder again at the two soldiers.

Rusty caught my eye and leered at me. He grabbed his crotch, thrust his hips, then leaned over to say something to Short Guy.

Both of them threw back their heads and howled with laughter.

Don't even think of trying anything with me, boys, or your nuts will be shoved down your throats.

I faced ahead and continued to be yanked along.

The deep ruts and potholes in the road were like grooves of wagon wheels. The road was probably shaped by last season's rains and left to dry in the summer heat. To my left lay the forest. To the right, the river tumbled over rocks and streamed through deeper channels. I continually looked for signs of

Roman or Marcellious, hoping to find them lurking in the woods.

“So, why did you do it? Why did you try to save us? You don’t even know us,” Emily whispered.

“I had to protect you. I can’t stand seeing men take advantage of women,” I whispered, looking straight ahead. “What kinds of bad things did your father do?”

Out of the corner of my eye, Emily cast her gaze to the ground. “I can’t tell you. They’ve accused my father of nasty things. These men—they want our heads.”

I preferred keeping my head right where it was. “Where are we? What is this war that’s being fought?”

“Don’t you know?”

I glanced at Emily’s pinched expression. “I was, uh... When my family was shot by British soldiers, I, uh... I hit my head, and I’m a bit confused.”

Emily’s eyes filled with unshed tears. “Oh, you poor thing. You lost your family?”

“Every one of them.” At least it wasn’t a lie. I had lost everyone. While living in Seattle, I watched my ex-boyfriend kill Papa before I was transported to Rome. Mom was killed by the darkness when I was ten. And Lee... Lee was the one who sent me time traveling. *And now I’ve lost the love of my life.*

My throat choked up, strangled by emotion.

“Oh, dear,” Emily said with a snuffle. “And now you’ve risked your life to save us for no good reason. My father—they think he was selling weapons. This is the War of 1812. We’ve been on the road for a week, heading north. I don’t know what will happen there, but I’m pretty sure they plan on killing us all.”

My heart sank. Could it be I escaped Rome only to meet my death here in the States?

Footsteps barreled toward us from behind.

Rusty grabbed a handful of Emily's hair and yanked her head back.

"Ow!" Emily cried out.

The young woman next to her cried out.

"It's alright, Charlotte, hush," Emily whimpered.

Rusty got close to Emily's face and snarled, "What did I tell you about chatting it up, huh? Didn't I tell you to be quiet?"

"Yes, sir," she said in a trembling voice.

He took a long sniff. "Oh, you smell mighty good, sweetness."

Emily whimpered.

I wanted to kill him. "Leave her alone. If you want to mess with someone, mess with me."

"Is that so?" Rusty said.

"Rusty!" Short Guy snapped. "Knock it off. Get back here. You've made your point."

"I'll see you later," Rusty said to Emily. "We'll be at camp real soon."

When Rusty returned to be with Short Guy, Emily whispered, "Thank you for being my saving angel—but we're all headed for our deaths."

"Shh," I hissed.

Some saving angel. I was all alone in Missouri amid the War of 1812. I couldn't find Roman. I couldn't find Marcellious.

If the dagger had sent me here, what on Earth did it want me to see?

CHAPTER TWO



Roman

Blasting through the atmosphere of some strange realm known only to time travelers, I dropped with an unceremonious thud on top of another body.

The body loudly grunted, and then the arms and legs flailed, kicking me, shoving me away from him.

“Get the fuck off of me,” the man shouted.

I blinked, clearing my gaze, and came face to face with Marcellious Demarrias.

“You!” I snarled, scrambling away from him.

I last remembered standing over Marcellious in the Colosseum in Rome, about to slice his head from his torso.

Where’s my knife? I’ve got to find my knife. I need a weapon to finish him off.

I cast my gaze wildly, looking for my dagger, a sword, anything.

That was when I realized I was in the middle of a forest somewhere. The hilt of my time-traveling dagger protruded from beneath soft dirt and leaves.

I lunged for it, snatching it into my palm, and lowered into a crouch, facing Marcellious. “Where’s Olivia?”

I whipped my head side to side, searching for my heart, my beautiful flame, my reason for existence.

Did she make it here with me? What if I lost her?

My heart began to crack.

“How the fuck should I know?” Marcellious grunted as he pushed to stand. “Where the fuck are we? If I’m dreaming, why am I dreaming about *you*?”

Blood streaked his torso where I’d landed blows and gashes from my sword a short time ago.

At least, I thought it was a short time ago. The memory of fighting to the death in the arena felt fresh and recent.

I remembered looking up at Olivia from the sand-covered arena floor.

“Roman, stop!” she’d cried. “He’s your brother.”

Was she right? Was this loathsome man who’d been my sworn enemy in Rome really related to me? Had he been the twin brother I’d longed for? We looked nothing alike. And yet, how could he have traveled if he wasn’t a Timeborne?

My questions crowded up against one another in my mind, creating a pile of confusion.

Think, Roman, think. What was the first thing I did when I landed in Rome?

Find a way to survive.

The woods stirred some vague memory just out of consciousness. This was definitely not Rome, but what century were we in? What part of the world?

Behind me, violent retching noises came from where I’d left Marcellious. The man was in worse shape than I was. *Good*. He could vomit himself to death as far as I was concerned.

I turned in a slow circle, hearing bird songs and the distant sound of a running river or a creek. We were surrounded by deciduous trees and a few evergreens.

Where the hell are we?

Marcellious let out a grunting, wheezing sort of noise.

I whipped around as he charged at me, head down, like a mad bull. I tried to step out of his path, but he still clipped my side. We tumbled to the ground.

He only managed to land a few feeble blows on my face before I rolled him over. I pinned him to the forest floor by his scraped and bruised arms.

“Stop fighting, Marcellious. We’re not in Rome any longer.”

“I don’t care where we are. I want you dead.” His face was an ugly grimace. He writhed against me but didn’t have the strength to accomplish anything. “What did your little bitch do? Why are we here?”

I hauled back and punched him. “You will *not* refer to Olivia that way.”

Marcellious spat blood from his mouth. “Is calling her your *whore* better? What the fuck did she do to get us out of Rome?”

I cocked my arm back, ready to slug him again, but I thought better. Endless fighting would never get us anywhere.

I crawled off him and placed my sandal-clad foot on his bare chest. “We can’t afford to keep arguing. We’ve got to figure out where we are and how we’ll survive since we’re obviously far away from Rome.”

Marcellious tugged at my foot, intending to throw me off balance. But he’d lost too much blood and sustained too many injuries to even wrestle with a cat.

In truth, I wasn’t much better—he’d managed to carve me up with some nasty gashes.

“Would you just shut up? We have to figure this out. How is it you can time travel?” I glared down at him.

“How is it *you* can time travel?” he countered.

The glint of a blade peeked out from under some leaves. I removed my foot from Marcellious, strode to it, and picked it up. It was the other time-traveling dagger—the one I thought belonged to Marcus, my former best friend whom I’d been

forced to kill. The same man I'd thought to be my real twin. But, if this was Marcus' blade, it wouldn't have worked on casting Marcellious to another place. The daggers of the Timeborne came into existence when we were born. To my knowledge, each blade was unique to us.

Marcellious uttered another strangled cry, scrambled from the ground, and lunged at the knife.

I held it out of reach, pushing him back with my other arm.

He lost his footing and fell back.

"Give that to me," he bellowed, struggling to get back up. His movements were clumsy and awkward when he got to his feet and hustled toward me. "Where did you get that? In Rome, I mean."

"It looks like the one Olivia and I found in my prison cell. It had been tucked inside a hiding hole carved in the stone." I held it high over my head.

"It's mine! That used to be my cell in the hypogeum. Give it to me." He summoned his strength and leaped at me, knocking the blade to the ground. He raced toward it and snatched it up. "Now I'm going to kill you."

He lunged toward me and slashed the air.

With an exasperated growl, I caught his wrist and wrenched the weapon from his hand. "Stop! Look, you're weak. We can't afford to keep fighting like this. I want to find Olivia and sort things out—like where the hell we are and what we will do to survive."

"What makes you think she's here?" Marcellious spat out more bloody phlegm.

"Because she's a Timeborne, asshole. She's the one who got us here."

Marcellious' gaze turned flinty. "The fuck you say?"

A loud crack came from my left, followed by another.

"Keep quiet!" I whispered.

I crept toward the sound and hid behind a tree.

Marcellious did the same, disappearing behind a tree next to me.

“Fuck,” he hissed as a half-dozen soldiers came into sight. They led a donkey laden with supplies.

I silently groaned—they looked to be American soldiers, dressed similarly as when I was fighting in the Revolutionary War in the Americas. There were some differences, but they looked eerily similar. Which meant...

We’ve been cast somewhere close to when and where I left before landing in Rome. And we’re dressed only in loincloths, our hair long and unkempt. They’re going to think we look savage.

Idiot that he was, Marcellious hissed, “Give me back my knife. I need to defend myself.”

The soldiers paused, heads cocked.

I gestured to Marcellious to keep quiet.

Dumb fuck that he was; he leaped out from behind the tree and attempted to wrench the blade from my hand. I shoved him away from me. He pushed me so hard my back slammed against a gnarled tree trunk. I let out a loud groan, dropping the knife.

Marcellious swooped up the dagger. “Got it!”

“Indians!” one of the soldiers cried. “Get them!”

And there was the confirmation—the cry had come in perfect American English, a language I hadn’t spoken in a long time.

“Whatever you do, don’t attack them. Let me talk to them,” I hissed at Marcellious, still in the ancient Latin we used in Rome.

Before I’d even turned to address the soldiers, we were surrounded by four muskets trained at our heads. The fifth guy kept hold of the donkey’s lead rope.

We both put our hands up, but I was the one who spoke. “Don’t shoot. We were attacked and barely managed to escape.

This war, you know? It's been brutal, and we only wanted to escape it. We got drunk, dipped in the river, and lost our clothes."

I swept my arm up and down my bloody body like that explained everything.

"You look like Indians," one of them said, "but you don't sound like Indians. Who are you?"

My mind scrambled for a plausible explanation. "Soldiers like you."

Another guy said, "We don't wear no skirts. Not ever."

He pointed at my loincloth.

I didn't know what to say to that.

Without warning, Marcellious leaped at one of the soldiers, caught him off guard, and slit his neck. The young soldier slumped to the ground, blood spurting from the gash in his neck.

My jaw slacked. I wanted to choke Marcellious.

The guy managing the donkey dropped the lead rope and fell to the victim's side. "Robert! Robert! Stay with us."

The first soldier yelled, "You just killed one of our men!"

Marcellious sneered. "You think I give a fuck who I just killed?"

He lunged and stabbed that guy in the stomach before the soldier could pull the trigger.

I stood stunned as the soldier staggered and fell to the ground. Marcellious had spoken in perfect English.

What the hell?

The two remaining soldiers cocked their weapons. Then, the guy who'd knelt to deal with Robert rose and grabbed the donkey's rope.

"Don't move, or we'll shoot," a guy with a bandage tied around his head said. Dried blood stained the cloth.

“What are we waiting for? Shoot ‘em through the skull right now, Clayton,” a dirty-haired blond guy said. “They killed our men!”

“Our captain will want to come to a decision about their well-being.” Clayton let out a heh-heh-heh kind of chuckle.

Oh, this wasn’t good. Not at all. But maybe it would buy me some time to develop a plan.

“Fuck the captain.” Dirty Blond took aim and fired at Marcellious.

The bullet whizzed through his shoulder and sent Marcellious flying to the ground.

The donkey reared up on its hind legs. Pots, pans, and other supplies hanging on his back clattered and clanged.

“Easy, Peaches,” said the guy with the rope, trying to calm the poor creature down.

“Amos!” Clayton yelled. “Stand down.”

“I’m with him. I say we take the bastards out,” the donkey holder said.

I glanced at Marcellious. He was awfully still, sprawled on the ground, eyes shut. Should I assist him? I didn’t want these soldiers to think I was in league with Marcellious since he’d already killed two of their men.

“Tie him up,” Clayton said, indicating me.

Amos turned to the guy holding the donkey’s rope and said, “Steven, toss me a rope, will ya?”

Steven strode to the donkey’s side and procured a rope which he tossed to Amos.

Amos yanked my arms behind my back and trussed them tight. I had to think, not resist. I was outnumbered, and these men had guns.

“What about this guy?” he said, indicating Marcellious.

“Is he still alive?” Clayton said.

Amos toed Marcellious with his boot.

Marcellious let out a wheezing groan.

“Yep. Should I finish him off?” Amos said.

“No. Let’s lift him up and drape him over Peaches.”

Clayton, Amos, and Steven lifted Marcellious and maneuvered him atop the donkey.

And then we were off, trekking through this endless forest in God only knew where to a destination unknown.

How would I find Olivia now?

CHAPTER THREE



Olivia

After I'd slogged a few hours through this forested land, the ill-fitting dead soldier's boots rubbed blisters into my feet. The horse that pulled the wagon I was tied to kept lurching through dried potholes and up hills, jerking me, Emily, and Charlotte along.

Charlotte had wept continuously during our journey, despite the comfort from her sister.

I felt terrible for her, but what could I do? We were all in this together.

Emily and Charlotte's father, Philip, an apparent hale and hearty man, got to ride up in the back of the next wagon. He kept glaring at me.

I ignored him for the most part, wondering why he didn't stick up for his daughters and beg that they be allowed to ride in the back of the cart. But then, who was I kidding? Philip was a prisoner, and prisoners didn't have rights.

As my legs fatigued, I turned to Rusty and Short-Guy and said, "Can't we please ride in the wagon? Or at least be untied? I promise we won't escape."

"Did you hear that, Bart? Our prisoners want special treatment," Rusty said.

"I did hear that, Rusty. I say we take turns granting them special dispensation. I'll take a turn in the back of the wagon

with one of them, then you take a turn. That seems fair, don't it?"

"More than fair." Rusty grinned, grabbing his crotch.

"You harm one hair on any of us, and I'll feed your balls to you," I said with a growl.

Bart let out a hearty laugh. "Don't she talk all tough?"

"Yes, indeed," Rusty said. He spat out a stream of tobacco-colored spit and wiped his mouth. "But she doesn't seem to realize she's tied up, and we've got guns, do she? Think I should remind her?"

Bart nodded. "I think she needs reminding. Go on then and refresh her memory."

Rusty stalked toward me, seized my hands tied behind my back, and yanked them straight up.

Pain shot through my shoulders. On instinct, my leg shot back, nailing him in the kneecap with my booted foot.

Rusty cried out, then reached for my hair and twisted it in his fist.

I clenched my teeth to keep from screaming in pain.

Rusty snarled, "Don't you ever be doing that to me again, or I'll shoot you. The only reason you ain't dead is because of my partner back there, you hear me? He's a whole lot nicer than I am."

"I hear you," I said between clenched teeth.

"Good." He gave my hair another yank before releasing me. "I ain't through with you, woman. When I'm through with you, you'll know it. I'll leave you sore and wet."

"Ooh," I said, unable to stop myself, "I love it when you talk dirty to me."

"You're a fucking bitch, you know that?" he said, his lip pulling back in a sneer.

"And you were never taught manners or equality among genders," I said. "What, were you raised among pigs? Just

another pig in the pigpen, fighting off all the hogs for food?”

Bart snorted.

“All right, all right, leave her be,” he called to Rusty.

Rusty gave my ass a squeeze before joining his comrade.

A long whistle came from further up the line when the sun dropped to the horizon like a tired, bloated ball. We gradually came to a stop.

Shouts of “set up camp” and “we bed here for the night” rang out.

I was grateful since I didn’t think I could take another step. I wished I had some of my now-deceased friend Amara’s healing herbs. My feet ached, and my blisters throbbed. And clearly, thanks to my hot-headed temper, I’d made an enemy in Rusty. I’d have to watch out for him.

Emily, Charlotte, and I were left tied to the wagon. I leaned against the wagon, taking some of the weight off my tired feet, as the soldiers set up half-shelters which they called “dog tents.” The tents were made of a six-foot square piece of sturdy white cloth which they threw over a stick held in place by two other branches with a “Y crotch” at one end. The other end was stabbed into the ground. The ends of the cloths were fastened to the Earth by a stick, making a simple triangle shelter.

A foul-smelling tarred blanket served as the “floor” of the tent. Beyond the smaller shelters, larger cloth structures were erected for the officers.

Would we be given a tent or forced to sleep outside in the freezing cold? At least my dead soldier’s wool coat hadn’t yet been seized.

After the tents were set up, the soldiers removed the harnesses from the horses’ backs and took the loads from the donkeys. The equines were then turned out in a rope-lined field to graze.

Even though my hands were tied behind me, I pushed myself up on the back of the wagon, relieving my aching feet.

Emily and Charlotte stayed standing.

None of us spoke to one another.

Philip said nothing to us from his perch a few yards away. He didn't ask how his daughters were doing or even utter a word.

"Don't you even care what happens to your children?" I asked him.

"My family is my business," he said, turning away. "Mind your own damn business."

I shook my head at him. What kind of father did not care at all for his daughters?

Soon cooking fires broke out throughout the camp, and the smell of pork, some sort of vegetables, and coffee teased my growing hunger.

Eventually, Bart shuffled over with a pan of food.

"Here." He tossed the dish on the bed of the wagon. "You three can share some meat and desiccated vegetables. Our captain wants us to keep you alive."

"How are we supposed to eat it? Our hands are tied," I said, my stomach growling.

"Figure it out. My only orders were to feed you, not free you." He spat near my feet as if letting me know what he thought of his captain's idea.

He glared at me, then turned to Philip, who was still huddled in his wagon. "We'll be back to deal with you in a bit, Mr. Weston."

He sauntered away.

I didn't know about the others, but I was ravenous. I lowered my face to the tin dish and ate some food like a dog.

Emily stared at me, then she did the same.

Charlotte refused to eat.

"Come on, Charlotte," Emily said, her face smeared with the brownish corn, tomatoes, and greens that made up the

meal.

Charlotte shook her head.

I took another bite.

Charlotte still refused to eat, so Emily and I finished the plate, licking it clean.

Afterward, I wiped my face on my shoulder.

We all sat, awaiting our fate.

“What do you think they’ll do with us?” Charlotte whimpered.

Emily pushed her shoulder into her sister and cooed, “We’ll be all right. We didn’t do anything wrong. It’s our father who they want.”

“But you told Olivia they wanted to kill us.”

“I was just spooked, is all. I don’t know what they want to do with us.” Emily glanced at me, perhaps looking for support.

“Your sister’s right, Charlotte,” I said. “We don’t know what they want from us. That soldier Bart said their captain wants to keep us alive. We just have to pray he’s a kind and just man.”

A wan smile formed on Charlotte’s face. “Yes. I shall do that. I shall hold him in my heart as a kind man.”

She lowered her head to the small gold cross dangling from her neck.

The sky turned the color of bruises as the day faded into night. The crickets rubbed their wings upon their legs in the distant woods, creating a din of evening song. It was an eerie backdrop to the threat of violence radiating from these men.

Rusty, Bart, and another guy dressed in a fancier uniform swaggered toward us, each carrying an oil lantern. Only one of them, Bart, had a rifle.

The men all sat the lanterns down by their feet, pausing near Philip’s wagon, and the golden light cast shadows across their faces.

Bart was short and squat, like a potato. His greasy coal-colored hair hung in wild waves around his face.

Rusty might have been considered good-looking if he were to wash his body and comb his unruly ginger hair. But his snarling, abusive attitude gave him a perm-sneer that made him ugly.

The third guy stood tall and imposing. His features, consisting of an aquiline nose, high cheekbones, and deep-set blue eyes, looked chiseled in stone. Fine light-blond hair hung to his shoulders.

All three men bore scruffy beards.

“Okay, old man,” Rusty said. “Now that we’ve eaten, we’re here to deal with you.”

Philip scowled. “I ain’t got nothin’ to say to you. I’m an innocent man.”

“Is that so?” Rusty said. “Captain Van Ness, do I have your permission to persuade this man to talk to us?”

“Go ahead,” Van Ness said with a nod.

Rusty sauntered toward the wagon and seized Philip by his shirt, dragging him off the back of the wagon. His wrists had been tied to his waist.

His face distorted in fear, but he didn’t resist.

Rusty hauled back his arm and slugged Philip in the gut.

Philip let out a groan and doubled over.

Charlotte let out a scream.

Emily bumped her shoulder against her sister’s shoulder, shushing her.

Rusty grabbed the top of Philip’s thinning, nut-brown hair and yanked his head up. “We know you is a traitor. You been selling weapons to the Indians who are in cahoots with the British Army. You’re a traitor to this country.”

He spat in Philip’s face.

Philip's head jerked back, but he said nothing as the slimy phlegm tracked down his cheek.

"Tell us who you're working for," Rusty said.

Philip's expression turned to stone.

Rusty landed his fist on Philip's abdomen.

The man doubled over, letting out a loud groan. Rusty dropped him to the ground.

Charlotte pressed her head into Emily's shoulder and started to cry.

"Will it help you talk if I torture your daughters?" Rusty said. He sauntered toward Charlotte and tugged her away from Emily.

"Don't hurt me," Charlotte sobbed. "Please, don't hurt me. I've done nothing wrong. I'm innocent."

Bart and Captain Van Ness stood by impassively, witnessing the whole scene.

"Look at this, old man," Rusty said, procuring a knife from a sheath on his leather belt. He positioned himself behind Charlotte, fisted her long blond hair, and drew the blade across her neck.

Charlotte sucked in a breath and sobbed as a thin line of blood oozed from the slash.

"Stop hurting my sister!" Emily yelled. "If you want to torture anyone, torture me. But leave Charlotte alone."

"Oh, I'll get to you, Miss...Emily? Is that your name?" He grinned at Emily.

"You don't deserve to call me by my given name," Emily said, her voice shaking.

I was itching to unleash my fury on Rusty, but what could I do, tied as I was to the wagon? Besides, my legs ached from the long journey, and I didn't think I'd have the strength to do much damage.

Rusty laughed. “Listen to you. You been taking tough girl lessons from the bitch next to you?” He stroked Charlotte’s cheek with the knuckles of his free hand. “See what I can do to your sister? And this is only the beginning. Men like us have needs, ain’t that right, gentlemen?”

“That’s right, Rusty,” Bart said, his gaze focused on Emily as if he longed to jump her bones.

“And, we also have ways to wield control.” Rusty drew the tip of his knife down Charlotte’s cheek.

Charlotte screamed and jerked her head away from the blade.

Philip turned his head away, staying mute.

“Say something, old man,” Rusty said. “Tell us who put you up to trading arms with the Indians.”

Philip pressed his lips into a thin, white line.

“Well, then...” Rusty moved behind Emily, gathered her hair into a ponytail, and yanked it.

Emily winced but said nothing.

Rusty slashed at the hair, cutting off the end.

Charlotte screamed, but Emily stayed as silent as her father.

“Well, lookee here. I got me a hank of your hair, Miss Emily. I’m going to use it to keep me warm at night.” He shoved the lock of hair down his pants and laughed.

I couldn’t take it any longer. “Good God, Philip, do something! This monster will continue if you don’t tell the soldiers what they need to hear. What kind of father are you, anyway, allowing his daughters to be tortured by these ruthless men? My father would give his life to save me!”

The thought of Papa wrapped itself around my heart and squeezed.

“You’d better listen to her,” Rusty said, pinching Emily’s rump, making her yelp. “Or I’m going to have my way with your daughters.”

Philip barely moved.

“And I’m going to be rough with them both,” Rusty continued. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to help myself with these succulent young things.”

He strode to the front of Emily, cocked his arm, and let loose, landing a blow to her belly.

Emily doubled over, groaning. But then she gathered herself together and stood upright, defying Rusty in her own quiet way.

Her bravery impressed me, but I wanted to destroy each man before me.

Charlotte began to sob.

“Do something!” I screamed at Philip. “He’ll kill your daughters if you don’t say anything!”

Philip winced, and his face contorted in pain.

“Say something, you bastard!” I yelled.

Emily swayed where she stood while Charlotte continued to wail.

“All right, all right, I’ll talk,” Philip said in a weak, wheezing voice. “But please spare my daughters and the other woman. She’s only trying to protect my family.”

I blinked.

Van Ness directed his attention to Rusty and said, “Stand down, corporal.”

Rusty sneered as if the last thing he wanted to do was stand down.

“I said, *stand down*, Corporal Brooks,” Captain Van Ness said in an imposing voice.

“Yes, sir.” Rusty stepped away.

Captain Van Ness crossed to stand before Philip. “Who are you working for?”

“No one. I work alone.”

“Which tribes do you distribute weapons to?”

“There are several tribes. Comanche, Sioux, Lakota, Kiowa—”

“Papa!” Charlotte cried. “You lied to us!”

“I didn’t mean to. I’ve struggled to make ends meet and care for you girls since your mama died.” Tears glistened in his eyes.

“But why sell weapons to the Natives?” Charlotte blubbered.

“I just had to. They paid a lot of money.”

He had been trying to protect them from the truth of his actions. I understood. When Papa confessed that he’d studied time travel his whole life and he and Mom had lied to me about my birth—I’d felt utterly betrayed. I’d grown up thinking my delivery had occurred in a hospital, not in a cave in Peru during a solar eclipse. And no one had mentioned that little detail of being a Timeborne due to my miraculous birth.

Hands clasped behind his back, Van Ness paced back and forth before Philip. “So, what kind of weapons do you have to sell?”

Philip blanched and glanced at Charlotte’s weeping face. “I’d rather not say.”

“And I’d rather not unleash Corporal Brooks on your daughters again,” the captain said.

“All right. I’ll tell you.” Philip cleared his throat. “I sell knives, swords, bayonets, pistols, muskets, rifles, cannons, and crude bombs. Most of the rifles and muskets are the kind with bayonets.”

“Papa,” Charlotte wailed in a trembling voice. “Why did you lie to us?”

Her plaintive voice broke my heart.

Emily remained stoic, taking in her father’s betrayal in silence.

Philip's complexion paled, and his face pinched with anguish.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry to both of you girls."

Van Ness stopped pacing and faced Philip directly. "Are you sure you're working on your own?"

"Yes, I swear it." Philip directed his gaze at the ground.

"That's not what we heard," Van Ness said coolly.

"Whoever your source is, is lying," Philip said, still not meeting the captain's gaze.

"Corporal Brooks." Captain Van Ness inclined his head toward Philip.

"Yes, sir," Rusty said, stepping forward.

"Would you do the honor of sharing with this traitor what we feel about his lies?"

"My pleasure, sir." He held his hand to Bart, who had remained mute.

Bart handed over his rifle.

"No!" Charlotte screamed and fell to her knees.

Emily lowered beside her and tried her best to comfort Charlotte.

Rusty cocked the rifle and shot Philip's shoulder.

Philip jerked backward as a spray of blood spattered the wagon. He cried out, "My arm, my arm."

"Let me try again, Mr. Weston," Van Ness said. "Are you working alone or with someone? If you don't tell us the truth, the next bullet will be aimed at one of your daughters."

"I'm working with the British Army," Philip said, gasping for air. "They give me all the weapons, and I distribute them to the tribes."

"That's a good start, Philip," Van Ness said. "So, you're admitting you're a spy. A traitor. An enemy to the Americas. But I still have a feeling you're not telling us everything."

“I swear that’s it. I don’t know anything else.” Philip had turned the color of clouds, and a dark stain of crimson bloomed on his sleeve.

The sky was now pitch black, and the light from the lanterns made the soldiers look like ghouls.

“Do you still have weapons in your possession?”

“No! I swear I don’t,” Philip said, swaying where he sat.

“Rusty,” Van Ness said.

“Yes, sir,” Rusty said.

“Do you think Mr. Weston is telling us the truth?”

“No, sir, I do not.” Rusty trembled as he clutched his weapon like a Doberman waiting to be unleashed upon an intruder.

“Would you see if you could jog his memory to see if he forgot anything?”

“Of course, sir. It would be my pleasure.” As he lifted his gun, Emily let out a small cry.

Another bullet struck Philip’s other shoulder.

He toppled over backward, howling and writhing in pain.

Charlotte let out a piercing scream.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I’d landed in as brutal a place as Rome, and I was helpless to do *anything*.

“Did that jog your memory?” Van Ness said to Philip, who squirmed below him.

“I’ve got a whole cache of weapons. It’s at my plantation. In a barn. A big barn.” He was wheezing now, blood bubbling from his mouth.

Rusty must have shot his lung.

“And where is your plantation?” Van Ness said, still as cool as the night air.

“It’s about twenty miles due west of here,” Philip said. His eyes rolled back, and his head lolled to the side.

“Does it have a name?”

“Weston Hills. Everyone around knows it by the name of Weston Hills.” Philip’s eyelids fluttered shut.

“Weston Hills. Can you remember that, corporal?”

“Yes, sir.” Rusty tapped his temple. “I’ve already committed it to memory.”

“Thank you, Corporal Brooks.” Van Ness turned toward Philip. “Thank you, Mr. Weston, for being forthcoming with information.”

Philip lay still.

“Mr. Weston?” Van Ness patted Philip’s cheek, rousing him from unconsciousness.

“Huh? What?” he whispered.

“I said, thank you for being forthcoming with information. You’ve been most helpful.”

“You’re welcome, Captain, but please spare my daughters and the young woman. You have all the information you need,” Philip said with a wheezing sigh.

“Corporal,” Van Ness said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Please put Mr. Weston out of his misery. We have all the information we need.”

“Gladly, captain.” Rusty placed the gun’s muzzle at Philip’s chest and pulled the trigger.

Philip’s chest jerked, but no words or moans escaped his mouth.

He was dead now. There was no way he could have survived.

Charlotte continued to sob as Emily kept quieting her.

Van Ness turned toward me and said, “Ladies, I bid you good night.”

He pivoted on his heel and strode away with Rusty and Bart trailing behind him.

If I thought I despised Marcellious, I loathed these men with a hatred so intense my vision clouded with red. I vowed to take my revenge.

If only I could figure out a way to escape.

CHAPTER FOUR



Roman

I didn't think I'd ever smelled anything as foul as the way Marcellious smelled. He lay beside me in this makeshift prison in the cellar of someone's abandoned home, barely breathing, emanating the scent of rotting, unwashed flesh. But who was I to talk? I didn't think I smelled much better.

And what was it with me and prison cells? I'd escaped the Americas in the 1700s only to be thrown into a prison in Rome. And now I'd fled Rome only to be thrown in a prison cell in the Americas. I was hell-bent on going to the Americas and serving in the war. Throughout history, would I be punished for abandoning my mother in the 1700s? It seemed that was the case.

Dim light forced its way through the grimy hopper windows lining the wall. Bushels and wooden half-barrels of potatoes sat just out of reach, along with smaller baskets of rotting carrots, peppers, and other vegetation. A dead rat, its belly torn open and dried guts spilling out, lay near one of the baskets.

On the far side of the room, water dripped, dripped, dripped in a slow monotonous rhythm that might soon drive me mad.

I squinted as I peered at the darkened corner.

Is that a...? Lord, have mercy.

There appeared to be another guy, barely breathing or dead; I couldn't tell which. From the stench, I figured he was dead. It seemed I'd gotten his smell confused with Marcellious. It didn't speak well of our captors if a dead man was already down here.

Great. So we've been left here to rot.

I glanced down at my many wounds, wishing Amara were here. She'd know how to patch us both up and remove the bullet festering in Marcellious' shoulder.

In stark contrast to the dark, dried blood staining his loincloth, his skin was the color of maggots. A sheen of sweat covered his forehead, cheeks, and neck. He would surely join that fellow in the corner if I didn't do something.

While it might be nice to not have to sort out where I was and how I would escape with my sworn enemy by my side, I couldn't help but wonder if Marcellious was truly my brother. Could he be? How was that possible? If he were my kin, wouldn't it behoove me to care for him until I knew for certain? But what could I do?

Amara's wrinkled face appeared in my mind. Using her most practical tone, she said, "You've got to remove the bullet. It will fester if you leave it in, and then he might lose his arm or even die."

"But how?" I whispered to my ghost.

"You've got a dagger. Use it. Clean the wound and dig out the bullet."

I chuckled at my mad ravings. Amara had never seen a bullet, but I had, and I knew what to do.

With a groan, I pushed to my feet and staggered around the basement, sourcing supplies. Half a broken gallon jar and a few baskets lay on the dirt floor. If there had been any preserved food down here, the soldiers would have already confiscated it. I'd done the same thing when I'd participated in the war—we'd burn down homes and villages and helped ourselves to their food stores.

But with my hands tied behind my back, I could do little. I couldn't pick up the jar, or anything else for that matter. So, I kept searching.

I searched the cellar for anything I could use to cut my bindings free. My gaze caught on several deadly-looking meat hooks hanging from the ceiling. If I could get my arms up there, I could use the hooks to free myself.

I kicked and pushed the bushel of potatoes until it sat directly beneath the meat hooks. Then, I stepped on top of the potatoes. The uneven surface made it hard to balance, so I widened my stance until I felt steady. I lifted my arms behind me until I could feel the meat hook. If I were to snag my arms on the metal claw, I'd be in a severely compromised position. I had to be careful and make this work.

Laboriously, I managed to pick at the ropes binding me. I had no idea if I was making progress. The only thing I knew was that I was nicking my skin with the sharp tip of the hook, bloodying my wrists. I gave my arms a tug in the hope that I'd done some damage to the rope. It held fast.

Damn.

I gave up, stepping free of the bushel.

What else could I use?

I eyed one of the wooden half-barrels holding potatoes—the friction might rip the noose if I could work the rope back and forth on the hook's edge. I positioned myself next to the barrel, knelt, and began sawing at the ropes. I worked until sweat poured from my skin, and my arms were utterly fatigued. I was about to give up, but I had no more ideas. So, I kept sawing.

Finally, the ropes snapped.

Despite the burning sensation in my arms and shoulders, relief surged through me. I brought my hands before me. My wrists were bloodied from the hooks and chafed from the wooden edge.

Never mind, I was free. I would heal.

Now I could see to Marcellious.

I picked up the jar, careful of its jagged edges, and placed it under the drip. When a small amount of water had collected in the bottom of the container, I swirled it around, emptied it, then used my loincloth to clean and dry the glass as best I could.

The voice of Amara inside my head insisted that whatever I used to clean Marcellious' wound needed to be free of grime.

Then, I placed the jar back down on the ground to collect more water.

Hoping the dead man had something on his body I could use, I made my way to the corner.

His skin had dried, and his mouth was open in a horrified grimace. I had to cover my nose and mouth with my elbow to keep from gagging at the smell. I used my other hand to root through his pockets, finding a metal fire starter and a pouch of tobacco.

What luck! I could use the starter to light a fire and sanitize my dagger. But what could I use to make a fire with?

The dead fellow's hair looked to be quite dry.

I retrieved my dagger from beneath my loincloth and got busy cutting the dead man's hair from his head. Next, I overturned one of the smaller baskets and sliced through the twine holding the sisal pieces together. After that, I lay the fire supplies near Marcellious' shoulder.

I peered at him, making sure his chest still rose and fell.

It did, but barely.

I fetched the broken jar full of water, then crossed to the deceased fellow and ripped strips from his linen shirt. Now I was ready.

Crouching before the pile of hair, which I'd arranged over the sisal rope strips, I struck the fire starter to make sparks. The hair caught on fire. Cupping my hands around my mouth, I gently blew on the hair and coaxed tiny flames to life.

The flames caught the sisal cord on fire, and I held the tip of my dagger over the flickering fire until it glowed red hot.

I lifted the jar and poured some water on Marcellious' wound.

He roused enough to let out a long moan.

I twisted a couple lengths of the sisal together and worked my fingers into Marcellious' jaw, opening his mouth. I placed the twisted rope between his teeth and said, "If you can hear me, bite down on this rope. You're going to need it."

Then, I spread apart the flesh of his wound with the thumb and forefinger of one hand, picked up the dagger, and started digging for the bullet.

A god-awful shriek escaped from Marcellious' mouth.

"Bite down," I commanded him.

He did, his eyes wide.

I could feel the tip of the bullet beneath my blade. I freed it from the muscle and shattered bone as Marcellious screamed and wailed through clenched teeth.

Once the bullet was free, I poured more water over the wound. Then, I bound his shoulder and chest with the fabric strips, the way I'd seen Amara do countless times. Marcellious might get infected from the dirty cloth, but it was either that or bleeding to death. "You're welcome," I muttered.

Marcellious spit the rope free. "You asshole. Are you trying to kill me?"

"If I were trying to kill you, you'd already be dead. I'm trying to save you." I poured water on my hands and the dagger, cleansing them of his blood.

Marcellious' hands were still tied behind his back. He tried to wrestle his arms free but let out another scream.

"You're going to alert the guards," I said calmly.

"You should have thought of that before you carved out the bullet," Marcellious shot back.

I grabbed his jaw between my fingers and squeezed. “Do you think I like the predicament we’re in? Do you think I like being here, trapped in this time, whatever it is, with *you*? I don’t. But for some strange reason, you and I, and I hope Olivia, all managed to time travel together. Which means we’re *all* time travelers. This also means, as loathe as I am to even consider it, you and I may be brothers. So, I just saved your life, asshole. You would have died if I left the bullet there to fester.”

I released his jaw.

“I didn’t ask to be saved,” he said with a growl.

“Too bad. If we’re going to escape, I figure the odds are in our favor if we work together. *If* we can manage to do that. Currently, I have my doubts.” I rose and stalked across the room.

“How did you free yourself?” Marcellious inclined his head toward my arms.

“It took a lot of effort.”

“So free me, already.”

“Not until I know you won’t try to kill me.”

He grew silent. He was probably planning my murder.

I would wait a while longer to undo his restraints.

Voices rang out from outside the cellar. Several sets of legs tromped past the hopper windows.

“Damn.” I shuffled to where I lay before I’d freed myself. I lowered to the ground and clasped my hands behind my back, hoping to appear still bound.

The burned sisal rope rested nearby.

I’ve got to get rid of that and somehow cover up Marcellious’ wound.

Marcellious’s eyes had closed, and he took ragged breaths, as if exhausted from the ordeal I’d inflicted on him.

I rose, gathered all the evidence, and rushed it to the darkened corner of the room where the dead man lay. No way would anyone want to venture to that corner.

I raced back to Marcellious and settled beside him, shielding him from view, my hands clasped behind my back again.

A clattering noise came from the entrance, and the door creaked open, letting in a shaft of sunlight. Two sets of feet clambered down the stairs.

The men I recognized as Clayton and Amos stood before us, their faces stern.

Both men had scruffy, unkempt mustaches. Their shoulder-length hair was plastered against their heads as if it hadn't been washed for weeks.

At least in Rome, cleanliness had been a part of daily life—if I wasn't locked up in prison, of course, as I had been before we were transported.

Clayton paced back and forth in front of me, a pistol gripped in his hand. "So, who are you two? You've got long hair. You're wearing loincloths. What tribe are you from?"

"We're not from a tribe. I told you—we're soldiers just like you. We were attacked by the Kiowa. They took our clothes and left us theirs," I said.

"Well, ain't that funny," Amos said. "Before you told us you was swimming, got drunk and just happened to lose your clothes. You're a liar, is what you is."

He leered at me, revealing a missing tooth in the front.

"I wasn't lying. It was the Kiowa who took our clothes. After they attacked us."

Amos looked at Clayton. "Ain't it funny how his story seems to keep changing? Next thing you know, they'll tell us they was out dancing with maidens in the field, and the women took their clothes." He guffawed, then turned to me. "Is that what happened? You came across some maidens in a

field, danced a jig or two, then the maidens turned out to be fae, and they ensorcelled you?”

His guffaws turned into wheezing laughter.

“Seems like you’re spinning the tall tales,” I said. “I told you. We got drunk. We went for a swim in the river. The Kiowa attacked us and took our clothes.”

Amos crouched and backhanded my face.

My head whipped to the side from the smarting blow. I shifted closer to Marcellious. I didn’t want Amos to see Marcellious’ patched-up shoulder.

“I don’t like to be talked back to,” Amos snapped.

“Amos,” Clayton warned.

“What? He started it.”

“We came here for information, that’s it. Back away from him.” Clayton turned to me. “Assuming your story is right, which side are you fighting for?”

“The same side as you.”

Clayton canted his head to the side and studied me. “I question your truthfulness like my partner here does. We have a few more miles to go before meeting the other troops. We’ll present you before our captain, and he’ll decide.”

“He’s a bastard; our captain is,” Amos interjected. “He’ll likely leave you to suffer the same fate as that fellow in the corner.”

Again came his wheezing laughter.

“Let’s go.” Clayton spun on his heel and headed up the stairs with Amos.

I moved away from Marcellious and pivoted to face him.

As soon as the cellar door shut, Marcellious opened his eyes.

“They want us dead,” he said in a weak voice.

“They do.”

“They have guns, not swords. One shot and we’re dead.”

“How is it you know about guns?” I said, narrowing my eyes. “What century were you born in?”

He said nothing.

“Answer me, Marcellious.”

Marcellious’ cold gaze met mine. “I’m not going to tell you anything. Not a word about where I’m from.”

“You’re just being a stubborn ass. Just tell me. Where did you learn of guns?” I glowered at him. I was so done with his resistance and constant need for fighting.

“My father taught me. He taught me about white men and their weapons.”

I frowned. *White men and their weapons? What’s he talking about?* “In what century?”

Marcellious’s lips formed a crisp line, and he turned away from me.

“Look,” I said, “there was a time we fought side by side in Rome. Granted, we were never friends, but we’ll never escape this situation alive unless we become allies.”

Marcellious kept his stony silence.

“What if we’re brothers? Were you ever told of a twin brother?” I asked.

Marcellious said nothing.

“What if we’re brothers, Marcellious? Did you know your mother?”

“I had no mother. And I’ll never be your ally. I just want to go back.”

“Yes, but where is that?”

He pressed his lips even tighter together.

I let out a sigh. “Can we agree to be allied for one day? At least until we find a way to escape? Otherwise, I will escape without you and leave you to the fate of the Americans. Like you said, I don’t think they will leave us alive.”

Marcellious jerked his head to face me. “You wouldn’t do that.”

“Think I wouldn’t? I’m this close to doing it—to taking off without you and leaving you here to die on your own.” I held my thumb and my forefinger before me, a millimeter apart.

Marcellious shook his head. “Fine. I’ll be your ally until we escape. But then, I’m done with you.”

“Fine,” I said.

“Fine,” he repeated. “Now, will you untie me?”

“Not just yet. I’m still not convinced you’re not going to murder me. So, let’s leave you tied until we can devise a plan.”

CHAPTER FIVE



Olivia

Charlotte caterwauled in my ears throughout the night each time I got back to sleep. She was like an incessant alarm clock, determined to disturb my slumber.

Lying in the dark in the back of the wagon with only some straw for bedding, I was freezing beneath the dead soldier's coat and increasingly annoyed while listening to Charlotte.

I understood we were in danger, but the girl kept crying and whining. If she continued in this manner, the soldiers would put a bullet through her head and then through Emily and me for not getting her to quiet down.

Emily had tried to soothe Charlotte.

"There, there," she'd say. "Everything will be all right."

"No, it won't," Charlotte had wailed. "Papa's dead."

"True, but we'll find a way to escape, and then we'll be free," Emily whispered.

"No, we won't. We're going to die!" Charlotte had moaned. "They will kill us, just like they killed Papa."

After about thirty minutes of failed attempts, Emily had hissed, "If you don't shut your damn mouth, that moment will come sooner than later. And I, for one, am not ready to die yet. Are you?"

"Sister!" Charlotte cried, the shock in her voice evident. "Father would be appalled by your profanity!"

“Well, he’s not here, is he? Neither will you be if you don’t shut up!” Emily said in a low, fierce voice.

Charlotte finally hushed, huddled between Emily and the side of the wagon. She still whimpered, but in a manner that could be ignored.

I probably wouldn’t have gotten sleep anyway. No way could I get comfortable with my hands tied behind my back. I tried rolling this way and that. I even tried lying on my stomach, but the hay tickled my nose and made me sneeze. And I didn’t want to disturb Emily, who lay beside me. Finally, I gave up and curled up on my side, listening to the snores of the soldiers.

“So you really want to find a way to survive, Emily?” I whispered.

“Of course I do,” she whispered back. “I will not allow these horrid men to get the best of me.”

I liked her gumption.

“Then, we need to devise a plan,” I said quietly.

“Why should we devise a plan when we’re all going to die?” Charlotte whispered.

“If you don’t have anything positive to contribute to the conversation, please keep your opinions to yourself,” I said, inches away from losing my temper.

I hoped Emily wouldn’t take offense at my sternness with her sister.

“She’s right, Charlotte,” Emily whispered. “When we’re out of danger, you can complain all you want. But now is not the time.”

She directed her attention back to me. “Any ideas?”

“First, it seems obvious that we must get our hands untied. Only one of us needs to get untied to free the others.”

“How do you think we can do that?”

“Not sure.” The wheels in my mind kept turning. “How tight are your ropes?”

“Tight enough that I can’t feel my fingers anymore. You?”

I wriggled my hands. There was no free play at all in my wrists. “What about your sister?”

“Charlotte,” Emily whispered. “Charlotte. Are you awake?”

We both listened for a response, but I only heard Charlotte’s deep, ragged breathing.

“I think she finally wore herself out,” Emily said. “What now?”

I thought of the dagger strapped to my thigh next to the gun. If Emily could get to my thigh, she might be able to wiggle the blade free of its sheath. But I didn’t think I could get my pants down that easily without free hands.

My gaze landed on the dim embers of one of the soldier’s campfires. It would hurt like hell, but maybe I could burn the ropes from my wrists. Burns could heal, right? I’d need to watch out for soldiers stirring from their sleep and not catch my clothes or hair on fire, though.

“I have an idea. Wait here.”

“What are you doing?” Emily hissed, alarm creeping into her voice.

“Just wait.” I wriggled to the end of the wagon and maneuvered to the ground. Then, I waited, listening for any signs of the men. The hooting of an owl and the distant howl of wolves filled the night with their lament.

I crept toward the fire and crouched near it. Taking a deep breath for courage, I pivoted so my back was to the coals. I swung my head forward so my hair fell before my shoulders.

The heat felt great, warming my frigid skin. But it wouldn’t feel so nice in a minute—not when it blistered me. I planned on igniting the rope, then pulling until it gave way, hopefully before I was too badly burned.

Here goes.

I glanced over to the wagon.

I could barely make out Emily's faint outline, and it looked like she was watching me. That gave me strength. She was expecting me to rescue us.

I held my hands close to the embers and closed my eyes.

The warmth of the fire turned into searing, painful heat as the flames licked my skin and ate at my shirt sleeves. I yanked and tugged at my hands, feeling the rope start to give. Finally, the sisal snapped. I lunged away from the fire and batted my sleeve-covered arms on the damp ground, trying to extinguish the flames. At last, I got the fire out, but not without scorching my skin.

Never mind, I was free. After getting the rest of the rope from my waist, I glanced around the camp. The soft nickers and snorts of the horses added to the symphony of night insects.

I know I can ride in the dark, but can Emily? Better yet—can Charlotte? Only one way to find out.

I returned to the cart and whispered, "All right, Emily. I'm free."

I held out my hands.

"But are you injured? I saw your shirt caught fire," Emily said, her expression concerned.

"It's nothing. Turn over."

Emily rolled onto her belly, and I quickly freed the knots in her rope.

"Okay, you're untied. You work on Charlotte while I go get us some horses. Can you ride?" I wound the rope that had bound Charlotte's waist and wrists, intending to use it as a makeshift halter.

Emily nodded.

"What about your sister?"

"Not very well," she said.

"One of us will have to ride with her, then. Can you do it?"

Again, Emily nodded.

“Okay, good. We’ll have to hurry, so get her untied and convince her to cooperate.”

“I’ll try,” Emily said determinedly.

“Okay, let’s do this.” I crept toward the horses, staying alert for noises.

When I reached the horses, I discovered the men had left their leather halters on but had removed the reins. Good news and bad news for us. We could lead them but had no way to steer them once we were riding—unless I managed to tie the rope to the halter.

I fastened the ends of the rope to one of the horse’s halters. Then, I slipped my hands inside the halter of another horse and led the pair away from their friends.

The roan-colored horse came willingly, but the Appaloosa, the one I’d managed to put makeshift reins on, balked. I tried to stay calm as I coaxed him along.

He was a handful—I’d have to be the one to ride him.

When I arrived back at the wagon, Charlotte was in a state of protest again.

“No, we can’t leave Papa,” she wailed.

“Shh, shh, shh. Papa’s dead. We have to leave him. He’d want us to leave,” Emily hissed. She looked in the direction of the encampment, and her eyes widened. “Oh, no. Someone’s coming.”

I glanced over my shoulder as two men stumbled from their tents.

“Hey! Stop!” one of them shouted, sprinting toward us on his bare feet.

“Shit. We have to go.” I vaulted on the back of the fussy Appaloosa.

Startled, it bucked and reared on its hind legs, trying to dislodge me.

I clung to its mane and clutched its sides with my legs.

Emily clambered on top of the wagon and swung her leg over the top of her steed. “Charlotte! Get behind me!”

“No!” Charlotte cried. “I refuse to leave Papa!”

The men grew closer, cursing and swearing as they stumbled across the rock-strewn ground.

Other soldiers popped out of their tents.

“We’ve got to go. *Now!*” I said.

One of the men lifted his rifle and aimed it at us.

“Charlotte! Hurry! Climb on!” Emily said.

“I’m scared.” Charlotte sobbed.

The rifle exploded, and Charlotte threw backward.

Emily screamed. Her horse bolted.

Mine galloped behind hers. As if this was a race, mine surged ahead, running for its life. All I could do was hold on for the ride. I was sad about what had happened to Charlotte. But going back and saving her meant both Emily’s and my death.

Far behind us, the sound of galloping hooves struck the ground. More shots were fired. Thankfully, it was dark, so the bullets didn’t even come close to us. Still, the explosive sounds spooked our horses, and their speed increased.

We galloped through the night. I didn’t know what happened to our pursuers, but I didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was that we were free. We raced until dawn’s light appeared in the sky, lending substance to the world around us that had only been shadowy shapes before.

I glanced behind us. Seeing no one, I slowed my horse to a walk. I stared at the start of a beautiful sunrise pushing through the thin clouds surrounding us.

Emily’s horse slowed also.

“That was close,” I said to Emily. “Are you all right?”

Our horses breathed heavily as they picked their way through a forested landscape to the tune of morning birdsong.

“Yes,” Emily said in a strangled voice. “My poor sister. She’s dead. They killed her.”

A tear trickled down her cheek. And then another, until she sat quietly weeping.

“I’m so sorry for your losses, Emily. I know what you feel inside—all the pain you carry,” I said.

“I know. It’s awful. But I keep reminding myself how spoiled rotten she was by her mother.”

“Her mother? Don’t you share the same mother?”

Emily shook her head. “My mother died in childbirth while birthing me. Father married Margaret when I was three.”

“I see—so Charlotte is a half-sister,” I said, guiding my horse toward a copse of trees and the sound of water.

“Yes, but Papa and Margaret doted over Charlotte. She was born a sickly child, and they almost lost her, so they always tried to protect her.”

“I’m sorry, Emily. It sounds like you haven’t had the easiest life.”

Emily’s shoulders rose and fell. “I learned early on not to complain. Charlotte did that enough for both of us. I always tried to keep my nose down and help Margaret with the cooking, cleaning, and washing. Whatever needed to be done.”

Emily had a good attitude.

We approached a meadow near a babbling brook.

“This might be a good place to rest our horses and ourselves. I’m exhausted,” I said.

“Me, too. I can barely keep my eyes open.”

I halted my horse and slid from its back as Emily did the same. I untied one end of the rope from the halter and affixed it loosely to a tree. The horse could still escape if needed but would be fooled into thinking he was restrained.

The horses got busy eating the sweet grass.

I flopped on my back in the meadow.

“How are your burns?” Emily asked, settling beside me.

“I don’t want to look yet. They hurt, but I’m trying not to pay them any attention.” I propped myself on my elbows and gazed at the creek which meandered between the banks. As soon as I rested, I would take a dip and get clean. “So, what was your father like when you were growing up?”

“Oh, he always seemed to carry a lot of secrets. I wondered if he was up to no good when I discovered a pile of weapons in the barn. But I’ve wrestled with this knowledge, desperate to see him as a good man. Margaret never pressed him, but I could see the strain it put on her. As far as I could discern, he’d disappear at odd times and return hours later without telling her anything. I think that’s why she poured so much of her attention into Charlotte, cooing and fussing over her. Margaret was miserable in her marriage.”

“Why do you refer to her in the past tense?”

“She died a couple of years ago. She caught the consumption. After that, Charlotte became even needier. It was up to me to see to her needs since Papa was mostly absent. I hated it.” She pursed her lips and stared into space.

Consumption was what we called tuberculosis in the 21st century. “That must have been awful.”

Her gaze slid toward me, then flitted away. “It wasn’t that bad when Margaret was alive. In a way, it’s a blessing that Charlotte died, too. I would have had to shoulder the burden of her care.” Her eyes widened in horror, and she clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh, I can’t believe I just said that. God will smite me down.”

“All you did was say the truth, Emily. If Charlotte had lived, we would have done our best to care for her.”

Emily lay down beside me and looked up at the blue sky. “So, that’s my story. What about yours?”

I studied a wispy cloud as it meandered overhead. How much could I reveal to her, given that I came from a different century? Well, two centuries now, if I wanted to be precise.

“There’s not much to tell. I lost my family, too. Both my mother and my father were killed.”

Emily gasped. “Olivia! That’s awful!”

I turned to face her, resting my head on my elbow. “It was heartbreaking. I’ve lost everyone close to me. Even the man I loved.”

One lone tear escaped and dripped from the side of my nose.

“Oh, dear!” Emily turned to face me and patted my hand. “You poor thing! So you know tragedy, too. Was he killed, also?”

More tears trickled from my eyes. “I don’t know where he is. We got separated on our journey. I miss him with all my heart.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet that you found true love!”

“It sure was sweet. I met him after I was betrayed by the man I thought was my true love.” My stomach squeezed into a knot at the thought of Tristan.

Emily stayed quiet, letting me sort through my thoughts.

“It was surprising to find love in an unexpected place. It took me a long time to trust him—I carried the wound of betrayal with me for a long time. I love Roman with all my heart and soul.” I sniffled.

“That’s a beautiful story, Olivia. Don’t worry. You’ll find him again. Love always finds a way. Keep the faith.”

She reached up and fished a necklace free from beneath her soiled dress. She gave it a squeeze, then tucked it back inside her collar.

“What’s that necklace?” I asked.

Emily’s gaze grew wistful. “It’s a part of me. It reminds me of my mother. Father said it was hers, and she wanted me

to have it. He gave it to me for my sixteenth birthday.” She rolled on her back, pressed her hand to her sternum where the necklace lay, and fell into her memories.

I rolled over, too.

It had been two days since I’d seen Roman, but it felt like a lifetime. The thought of never seeing him again, feeling his touch, or waking up next to him felt as heavy as a coffin stone over my chest.

Oh, Roman. I thought I was doing the right thing by sending us together somewhere, but all I did was separate us.

I wiped my eyes with my grimy, blister-covered hand. I was in pain, inside and out.

“Olivia?” Emily said in a small voice.

“Yes?” I said, still watching the sky.

“What are we going to do next? I’ve never had to survive on my own.”

I thought of all my survival training and my time in Rome, where I had to start over. “I have. Let’s get some rest and then clean up a bit. Maybe there’s a town nearby where we can find an inn or something.”

“I don’t have a way to pay for an inn. Do you?” Emily said.

“No,” I said glumly. Even if I had money, it would all be coins from 208 A.D. “But we’ll figure it out.”

I hoped we would. If I could survive ancient Rome, I could find a way to endure 19th-century America.

“Let’s get some rest before we make any decisions. Then, we’ll forage for food. After cleaning up.”

What I would give for a hot shower. Oh, well. A creek will have to do.

I fell fast asleep with one thought on my mind

Where is Roman?

CHAPTER SIX



Roman

I listened as the guards discussed our fate from outside the hopper windows. Things didn't look good for Marcellious and me.

Ideas were tossed about like hanging us from a tree and disemboweling us to warn other traitors of the fate due them. Apparently, they didn't believe a word I'd said about getting drunk and swimming before the Kiowa attacked us.

Another fellow suggested they bind our hands and feet and drag us behind the wagons until the skin ripped from our flesh, and we finally succumbed to death.

I didn't care for either option. So, armed with my dagger and a flint striker as my only means of escape, I nudged Marcellious' sleeping form.

"Hey," I said. "Wake up."

He mumbled something unintelligible.

"Hey," I said again, poking him with my foot. "Wake up."

I studied the wound on his shoulder. At least he'd stopped bleeding. The bandage had dried into a stiff dark-red stain over the bullet hole.

The late-day sun filled the cellar with stifling heat, making the rotting corpse in the corner smell like hell. I pressed my palm to my nose and mouth. It sort of helped stifle the disgusting smell.

“I said, wake up.” I kicked his side with more force.

Marcellious let out a groan.

“Fuck off.” He glowered at me.

“We’ve got to get out of here. In the morning, they’re going to be on the move, either dragging us behind a wagon until our skin falls off or hanging us from a tree and gutting us.”

Marcellious’ eyes popped open. “How do you know that?”

“I overheard them while you were sleeping, princess.”

“Some sleep. I was having nightmares about landing in the same place as you.” He glared at me with his bloodshot eyes. “Seems the nightmare is a waking dream.”

“We landed where we landed. You can thank Olivia later. But now, we need to escape.”

“Do you have any ideas?” With a groan, Marcellious struggled up to sit. He visibly paled, no doubt from the pain stabbing his shoulder.

I struck the flint striker. “Where there’s a spark, there’s a flame.”

He scoffed. “So you’re going to waltz up to one of the buildings and strike that flint enough times to catch the timber on fire? Good luck with that.”

“What, you think I don’t know how to start a fire?” I rolled my eyes. “Actually, over the scent of death down here, I caught whiffs of smoke. They’re probably setting up campfires for their evening meals. And they’ve got hay in their wagons for the horses. All it would take is a few embers to start the wagons on fire. Then, we push them toward the tents and flee in the chaos.”

“Have you forgotten I can barely lift my arm? I’m useless to your plan.” His expression was bruised with frustration.

“Not entirely. If we can trick one of the guards into coming down here, I’ll kill him, take his uniform, and put it on. Then, I’ll push you outside, pretending to be a soldier, and tell

everyone I received orders to take you out and shoot you before taking care of the other one.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Marcellious glared at me.

“Not at this moment, no. But pull something foolish, and I’ll happily oblige you.”

“Does that mean you’re going to untie me?”

“Not yet. You need to remain restrained until we’re free.” I made my way to the hopper window and searched around for soldiers.

They all stood or lounged in the distance, preparing fires near their tents or tending to their guns.

A couple of them were skinning the carcass of a deer, no doubt for their evening meal.

“Come on,” Marcellious said. “You’re free, and I’m in no condition to fight you as much as I’d like to. But I gave you my word to be your ally for twenty-four hours. So, fucking untie me.”

“You’re in no condition to bark orders at me, either,” I snapped, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye.

He had a point, though. If I had taken him outside restrained, I might not have had time to free him when we had to run. And I could overtake him in a fight.

“Fine,” I said.

“Thank you,” he said.

I crossed to where he sat, crouched behind him, and used my knife to slice through his bindings. Finally, I had him free of his restraints.

“Oh, that’s better,” he said, drawing his arms before him. He winced at the pain in his shoulder and used his non-injured arm to push himself up to standing.

“All right, now how can we convince *one* soldier to come down here?” I said.

“Maybe we don’t have to do any convincing,” Marcellious said, looking past my shoulder.

I pivoted to see what he was referring to.

Booted feet strode toward the cellar, and seconds later, the door creaked open.

“Sit down,” I hissed, and Marcellious and I sat, jerking our arms behind our backs.

The lone soldier clomped down the stairs bearing a platter of something edible. “Last meal, gents. Tomorrow we’ll put you out of your misery.”

He grinned, revealing blackened teeth.

“We can’t exactly eat it without using our arms, can we?” I said.

“Isn’t that a shame?” The soldier extended the platter toward us.

“Could you at least bring it closer?” I said. My stomach growled, liking the idea of food.

“Sure thing,” the soldier said, crouching before me to set the plate by my feet.

I whipped my arms from behind my back and seized his neck

His eyes grew enormous. I bore down on his neck as he struggled and kicked. Then his body went limp, and his eyes stared at nothing. I dropped him to the ground.

I picked up the food and gobbled some down before handing the platter to Marcellious.

“Here. I’m going to change into the soldier’s clothes.” I stripped him and donned all his garments, including boots and a bicorn hat. I gathered my hair back and bound it with some strips of the dead man’s shirt. “How do I look?”

“Like a fucking soldier with too-tight clothes,” Marcellious said through a mouthful of food.

I seized the pan from his hands and helped myself to a few more bites, using my fingers as utensils.

When no more food was left, I flung the platter across the room. "Get up. Now we put our plan in motion."

Marcellious heaved himself to standing.

"Put your hands behind your back," I said.

Grimacing, Marcellious did as I commanded.

"You ready?" I looked Marcellious in the eyes.

"As ready as I'm going to be, considering." His complexion was as pale as the snow, his forehead dotted with sweat.

I hoped he didn't die before we had a chance to escape.

We tromped upstairs and veered away from the men milling about near the encampment consisting of at least thirty small tents and several larger ones. Campfires burned brightly before several tents and pots and pans had been placed over the flames.

The deer looked skeletal, stripped of its meat for the soldiers' consumption.

"Hey!" someone yelled. "You there! Where you going with that prisoner?"

"Interrogation," I called back. I had to think fast. I was making up the plan with each step I took.

"I hope your plan works, and you can start the wagon full of hay on fire," Marcellious whispered to me over his shoulder. "If we get one wagon ablaze, that should keep them busy while we light others."

"All right, good." I headed toward the wagons near the horses, which stood beneath a copse of trees. I beelined toward one of the carts filled with hay. After retrieving the flint striker from my pocket, I struck it until sparks flew onto the dried grass.

Luckily, the soldiers seem distracted by a drinking game if their wild yells from across the camp were any indication.

The grass caught fire, and the flames began to spread.

“Blow on it,” Marcellious whispered.

“I know what to do,” I snapped. I cupped my hands and blew.

The flames grew taller until the hay was blazing.

One of the soldiers yelled, “Hey! Look!” but he was cut off by raucous laughter.

“Go hide,” I hissed at Marcellious. “Pick a couple horses and wait for me near that tree.”

I pointed toward what looked like a maple tree.

“On it,” Marcellious said. He hurried toward the horses.

“Fire!” I shouted. “Fire!”

I raced toward another wagon and ducked behind it.

Soldiers sprinted toward the wagon.

I struck the flint lighter near another hay-filled wagon until it caught fire, then rushed toward a third wagon.

The soldiers all scurried about, trying to put out the flames.

I rushed toward the tree where I’d directed Marcellious.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go,” Marcellious cried from his position on one of the horses. He held the reins of another.

I vaulted onto the horse’s back, and we both took off in the direction opposite the fires.

Shouts rang out from behind us, followed by the distant pounding of hooves. The soldiers were after us, but hopefully, we had enough of a head start to lose them.

Night fell, blanketing the land, but we rode on, trusting our surefooted steed’s instincts.

We rode for hours until the light began to force its way into the sky.

Our exhausted horses had slowed to a walk. To my right came the sound of running water.

“Now what?” Marcellious said.

“I don’t know. My only plan was to escape.”

“Good plan.”

“We’re not stuck in a cellar with a dead man anymore, are we?” I said. “Let’s let the horses have some water. I could use some, too. Then we can come up with our next move.”

Marcellious swayed on top of the horse.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Not really,” he croaked. “I don’t feel well. I think I need to rest. My shoulder is killing me.”

“Give me your reins.” I trotted my horse next to Marcellious and held out my hand.

“What? No. I’m fine.”

“You look a breath away from death. Hand me your reins.”

“No!” He swayed again, nearly toppling from the horse.

I leaned over and yanked the reins from his fingers, guiding them in front of his horse’s head.

Marcellious slumped over the neck of his steed, clutching the mane.

I led both horses toward the creek.

They waded out into the middle of the creek, lowered their muzzles, and began to drink.

I slid off the side of my equine and scooped water into my cupped hands, slurping it down. Once my belly was full of liquid, I ladled some more into my hands and held it up to Marcellious.

“Marcellious.”

He roused himself from his collapse. “Huh? What?”

“You need water. Turn your head to the side, and I’ll pour some in.”

He turned his head and opened his mouth.

I let the water stream from my fingers into his waiting maw.

After two more handfuls, he recovered enough to slip from the back of his horse, stoop in the stream, and fill his belly with water.

Then, he splashed his face and hair.

I did the same. When I righted myself, I sniffed the air. “Smell that.”

“What?”

“It smells like fire.”

“Maybe it’s from the fire we set.” He wiped his palm across his face.

“That’s miles away. Look!” I pointed at smoke wisping into the air from the trees. “Maybe there’s someone there we can ask for help.”

“Only one of us is dressed like a soldier. I still look like a Sioux.” Marcellious smirked.

“You can be my prisoner,” I said, peering through the trees.

“What if *you’re* my prisoner?”

I gave him a side-eyed glare. “If it makes you feel better. But, if it’s white people, they’ll be terrified of you.”

Marcellious sighed. “I suppose you’re right, but what makes you think they’ll help either of us?”

“I think we should at least go and see. We could use some help if help is available.” I picked up the reins of both horses and led them out of the stream.

We headed toward the smoke, following the creek’s bank.

My footsteps were heavy as I tromped along the stream’s edge, with Marcellious lagging behind. I was beyond exhausted and could use a good twenty hours of sleep. But, at this point, I’d settle for even one hour.

As we rounded the bend, a female voice hissed, “Don’t move, or I’ll kill you.”

The voice sounded familiar. I *knew* that voice.

Olivia peered at me from behind a tree trunk, her gun aimed at my head. “Roman?”

“Olivia!” I dropped the reins of the horse and ran to her.

She emerged from the trees and raced toward me.

“Oh, my God! Roman! I thought I’d never see you again,” Olivia said as we squeezed one another in a fierce embrace.

I eased back and slammed my mouth against hers, kissing her with hunger and need.

Oh, the taste of her. I couldn’t get enough. My heart pounded in my chest. I was so overjoyed to see her—beyond joy. I ground my lips against hers, passionately, fiercely, reclaiming her soul to mine. To hold her in my arms again—the feeling was exhilarating.

I eased away from her to behold her beautiful face. “My beautiful flame, I’m so—”

A loud splash exploded into the air. I whipped my head to the side to see what had made that noise.

Marcellious had fallen in a dead faint a few yards away, face down in the creek.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Olivia

With a roar, Roman sprinted toward the stream where Marcellious had fallen.

I followed, right on Roman's tail. I couldn't believe my eyes. Marcellious was here with Roman, which meant I was right about him. He was Roman's brother and a Timeborne, just like us.

Water tumbled over and around Marcellious' limp body as if he were nothing but another boulder in the creek. The moss clinging to the bank of the water trailed over his bruised and battered back and tangled in his long hair, making him look like a strange sea monster.

"Oh, no, you don't," Roman said, grabbing him by the back of his neck and hauling him free of the water.

Marcellious spluttered and coughed, and then, he cried out in agony. A bloody bandage was wrapped around his shoulder.

"What happened to him?" I said, lifting up Marcellious' feet as Roman hefted his torso. We hauled him from the stream and gently placed him on the ground.

I paused to catch my breath. Hauling over two hundred pounds of dead weight was hard work.

Bare-chested, dressed only in his loincloth, Marcellious was peppered with gooseflesh.

"He was shot. We were captured by American soldiers and held captive."

“We were, too,” I said, reaching for Marcellious’ ankles.

“We?” Roman said.

“Me and a woman named Emily. Long story. I’ll tell you after we get him to the fire.” I inclined my head toward a small campfire where the hare I’d caught lay roasting.

Emily sat by the fire, staring at us.

The horses Roman had arrived with had wandered out into the meadow to join the two Emily, and I had stolen. They all stood, heads down, contentedly munching grass.

“Ready?” I said, gripping Marcellious’ ankles.

Roman nodded.

“Here we go.” I lifted Marcellious’ legs, and we carried him to the fire with Roman supporting his torso.

“What happened to him?” Emily said, hurrying toward us.

“He has been shot and severely wounded,” I said, easing Marcellious to the ground.

Roman looked at Emily with a curious expression. “And you must be Emily, am I right?”

“That’s me,” she said with a quick smile.

“Where are my manners?” I said, stepping forward. “Emily, this is Roman. Roman, this is Emily. Emily helped me escape the American soldiers. She feels like a sister to me.”

I reached for her hand and squeezed it. “And, Roman, as you’ve surely guessed, is the love of my life.”

I glanced at him, my heart overflowing.

“And this fellow...” I cast my gaze at the ground where Marcellious lay. “This is Marcellious. He and Roman are brothers.”

Marcellious let out a long groan, rolled to his side so he faced the fire, and drew his knees toward his chest.

“Oh, he must be freezing from the cold creek. I’ve got a man’s jacket he can use,” I said.

I retrieved the dead soldier's coat from the ground, where I'd napped beneath it, and lay it on Marcellious's chilled skin.

Marcellious shivered, his eyes closed.

"What can I do to help?" Emily asked.

"Do you have any knowledge of local medicinal plants?" I said.

"Some. Margaret taught me. She used herbs in her midwifery."

"Are there any herbs around here?"

"I think I saw yarrow at the edge of the meadow. We can make a paste that will help stop the bleeding. And wild willow bark will help ease the pain. I'll go and fetch it."

"Thank you," I said.

After she departed, I folded back the jacket and set to unwrapping the wet, bloody bandage. "What happened to him? How did he get all these injuries?"

"Some of the injuries were from our fighting in the Colosseum. This latest one is a gunshot wound, as I mentioned. Some American soldiers shot him and took us prisoner. They thought we were Sioux."

"And how is it you're wearing a soldier's uniform, and he's dressed only in a loincloth?" I peeled apart the sodden mess of fabric, revealing an angry-looking, gaping wound.

"I killed a soldier and pretended to be taking the prisoner... out to be interrogated. Then we set wagons on fire and escaped with two horses."

"Is this where he was shot?" I delicately touched the edge of the injury with my fingertip.

"Yes. I had to dig out the bullet while Marcellious was conscious. It wasn't a pretty moment for either of us."

"I can only imagine. Kind of serves him right, though, for all the misery he put you through."

Marcellious' eyes remained closed while I tended to him. His skin was a ghastly gray-green.

"Can you rinse this off in the stream and hang it over a tree limb until we need it?" I handed the wet mess to Roman.

"Of course," he said, rising to his full height.

My heart soared as I watched him depart, his long-legged stride eating up the distance to the creek.

Dressed in an American soldier's uniform, his muscular body moved like a lithe tiger, even though he looked tired.

We found each other. We time-traveled together, and now he's here with me. Emily was right about true love.

I peeked beneath the jacket at all the scrapes, bruises, and gashes marring Marcellious' body.

"Oh, Marcellious. What has happened to you?" I said softly.

"*You* happened to me, Olivia," Marcellious spluttered before groaning. "Why did you bring me here?"

I blinked, startled that he said anything but stunned that he spoke in English. "I had nothing to do with where you ended up. I just took a wild guess that you're a time traveler. And you are. That must mean you're Roman's brother."

"Like hell I am." Marcellious gripped his stomach and let out an awful groan as if he were in agony.

"And how is it that you speak in English? Is this where you're from?"

"None of your damn business," he snapped.

"You're an asshole, you know that? I'm trying to put the past behind me. I'm tending to your injuries, and yet still you complain." I tsked.

"I didn't ask for your help, did I?" He clutched the coat tighter around him. "I didn't ask for any of this."

I rolled my eyes and glanced at the hare roasting over the fire. The skin was blistered and burned, so I used a stick to

move it off the embers.

We would have to split the hare four ways, but I didn't care—Roman was back, and we were together.

I turned back to Marcellious and placed my hand on his forehead, checking for signs of a fever. If he had sepsis, there was little I could do for him. Thankfully, he still felt cool to the touch.

“Get your hand off of me,” he snarled, directing his angry, brown-eyed gaze at me. “Why did you force me to time travel? I don't want to be here at all, but I definitely don't want to be here with you two.”

“And yet here we all are,” I said, shaking my head. “I got you out of Rome, didn't I?”

“I never wanted to leave Rome. I didn't care if I died in Rome, either,” he said. “You're going to pay for this, bitch.”

“You should be thanking me,” I said. I was starting to regret bringing him here. “Can't you be nice for one second? I've given you my coat. Emily has gone to fetch herbs to help you heal, yet you still complain about everything.”

Marcellious opened his mouth to retort, but Emily interrupted, approaching us from the creek with Roman by her side.

They both carried leaves cupped in their hands.

“What a boorish man you are,” Emily said. “This woman saved me. She's an angel. That is what she is. How dare you speak to her so rudely.”

She crouched next to him and set her leaves next to her. A gooey, green paste sat inside the leaves.

“You can set your willow bark here,” she said to Roman, pointing to the ground next to her, then turned to Marcellious. “You, sir, need to learn some manners.”

She dabbed some paste on his wound. “She's here tending to your injuries, and you are ungrateful. Shame on you. We should leave you here and let the animals devour you.”

I was surprised by Emily's bold words and courage to stand up to Marcellious on my behalf.

Marcellious blinked. "Who are you?"

"I'm Emily. And Olivia is my friend. I don't appreciate you speaking to her so harshly."

Marcellious simply stared at her, speechless for once.

Once she'd applied the concoction to his flesh, she scooped more of the goo onto two fingers. She held them over Marcellious' face. "Open up. Eat this. Willow bark helps ease the pain."

He did so willingly, like a docile child.

Roman and I exchanged stunned glances.

"We need to let the poultice dry before we rebandage it," Emily said.

I appreciated her no-nonsense attitude.

"Okay," I said. "Let's share the roasted rabbit while we wait."

We all settled on our rumps in a small circle around the fire. I passed chunks of the cooling meat to everyone, even snarky Marcellious, and we all ate like ravenous beasts. While it wasn't much, it would keep us going for a little while until Roman or I caught more game.

While we ate, Roman and I exchanged tales of our journey thus far. Both of us carefully concealed the fact that we appeared out of nowhere at a time we were unfamiliar with.

Marcellious fell asleep. The medicine and the food must have helped because his color improved.

Emily listened to us and occasionally interjected a few stories into mine, but mainly, she kept quiet and studied Marcellious' sleeping form.

I glanced at Roman. Deep bruised lines gave his face a haunted expression.

I reached out and stroked his cheek. “You must be exhausted. Why don’t you rest? I could use some more sleep, too.”

I looked at him, hunger in my gaze. How I’d love to be naked next to him, exploring one another....

His expression turned smoldering. But now was not the time.

“I’d like nothing more,” he said, “but someone must always stand watch.”

“I’ll do it,” Marcellious murmured in a sleepy voice. He opened his eyes. “I feel better from the herbs and the food. Thank you,” he said to Emily.

“No need to thank me,” she said. “Olivia caught the hare. You should thank her instead.”

Marcellious said nothing as he pushed to sitting.

I sighed. His attitude toward me hadn’t improved.

“Go,” Marcellious said, shooing me with his hand. “Get your rest. The sooner we mend and find a place to land, the sooner we can separate.”

“God, Marcellious. Give your perpetually bad mood a rest,” I said.

Roman and I moved to the other side of the fire. I lay next to him, cradled in his arms.

Emily rested near the fire, keeping a close eye on Marcellious.

Roman’s breathing grew slow and deep.

As nightfall descended and the fire flickered, dying out, I caught movement in the woods. A dark figure, appearing like a shadow, stared back at me.

I squinted, making out a man’s outline. He looked the same height as Roman, and his body rippled with power. He was dressed all in black, making it impossible to tell what he truly looked like. But all that power—it rolled from him in waves.

I tensed, shuddering in Roman's arms, and started to push upright. The shadow vanished.

My heart plummeted. It seemed the darkness had found me.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Olivia

I barely slept a wink that night. Wolves or coyotes howled, their song like banshees. Owls hooted and sailed overhead on whisper-soft wings. Every snap of a branch had me on high alert as I waited for the darkness to return.

The only comfort I took came from pressing myself into Roman's delicious warmth each time I woke up. I'd snuggle into him or find him pulling me close, his arm wrapped firmly around me. It was like we had to keep touching one another to ensure that this moment was real—we had found one another through time and space. We had discovered each other once more.

When I woke up with the sun piercing the morning, Roman was nowhere to be found. Nor was Marcellious. Even Emily was gone.

Panic overtook me. Had Roman really been by my side last night, or had I dreamed it?

The sight of Marcellious emerging from the woods, a scowl on his face, told me I hadn't imagined it.

I sat up, stretching the ache from my limbs.

Marcellious carried an armload of firewood. The soldier's jacket I'd lent him was wrapped around his torso, but he still wore the loincloth. When he stood by the cold campfire, he dropped the wood with a clatter.

“Where’s Roman? Where’s Emily?” I said, pushing to stand. I wore the soldier’s trousers with my stola tucked into the waistband. But, having given the jacket to Marcellious, my arms were bare and covered with insect bites.

Only Emily and Roman had decent attire on. We’d have to find a way to remedy that to survive the bug bites and night chill.

Marcellious said nothing to me.

“*Hello*. Marcellious. Anyone home?”

His brow bunched together in confusion.

I sometimes forgot that the colloquialisms of my time didn’t translate to other centuries. “Have you purposefully ignored my questions or lost your hearing?”

He drew back his lip in a sneer. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Quit being an ass, Marcellious.” I moved closer to him until we stood face to face. “How’s your wound? You seem less pale than yesterday.”

“Isn’t that wonderful?” he said sarcastically. “She says I’m less pale than yesterday. That implies that I’m grateful to her for loaning me her jacket and Roman for pulling me out of the stream.”

I rolled my eyes. “God help us if you were to actually thank us for being nice to you.”

“Why the hell should I be nice to you? I didn’t ask to be here. You simply took it upon yourself to transport my so-called brother and me to another time and place—a *loathsome* time and place, I might add.”

He lifted his hand, dismissed me, and started to walk away.

I lunged, snagging his coat sleeve. “Don’t just walk away from me. I want answers from you!”

He whirled and yanked the sleeve from my grip. “Don’t you fucking touch me, bitch.”

His face appeared ugly with rage.

I stepped back, surprised.

“How dare you bring me back to this place? Ever since I met you, you’ve been nothing but trouble.” He leaned forward, like a foul wind, trying to blow me over with his words. “How dare you bring me here without my permission?”

“We’ve already been over this, Marcellious. You’re only repeating yourself, like a one-note song.”

Rage flared in his eyes. “You ruined my life!”

“I did nothing of the sort!” I gave him a hard shove.

He stumbled back, recovered, then countered with a shove of his own.

“I saved your life by getting you out of Rome!” I shouted, regaining my balance. “You were a *nobody* in Rome, a lap dog to the emperor and his whims. You weren’t a free man but an enslaved person serving the emperor.”

“I didn’t want to leave Rome!” His face was purple with anger. “No matter who I was there, I could have left Rome anytime I wanted. But I stayed in Rome because of her, and now you separated me from *her!*”

My arms dropped by my side, and I stared at him, blinking.

“I don’t know who you are talking about,” I said in a softer voice.

“Theadora!” He sounded anguished.

Roman stepped toward the meadow, his hair dripping wet as if he’d cleansed himself in the stream. He frowned as he strode toward us.

“Who’s Theadora?” I said.

“The woman I loved and cared about the most. The woman who was killed because of me. And now you have ripped her away from me forever.” Marcellious turned away from me and hung his head.

As Roman approached us, he said, “Why are you talking about Theadora?”

“You know Theadora?” I said.

“She was Amara’s daughter.” Roman’s brows bunched together as he regarded Marcellious.

“Amara’s daughter?” I said to Marcellious. “Wait a minute. You and Amara’s daughter were together...as in lovers?”

Marcellious shuddered, and he clenched his hands into fists like he was going to pummel someone. “She was my life! She was my world! She was everything to me, and now you have separated me from her!”

Roman drew back in surprise. “You and Theadora?”

“Yes, me and Theadora,” Marcellious yelled. “She gave me joy once until she was taken from me—both her and my unborn child. I wanted to remain in Rome, just to be close to her.”

“But...but...she’s dead, Marcellious,” Roman said.

“I know she’s dead! But I knew her in Rome, not here. This is the last place I want to be—I was miserable here. Everyone I knew betrayed me. I’d rather be anywhere but here.”

Emily emerged from the trees, her arms laden with greens.

I lowered my voice and said, “Marcellious, I’m sorry for your losses and pain. I never meant to cause you more trouble and sorrow. I didn’t know how much she meant to you. But we need to know what you were doing here. It sounds like you used to live here. How did you end up in Rome? What happened here that was so despicable?”

Marcellious spun in my direction like a trapped beast, fangs bared and claws extended. “Why should I tell you anything? What good will it do me to tell you?”

Spit flew from his mouth as he shouted.

“You, me, and Olivia are all Timebornes. We shouldn’t be fighting but come together as allies,” Roman said. “Keeping secrets about your life and who you are will get you nowhere.”

Marcellious sneered and looked away from Roman.

“Marcellious, I need answers from you,” I said. “If it wasn’t for the crazy chants you sang when you captured me and me finding your dagger in a prison cell, we wouldn’t be here. Instead, you and Roman would be dead by now. I saved you, Emily healed you, and we only want answers.”

Marcellious started to stalk away, but Roman caught his arm.

“Look,” Roman said. “You’ve been acting like an ass ever since we got here. If you don’t start talking, I will make your bullet wound feel like the best thing that ever happened to you. I’m sick of you. In Rome, you held Olivia captive. You forced me to be in servitude to the emperor. You made me kill my best friend. Now, we’re here, like it or not. Give us some answers, damn it!”

Marcellious took a swing at Roman but missed him. His face contorted with pain.

Emily dropped her bundle of greens and ran toward us. “Stop! Stop!”

Roman swung at Marcellious and connected with his jaw.

Marcellious stumbled backward, falling into Emily.

Emily screamed as they both fell to the ground. She pushed Marcellious off her. “Stop this! You’re still badly injured!”

Marcellious rolled over and pinned her to the ground. “Don’t you dare tell me to stop! You are *nothing* to me.”

I was so wrong about Marcellious. Nothing was redeeming inside him, and I regretted bringing him here. It had all been a big mistake.

I charged toward Marcellious at the same time as Roman. I grabbed Marcellious’ jacket and tried to yank him off of Emily.

Roman pushed me aside, seized Marcellious by the waist, and hauled him to his feet.

Something rocketed past my head and struck a nearby tree with a thwack.

I whipped my head to see what it was. My eyes widened in alarm at the quivering arrow stuck in the side of the tree trunk.

“Oh, God! We’re under attack!” I cried out as another arrow flew toward me. I threw myself to the ground, avoiding the strike by the deadly barb.

“Savages!” Emily screamed.

“Go for cover!” Roman yelled.

We all scrambled for the trees.

It was no use. We were surrounded in all directions by Native Americans, their faces smeared with warpaint.

We’d gone from dire circumstances to worse ones. If I thought ancient Rome was brutal, America in the 1800s was a close contender.

How would we ever escape?

CHAPTER NINE



Olivia

Native Americans slid from the trees like shadows until we were surrounded by at least ten men, all wielding arrows or tomahawks aimed at us. The men's torsos were bare, and their chests and faces were painted with red and black symbols. Their intent to kill us rolled from them in giant waves.

Roman, Marcellious, Emily, and I backed toward one another, making a tight circle in the center of the warriors.

A breeze whistled through the trees, blowing my hair in my face.

I brushed the strands back, not wanting anything to distract me. I tried to scan my surroundings, looking for a means of escape.

These men were formidable, muscular, and lithe—and they were closing in on us.

“What are we going to do?” Emily whispered. She reached for my hand.

I gave her a squeeze for courage, then withdrew my hand.

“I don't know,” I whispered. “Roman? Ideas? Think we can make peace with them?”

Roman's face had hardened into his gladiator expression, intense and deadly. “They don't want peace, Olivia. What we have to do is fight.”

The Native Americans stepped closer, tightening their circle.

I became acutely aware of the absence of sounds in the forest. No birds sang, no animals pushed through the underbrush... I could barely make out the gurgling stream.

The two Native Americans facing me looked to be about my height. Their muscles were sinewy and well-developed.

I had no doubt they would fight me to the death if I gave them the opportunity. I had to employ my wiles.

In Rome, I'd trained with Roman. We'd shared our unique fighting skills with one another until we were each infinitely more effective. And we'd learned to sense one another's movements and strengths. It even seemed like we could read one another's thoughts.

I glanced over at Roman.

He looked at me and gave me an almost imperceptible nod.

I echoed the nod and assumed a wide-legged fighting stance.

Roman did the same.

I launched into a roundhouse kick and caught one of the Sioux in the face.

His face widened in shock as he tottered backward and fell against a tree. His expression contorted into one of rage. He pulled away from the tree and attacked, head down, ready to take me down.

I caught his head and jacked my knee into his face. I felt the solid connection of bone on bone as my kneecap hit his teeth and upper jaw with a crunch.

He howled and righted himself, his mouth a bloody rictus of pain.

Two other Native Americans uttered piercing war cries and charged me, tomahawks waving.

I ducked to avoid the sharp blades.

Another grabbed my hair and yanked, forcing my head backward.

A knife came into view, wielded by the man who gripped my hair.

I seized his wrist and fought with all my might to keep the blade away from my throat.

Roman came up behind him, wrapping his arm around the man's neck in a grappling chokehold.

The Native American jabbed Roman's side with his elbow. At the same time, he brought his leg up and kicked straight back into Roman's thigh.

With a loud "oof," Roman released his attacker.

I grabbed another man in a bear hug, biting down on his sweaty neck.

He wrenched his elbows back and forth like a tornado, breaking my hold. Then, he whirled around, seized my arm, and twisted it behind my back.

Sharp pain rocketed through my muscles. I was shoved and sent flying to the ground, flat on my stomach.

The warrior climbed on my back, straddling me. He seized my hair and gathered it into a bunch.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a knife in his other hand.

Oh, hell no. I got my hands beneath me and shoved with all my might, managing to get to my hands and knees, knocking him off balance.

In front of me, a warrior raced toward Marcellious from behind. He slammed his fist into Marcellious' face.

Marcellious' whole body torqued to the side, and he landed in a heap on the ground with an ear-splitting cry of pain.

We were getting nowhere with our attackers.

Two men came at me from either side.

I got a good roundhouse kick into the man on my right. The man on my left threw himself at me, and we flew to the ground.

He began pummeling my face with his fist.

I couldn't get a good hold of any of his body parts. Just as the lights started to go out and I began to fade from consciousness, Roman yelled and viciously kicked the man's kidneys.

My attacker rolled away from me and took off after Roman.

One of the Natives grabbed Emily, and she let out a shriek.

"Help me!" She writhed in his grip.

"Emily, no!" I raced for her, but a Native warrior caught me around the waist.

Marcellious, Roman, and I were good fighters, but not in a ten-to-three ratio, with one of us badly injured—Marcellious.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him struggling with two Natives, clearly at a disadvantage.

I kicked and fought, held tightly by my captor.

Three men had Roman on the ground, and one raised his tomahawk, ready to plunge his blade into Roman's chest.

Somebody let out a deafening roar like a bear.

"*Ayúštą po!*"

We all turned toward the sound.

Marcellious, clutching his arm as blood seeped through his jacket from the wound in his shoulder, shouted in Sioux. "Stop fighting, my brothers. I am one of you!"

My jaw dropped open. *Marcellious knows the Sioux language? How many secrets does he carry?* While I could not hold a conversation, I'd learned enough from Moon Lee to understand it.

Everyone stopped fighting.

The forest around us seemed to hold its breath as we all waited to see what happened next—even the breeze had stopped.

Only the sound of our heaving lungs rattled the silence.

One of the Natives, the tallest man, stalked toward Marcellious and got in his face.

“*Tukténitanhan he?*” he demanded.

I quickly translated to, “Where do you come from?”

“How does this white man know our language?” a shorter man said, speaking in Sioux.

The tall man loomed over Marcellious as he said, louder this time, “Who are you?”

Marcellious held his ground. “I am one of you.”

“No,” the tall man said, “you are not one of us.”

“I am indeed one of you.” He pushed his sleeve back, revealing his tattooed arm.

The tall man glanced down at his own arm and back to Marcellious’ forearm. “How did you get that mark? It is known only to our tribe.”

Roman and I glanced at one another.

I extended my arm and pointed at it, silently asking him if he had a similar mark.

Roman shook his head.

The Natives began talking to one another, shifting uneasily back and forth.

“How can he have our mark?”

“Who is he?”

“Is this some sort of trick?”

Finally, Marcellious said clearly, “Take me to your village. I would like to meet your chief.”

The tall man glared at Marcellious but said nothing.

“I am the son of Dancing Fire. I want to be taken to your chief, *now*,” Marcellious bellowed.

Roman’s and my mouths both dropped open.

Marcellious is the son of Dancing Fire? That was Lee’s Native American name.

The warriors shrank back as if shoved backward by Marcellious’ words.

One of them fell to his knees and lowered his head, and then, one by one, they all followed suit.

I swayed where I stood, stunned, struggling to catch my breath.

Finally, the tall man lifted his head and climbed to his feet. He grabbed Marcellious’ wrist the held up his arm like a prizefighter. “The great warrior has returned! We must bring him to our chief!”

A collective cheer rang out among the Native people.

They all started through the woods with much exuberance, dragging Marcellious.

Roman, Emily, and I tagged along behind, exchanging confused looks.

CHAPTER TEN



Olivia

Never show your captor signs of fear—even if they might not be your captor. Those thoughts continued as I followed ten Native Americans, Roman, and Marcellious, through the woods. The Native warriors had brutally assaulted us, and I thought we were goners. Now, I wasn't so sure what their intentions were. They'd led us to where they'd hidden their horses and told us to follow them on horseback.

Could the Native Americans be trusted after their vicious attack?

That remained to be seen.

The men were several paces before us, easily keeping up with Roman and Marcellious.

I stayed behind, leading our two horses since Emily didn't want to ride.

She stayed glued to my side, her face pinched with worry. Every once in a while, I'd reach for her hand and squeeze it or offer a reassuring glance to let her know she was safe with me.

We tromped over fallen logs, clambered through dense underbrush, climbed hills, and navigated across plateaus, with the Native Americans showing no sign of fatigue or exertion.

Emily stumbled and tripped her way along, probably because of her tightly wound nerves. "I'm scared, Olivia. I don't trust the men who attacked us."

“Don’t worry,” I said, holding aside a branch for her to duck under. “You have me. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I gave her a warm smile.

“Thank you, Olivia,” she said, a quaver in her voice.

After she’d passed, I followed.

Our horses followed along, picking their way through the brush.

The branches had scraped the hell out of my bare arms. Insects attacked the bites their friends had already made. I tried my best not to scratch my skin, but I lost the war. And, as hot as I was from all this exertion, sweat poured from my neck and face, trickling onto the bug bites and making them itch even more.

I was miserable, but I had to stay strong for Emily and be her protector, no matter how much I was quaking in my trousers.

Finally, we emerged from the woodsy hills and headed toward vast plains.

At one point, Roman circled back, waiting for Emily and me to catch up.

“Do you have anything to report?” I asked, comforted by his presence.

“They haven’t said much.” Roman gave my hand a squeeze. “But they’re no longer hostile, which is good. The lead Sioux, the man who confronted Marcellious, keeps reaching out and patting Marcellious’ leg. Marcellious is flanked by that man and another one. Two others walk directly behind him, and then the rest follow, so, while they seem welcoming, they also don’t want him out of their sight.”

I nodded. “All I have are questions for Marcellious. How does he know the language? And how does he know Dancing Fire?”

“I share your questions, Olivia. We need answers, and Marcellious stubbornly withholds anything save for the

occasional grunt or glare.” Roman leaned past me to look at Emily. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m frightened,” she said.

“There’s no need to be scared,” Roman said warmly. “Olivia is a fierce warrior in her own right. She’ll take good care of you.”

Emily smiled at me, gratitude evident on her face.

Up ahead, one of the men let out a high-pitched call.

In the distance, someone called back.

The hairs at the back of my neck prickled. “We must be close to their village.”

“So it seems. I’m going to catch up with the others,” Roman said. He urged his horse onward.

More Native Americans rushed to greet the men. They huddled around Marcellious, helping him from his horse. Roman dismounted, as well. Then, they ushered Roman and Marcellious toward their village, which consisted of numerous teepees of every size dotting the clearing near a creek.

Smoke drifted from the top of many teepees. Women and children huddled near their dwellings, eyeing us as we wandered into their midst.

Two younger warriors, looking to be in their teens, their faces painted with the same distinctive red markings, took our horses. The warriors said nothing to me—didn’t even make eye contact.

A rotund male who appeared to be an elder indicated we should wait outside one of the large teepees. Then, he, and the ten men who had attacked us, all disappeared behind the hide-covered door flap.

“What do you think they want?” Roman said to Marcellious.

Marcellious’ jaw jutted out, but he said nothing.

“You’re going to have to tell us something sooner or later,” Roman said, shifting side to side on his feet.

“Must I?” Marcellious’ gaze held an icy demeanor.

“We’re all in this together,” Roman said.

Marcellious loosely crossed his arms over his chest and stared at the teepee.

Roman and I exchanged glances.

I shook my head and let out a big sigh. It had been such a mistake to bring Marcellious with us. Such a colossal mistake...

As we waited, I tried to make eye contact and smile at some women who gawked at us with mistrust, hostility, or curiosity.

They averted their gazes.

I crouched and reached a hand to a couple of curious children until their parents whisked them away, scolding them for looking at us.

Obviously, we were regarded as “persons of suspicion” and untrustworthy.

About fifty teepees stood in the clearing, several yards between each. The sturdy poles of each structure poked out the top like porcupine quills, with tendrils of smoke lazily winding their way to the sky from between the sticks.

Some of the dwellings had horses or other symbols painted on the outside. Some were merely unmarked bison skin.

The women and girls wore soft deerskin dresses richly decorated with colorful beadwork. The men and boys wore supple leggings and suede shirts or went bare-chested.

They looked like proud, noble people, much like I knew Moon Lee to have been. Lee always spoke highly of his heritage.

Thinking of Lee drew wistful longings through my mind. I couldn’t help but wonder where he was and what he was doing. Did he ever miss me as much as I missed him?

After an interminably long time, a wizened old man emerged from the teepee. He gestured for Marcellious,

Roman, Emily, and me to enter.

Inside the teepee, a man who looked to be in his late forties sat in the center, flanked by the other men.

The old man who had led us in here indicated that Emily and I should sit in the back and Roman and Marcellious should approach the man in the middle.

“He’s the chief’s son,” the man said. “His name is Mahkah Mato.”

Earth Bear. Indeed, he looks like a bear.

As soon as Mahkah Mato looked at Marcellious, tears filled his eyes. He glanced at the men next to him, and they rose to their feet and helped him stand.

The chief’s son threw his arms around Marcellious. His sobs grew as he patted Marcellious’ back.

Marcellious’ back heaved with silent laments as he returned the embrace.

“Mahkah Mato,” he said in Sioux. “It’s been so long.”

I sat with my hands draped over my bent knees, eying the exchange with wonder.

What the hell is going on?

Finally, Mahkah Mato drew back from the embrace, placed his hands on Marcellious’ shoulders, and studied him. “Hunting Wolf, you’ve returned to us.”

Marcellious wiped his eyes with his thumb and forefinger but said nothing.

Hunting Wolf? How many secrets does Marcellious have?

Mahkah Mato turned to Roman. “Swift Hawk, you have returned your brother. You found him.”

He gestured for Roman to step forward and enveloped him in a hug.

Swift Hawk? Holy hell! Why hadn’t Roman ever told me he had another identity? And, had he known Marcellious was his brother?

I was reeling from all this new information, especially wondering how the two brothers had arrived in ancient Rome.

I glanced at Emily, who stared at the exchange with wide-eyed interest.

When Mahkah Mato released Roman, he said in his raspy voice, "How did you find your brother and return him to us?"

Roman gestured to me. "It was all Olivia's doing. She figured it all out. When she told me that Hunting Wolf is my brother, I wouldn't believe it until we came here together."

Mahkah Mato slowly nodded at me, his face somber.

I didn't know what to do, so I nodded back.

"Is she your wife, Swift Hawk?" Mahkah Mato asked Roman.

"She is by all rights mine, yes," Roman said.

A surge of pleasure rocked through me.

Earth Bear addressed the entire group. "The brothers have returned. They shall stay with us, and we shall care for them as family. My father, the great chief, Grey Feather, shall dine with the brothers tonight."

Terror flashed across Marcellious' face.

He'd looked so happy to be welcomed by Mahkah Mato. Why the reaction to the great chief?

So many questions....

"Prepare a feast," Mahkah Mato said, "for this is a joyous occasion."

The other Native Americans all murmured their assent.

"These people have had a long journey to be with us. See to their needs and tend to their wounds," Mahkah Mato said.

Several others nodded, rising, and ushered us from the teepee.

"Olivia," Roman said, stepping up behind me. "Marcellious and I are to see a healer. You will be taken to a

female healer. I am told they will take good care of you and Emily.”

“See, Emily?” I said, reaching for her hand, who stood beside me.

It felt cool and clammy to the touch.

“Don’t worry. Everything will be all right,” I said.

“She’s right, Emily. Don’t worry.” Roman regarded me somberly. “I will see you at the feast tonight.”

“All right,” I said, my heart fluttering at Roman’s nearness.

After a quick kiss, Roman turned to stride toward Marcellious, who stood surrounded by men, teens, and young boys, all clamoring for his attention.

I wandered off with Emily to whatever fate was in store for me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Olivia

“Remove all your clothes.” The Native American woman stood before us and pointed at the gurgling stream.

Although she spoke in Sioux, I understood the words, but Emily didn’t. And I didn’t think Emily would go along with this idea.

“What did she say?” Emily asked.

“She, um, wants us to remove all our clothes.”

I glanced behind me. We’d trekked a distance from the camp, and no one was watching us, but still...

Emily clutched her skirts, her face contorted in fear.

“She wants us to remove all our clothes?” she stammered.

“Remove all your clothes,” the woman repeated. “We will burn old clothes. Give you new ones.”

She flicked her hand impatiently.

“Yes,” I said to Emily. “She definitely wants us to remove our garments. She says she wants to burn the old clothes and give us new ones.”

My gaze slid between the woman and Emily. I tried to smile at the woman, but my grimace was forced and hesitant.

“What if I don’t want to remove my attire?” Emily said.

“I think we’d better do as she says,” I said.

The woman didn't look mean, but her stern face indicated she wasn't used to hearing the word "no."

"Let's just wade out into the middle of the stream, duck under the water, and strip, okay?" I looked encouragingly at Emily. "She's being nice and showing us hospitality."

"Will we have to walk back *naked*?" Emily said with a gasp.

I looked at the woman and tried to form meaningful words.

"Where are..." I searched my mind for the Sioux word for clothes. "*Ogle lecala*?"

She frowned and shook her head.

"No new shirt. *Cuwignaka* for you," she said, using the word for "dress." She held her hand above her eyes and peered toward the village. "Coming soon."

"She said the new clothes are coming soon. So..." I turned so my back faced Emily. Not wanting to waterlog my Glock, I peeled off the man's pants and reached under my stola to bundle the gun inside the pants. Then, I unstrapped my dagger and placed it next to the firearm.

I hoped no one would cart off the garments before retrieving my weapons.

I shrugged and began wading out into the cold water. "Come on, Emily."

Emily glanced at me, then at the woman. With fear in her eyes, she followed me into the stream.

The middle of the stream only came to my hip level, so I ducked down until I was immersed up to my neck. I gasped as chilly water surrounded me. Then I dragged my stola over my head. As I peeled the gown from my body, a wave of grief slammed into me as if I were stripping myself of Rome.

Still standing upright, Emily studied me. "Are you all right?"

"It's been such an ordeal. And I think the struggles aren't over. It feels good to remove these clothes, though, like letting

go of the past,” I said, tears pricking the back of my eyes.

A slight frown appeared on Emily’s face. She took a deep breath and plunged into the water with a shriek.

“So... c-cold.” She worked to shed herself of clothing. Then, like me, her expression turned to sorrow. Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Poor Charlotte. She was taken so brutally.”

“She was,” I agreed.

“And poor Papa. He may have done bad things but didn’t deserve to be shot and killed like that.” Emily’s voice cracked.

At the sound of splashing, I saw the woman who had ordered our clothes removed wading into the water with us. When she stood before us, she said, “You are sad. Let your sorrows wash away.”

She scooped water into her hands and poured it over my head, citing some chant I couldn’t understand.

As liquid trickled down my hair and face, I felt a wave of purification. All the battles and struggles I’d faced up to this point had tempered my spirit, made me strong, had revealed characteristics I hadn’t yet known. I was a fierce woman and intensely loyal to those I loved.

The woman did the same to Emily, dousing her head and face.

Emily started to cry even harder. “I have no family. I have no one. I am all alone in this world now.”

“You have me, Emily. You have me.” I pushed my way through the water and wrapped her in my arms.

The Native woman stood next to us and continued to pour blessings over our heads, chanting songs.

I didn’t know how much time had passed as we huddled in the water, freezing our asses off, hugging one another.

Then, the woman said something like, “It is done,” and urged us toward the riverbank.

I glanced toward the sandy bank where two young women stood, holding what looked like deerskin garments.

I reached for my stola, which had wrapped around my legs, and clutched it to my chest.

Emily did the same with her dress.

We both waded out of the stream.

“Give clothes to Song of the Night,” our Native American healer said, pointing to one of the young women. “Laughing Maid will help you into your new garments.”

We did as we were told, shivering until we donned supple deerskin garments.

Laughing Maid held our sodden old clothes away from her body as if they were something distasteful like offal or dog poop.

I reached for the dry pants that held my bundled weapons and said, “I’ll make sure these get to you.”

Laughing Maid nodded.

And then, purified by the water and the woman’s blessing, we were led back to the village and shown to a teepee where we could rest until the feast.



“Goodness, does it feel good to be clean and dressed once more in clean clothes,” I said, falling back on the bison hides spread over the floor. I’d been able to sneak my weapons from the pants and strap them to my thigh without Emily noticing.

“Yes, it does,” Emily said, snuggling beside me. She rolled on her stomach and propped herself on her forearms. “I’m so glad to have you by my side, Olivia.”

“I know. Me, too.” My heart surged with affection. I’d liked her from the start, and our connection seemed to grow and grow.

Emily fiddled with a lock of her wet hair. “Roman seems caring... nice. I’m not sure about Marcellious. He seems like a

mean man, filled with anger and violence.”

“He is.” I sighed and folded my arms behind my head. “I thought he must have redeeming qualities, but lately, I’m unsure. Maybe if he met the right woman, he could be a changed man.”

“How did you meet Roman?” Emily said, rolling on her back.

I tensed. I wanted to tell her my whole truth, but how could I? Who would possibly believe me? Emily would run for sure if I were to share my fantastic story of being born in the 21st century, traveling through time to ancient Rome, and now being here. She’d think I was insane.

“Let’s see,” I began. “I met Roman when I was traveling. We were kind of thrown together. It’s a crazy story, really. One I’m not sure I can do justice.”

Emily frowned. “And who’s Marcellious? How did you meet him?”

“He’s Roman’s twin brother. I met him on my travels.”

A wistful sigh escaped Emily’s lips. “I’ve never traveled anywhere. I was born in South Carolina and thought I’d live and die there. But then the war happened, and soldiers ripped us from our home when they found out Papa was trading weapons with the British.”

“I’m sorry.” I couldn’t imagine what it would have been like to never leave your state or your hometown. As for being ripped from your home, I knew what that felt like in ways Emily could never comprehend.

“How is it that Marcellious speaks the Sioux language?”

“That I can’t answer. I don’t know Marcellious that well. He and Roman have been at odds for a long time. I’d hoped that, um, traveling to a new place together would help them reconnect. It hasn’t.” I turned on my side to face Emily. “How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-eight. You?” She rolled to face me, too.

“Almost twenty-six. So, we’re close in age.”

“We are.” Emily reached out and touched my face affectionately.

The door flap flew open.

The woman who had led us down to the stream said, “Come. We feast.”

Emily shook her head. “I’m not going, Olivia. I’m too sad. This is the first time I’ve had to mourn my half-sister and father. Would you mind if I stayed here?”

“I don’t mind. I’ll tell them you’re not well. And I’ll bring food for you to eat. You must be as hungry as I am.”

“Thank you.”

I hesitated before saying, “Don’t be afraid, Emily. I’ve lost many people, but I won’t lose you.”

I hugged her warmly.

Emily beamed at me.

I crossed the fur-covered floor toward the woman.

“I’m Olivia,” I said.

“Leaping Deer,” the woman said, flashing the first smile I’d seen on her face. It creased her cheeks and brightened her stern countenance. “Come.”

She exited the teepee, and I followed her.

The sun was low, hovering in a cloudless sky above the abundant grasses rolling across the plains. Soon it would be nightfall.

“Your man has been asking for you,” Leaping Deer said.

My man...

My heartbeat increased.

Leaping Deer gestured toward a teepee. “He is over there. I will bring you to him. And soon we feast.”

I nodded, wings practically sprouting on my feet at the thought of seeing Roman alone.

We padded across the soft dirt until we stood before Roman's teepee. My heart nearly fluttered from my chest like a wild bird.

Leaping Deer opened the door flap to the teepee, and a warm smile stretched across her face. She stood aside and gestured for me to enter.

A Native man crouched near Roman's prone body, dabbing herbs on his many wounds. He didn't look up, focused on his task.

Like me, Roman's hair appeared damp. And he'd been dressed in buckskin leggings. His torso was bare, but what looked like a buckskin shirt lay beside him.

His face brightened like a sunrise when he saw me. He patted the bison hide next to him.

His healer finished applying the herbs to Roman's skin, sat back, and said, "You will heal. You are a strong warrior."

He stood, reached for a large deerskin pouch on the floor, and nodded at Roman. Without glancing at me, he exited the teepee.

I rushed to Roman's side and sat beside him.

He pushed up to sit and faced me, his eyes shining warmly.

I studied his handsome face in the dim light from the small hole in the ceiling, tracing his features with my fingertips. "I'm so thankful we're far away from Rome and the emperor."

I let my fingers trail down his thick neck and brush his collarbone.

"As am I, my beloved." He pushed my hair away from my face. "You look beautiful."

"So do you." I drank him in with my eyes, unable to get enough of him.

He glanced at his body. "Even my wounds have wounds."

His torso was smeared with herbs.

“But you look clean and cared for, as am I.” I ran my fingers across his skin, mindful of his many bruises, scrapes, and gashes.

“I was told to let these dry before putting my shirt on. But I can still kiss you.” He brought his hand behind my neck and dropped his forehead to mine. “Olivia, my beautiful flame. I thought I would never see you again. Forgive me for not believing you when you told me Marcellious was my brother. I stubbornly clung to the idea that Marcus was my brother. I should have listened.”

“I forgive you. I’m just thankful that the time traveling worked, and I brought you here with Marcellious.” I breathed in Roman’s clean scent of creek water, deerskin, herbs, and his uniquely masculine scent. He smelled delicious. Swirls of pleased heat rocked through my body. “Can I sit in your lap?”

“Oh, yes, my beautiful flame,” he whispered.

He crossed his legs, and I straddled him, pressing my core into his growing erection. I leaned back slightly, not wanting to disturb the thick, gooey salve drying on his wounds.

He grasped my face between his hands and studied me intently. “Had I lost you again, Olivia, I would have searched the heavens for you.”

“As I would for you, my love.” I pressed my palms over his large hands, savoring the heat emanating from him.

“I never want to be apart from you again,” he breathed.

“Nor do I.”

My heart ached with need. I loved this man so much that it shattered me. Touching his muscles, I felt the strength of his warrior self. This man killed and conquered, who did what he must for his honor. Yet his words and caresses soothed me, melted me, coaxing me into a private world where the only people who existed were him and me. Everything—this village, our time in Rome, my life in Seattle, all the hardships we’d experienced in the last couple of days—melted away inside this shelter. We were suspended in a cocoon of love.

“It’s so bewildering to be in one place and time and then in another. I barely had a chance to comprehend what you were saying, and then I dissolved through time. Awakening in this land was pure torture without you by my side.” Roman stroked my cheeks with his calloused thumbs.

“I know,” I said, squeezing his hands. “It was for me, as well. I didn’t know where you were or how to find you. Emily gave me hope—she told me love would find a way, and I clung to that belief. And now, here you are.” *What had been Roman’s role here? How had he ended up here?*

I let go of those thoughts, caught up in pleasure.

“Here I am.” He brought his lips to mine while continuing to caress my cheeks. His lips were soft and pliant as he kissed me, as if I might splinter from too much passion. Or maybe he was savoring the connection, easing into the desire that burned so hot between us.

I rocked into his hips, wanting nothing more than for him to slide inside me. My core ached with the need to join with him, to draw him into my soul with the insatiable hunger pouring through me. But we could be interrupted at any moment, called to join the others in celebrating Roman’s and Marcellious’ return.

Roman’s movements matched mine as he deepened the kiss, thrusting his tongue inside my mouth while urging the hardness beneath his leggings against my swollen core. His slippery tongue slid in and out, in and out, with maddening intensity.

I wanted his erection to slide in and out of me.

As I continued to push against his rigid heat, my excitement built. I could climax through our garments, which had never happened to me. But my desire for Roman knew no limits.

He gripped my face as I whimpered into his mouth.

I massaged his shoulders and neck, mindful of not getting too close to his wounds but desperately wanting to be skin-to-skin with him.

We poured all our needs and all our desire into this kiss. We rejoiced in this connection, this renewed jubilation at finding one another again.

If I didn't take what was offered now, I didn't know when we'd have the chance to connect again.

My thrusts became frantic as I pushed against Roman's bulge.

I continued to moan and whimper against his lips as I rocketed toward release. I hungrily sucked his tongue, digging my fingers into his shoulder.

Roman wrenched his lips from mine and bit the tender skin at the base of my neck.

The intensity of the bite, coupled with the thrusts of our hips crashing together, sent me soaring.

"Oh, God," I whispered. "Roman. I'm going to come, and you're not even inside me."

He let out an exultant laugh. "Come for me, my beautiful flame."

He brought his fingers to my hips and gripped me tightly as he shoved against me.

My whole body exploded in an orgasm.

"Roman!" I bit the words out through clenched teeth, not wanting to be overheard. "Oh, Roman!"

My body lit up like it was on fire, flames licking my limbs, coursing through my bloodstream.

Roman's expression was one of triumph as he watched me.

As I came down, I wanted to fall against him, to draw him into the hides covering the floor. But I dared not sully the work of the healer. Roman needed time and care to recover from his injuries.

He urged me off his lap and guided me to lie down as if sensing my thoughts. Then, he settled on his side, facing me. He stroked my hair, smiling all the while.

“You’re so beautiful when you orgasm, Olivia.”

“Thank you. But what about your needs? How can I take care of you, too?” I caressed his stubble-covered jaw.

“Oh, I can think of a few ways to meet my needs. But they all require more time than I believe we have now, so I can wait. It was such a pleasure to watch you surrender.”

“Are you sure?” I dropped my hand to the bulge beneath his leggings and stroked.

Soft scratching sounded on the door flap, followed by a male voice. “Come. It is time for the feast.”

“That answers that,” Roman said, then kissed the tip of my nose.

I sighed and pushed to sit.

Roman did the same, then he placed his palm on my cheek. “Seeing you again, being with you, it’s as if my love for you has only intensified. You are my world, Olivia.”

“Oh, Roman,” I said. “You’ve made me so happy. I feel it, too. It’s as if I’m falling in love with you all over again.”

Light streamed into the teepee as whoever stood outside opened the flap.

A man peered inside. “Come.”

“We’re coming,” Roman said in faltering Sioux. He donned his shirt and helped me to my feet.

We strode hand in hand behind the fellow who had summoned us. The smell of cooking meat and fragrant stews made my stomach growl.

Other village dwellers, men, women, and children, headed in the same direction as us. They eyed us with curiosity, without the suspicion from earlier. Apparently, word had spread that Roman and Marcellious were honored guests.

Emily and I were held in equal status through association.

“I was so shocked to see Marcellious revered by these people,” I said.

“I agree,” Roman said. “But there are too many holes to his story—holes that need answers. Perhaps we shall get the answers tonight.”

“I certainly hope so. How is it you know Earth Bear?” I asked.

“Dancing Fire introduced us. Chief Grey Feather is Dancing Fire’s brother.”

A fire blazed beneath a deer carcass in the middle of a half-circle of gathering participants. Women huddled over cooking stones and frying loaves of bread and greens.

The smells made me nearly ravenous.

Two of the men who’d attacked us approached us. The taller of the two, who had confronted Marcellious when he told them he was one of them, said, “Come with me. I am to take you to the Great Chief. He is waiting for you.”

Roman nodded.

“Of course,” he said.

“I am White Eagle,” the tall man said. “And my friend is Little Bull.”

He grinned at us.

We crossed to the largest teepee.

White Eagle peeled back the door flap.

“Come in,” he said.

We ducked our heads and entered.

Embers burned in the center of a fire pit inside the dark environment. The ten men who had attacked us sat in a circle around a man who looked as old as time itself. Next to the elder sat a man who looked to be in his forties.

The elder wore a deerskin robe as white as bleached bones. Intricate red, black, yellow, and white beadwork had been sewn into the robe, and the lapels were lined with fur. The man’s skin hung in deep wrinkles, and he peered out at us from beneath folds of skin. A lavish headdress of feathers

adorned his head. His long hair, the blue-black color of crow wings, had been crisscrossed into braids wrapped with leather strips. Two long earrings of bone and beads hung from the chief's ears, trailing down to his chest.

I fell in awe of his quiet power and something curious—I felt at home in his presence. When I turned my gaze back to his face, I knew why.

Chief Grey Feather was the spitting image of Moon Lee.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Olivia

I faced another bewildering moment as I stared at Grey Feather, trying to wrap my head around the fact that he looked exactly like Moon Lee. Marcellious, who had just shuffled into sight, looked more frightened than I'd ever seen him. Come to think of it, I'd never witnessed fear on the face of Marcellious. Derision? Many times. Rage? Of course, that was his M.O.

But fear? Never.

So what was he afraid of? Whatever it was, I hoped that maybe he wouldn't act out in his usual crazy, unpredictable manner.

An array of bison hides had been arranged on the ground in a circle. One by one, we all took our seats. I settled next to Roman, who sat next to Earth Bear.

Marcellious sat where Earth Bear indicated—next to Grey Feather. Marcellious kept his body rigid to avoid touching Grey Feather, even though he was sandwiched between the chief and the chief's son.

After taking a seat, the tribeswomen distributed roasted deer, fry bread, and fried greens. No one spoke, however, making it an awkward kind of festival. I busied myself eating, smiling at the tribal members who stared at me, and studying my surroundings.

A pale moon hung in the sky. An abundance of stars spread across the sky, making the setting look magical. A vast

herd of horses appeared as shadowed shapes just beyond the myriad of teepees.

I thought of all the times I'd studied Native American history. But I'd never imagined I'd be immersed in it firsthand.

"Why aren't you eating?" Roman said softly, leaning close enough that our shoulders brushed against one another.

I glanced down at the basket of food placed before me.

"I'm not sure. Everyone is so quiet. I'm afraid I'm feeling a bit uneasy," I whispered.

"Just follow me. Do what I do," he whispered back. He reached for his flat basket, plucked a steaming morsel of deer, and popped it in his mouth.

I did the same. Then, I shoveled in a few more bites.

The simple food tasted delicious, save that my stomach, reflecting my unease, cramped around each bite. I wished someone would say something or do something to indicate that this was indeed a celebration, not a somber, stiff affair.

Grey Feather appeared to take his time eating but kept his gaze pinned on Marcellious.

"Eat," he finally said in Sioux.

Marcellious jerked like he'd been struck by a stone. His hand shook as he picked at the deer meat in his basket.

What is going on with him?

Watching him only increased my anxiety.

"Olivia."

I turned toward Earth Bear, who stared at me expectantly. "Yes?"

"I would like to ask you some questions. Would you rather I speak in English or my native tongue?" he smiled warmly at me, making his weathered face crease in wrinkles.

I glanced at the other tribal members, who eyed me with curiosity. "English, please."

Earth Bear nodded. “As you wish. My father and I learned English from the white man, but please excuse me if I falter.”

“Of course. I don’t really speak your language at all. I only understand it, so clearly, you’re at an advantage.”

I returned the smile, starting to relax for the first time since I entered the feasting area.

Earth Bear’s smile transformed into a grin. “Then, let us proceed. How long have you been here?”

I froze, unsure whether he wanted to know how long I’d been in this century or if this was the kind of question you’d ask innocuously at a dinner party.

Roman touched my hand in reassurance. “It’s alright, Olivia. You can speak freely. Grey Feather and Earth Bear know we are time travelers.”

I scanned the group.

“We haven’t been here—in this time and place—for long. Less than a moon cycle,” I said, figuring they didn’t use terms like “month.”

“And where were you before?” Earth Bear leaned forward slightly.

“We came from ancient Rome.”

“Fascinating,” Earth Bear said, shaking his head.

I glanced at Marcellious.

He appeared miserable, hunched over his meal.

“Let me add something,” Roman said. “I lived in Rome for eight years. Olivia arrived over one and half years ago—that’s where we met and fell in love. Olivia is a clever woman—strong and intelligent.”

He reached for my hand and squeezed it.

“I can see that by how she holds herself,” Earth Bear said.

“She was the one who figured out that Marcellious and I were brothers,” Roman said.

Marcellious lifted his head and scowled at me.

“I didn’t know Hunting Wolf and I were brothers,” Roman continued. “I only knew I had a twin, so I searched for someone who looked exactly like me. But since we’re not identical, I didn’t know what I was looking for. I only knew Marcellious as my enemy. We’d been at odds with one another from the time we met. We were about to kill one another in what is known as the Colosseum in Rome when Olivia sent us here, back to the time we were before.”

“Colosseum?” Earth Bear said, his eyes wide.

Roman continued. “It is an enormous structure, twice the size of your encampment. People came from miles around to watch men fight against other men and animals.”

Earth Bear and his father exchanged glances.

“What a wonder,” Earth Bear said in Sioux to Grey Feather. “I wish white people would pay to watch us fight them. We would give quite a show.”

Grey Feather laughed. It was a deep, rumbling sound that seemed to well up from his toes. “And we would win.”

The rest of the tribe seemed to enjoy this exchange, whatever sense they made of it, as a few chuckled.

“Yes,” Earth Bear said, sharing in the laugh. Then, he turned back to me. “How did you know? How did you find out about the kinship between two brothers?”

“Marcellious? Would you like to contribute to this story?” I asked, recalling the time he kidnapped me, tied me to his bed, and began his mad ravings about his past. That was when he kept singing the words meant to send someone time traveling.

Marcellious’ mouth worked around, but no words emerged. He pushed his food around and around the basket.

“Have you grown mute, Marcellious?” I said. “Why are you staying so quiet in front of the chief?”

My voice emerged louder than intended.

Grey Feather drew himself up to his imposing countenance.

The entire gathering stopped what they were doing and focused on him.

“Hunting Wolf is ashamed of his actions,” Grey Feather began.

He wasn’t precisely yelling, but his words carried the weight of a charging elephant.

“You left the tribe without our *permission*,” Grey Feather said accusingly.

Marcellious pursed his mouth and seemed to vibrate like a volcano about to erupt.

“How dare you leave the tribe and your home without our permission, without saying goodbye. After everything we have done for you, is that how you show respect to us?” Grey Feather growled.

Marcellious drew his shaking fists by his side but continued to say nothing.

“Do you have something to say, Hunting Wolf?” the chief prompted.

“You’re a liar! You lied to me about my identity!”

Grey Feather reeled back.

The person to his right reached out to steady the elderly man.

Marcellious continued his tirade. “You lied about where I came from. I overheard a conversation between you and Dancing Fire. Dancing Fire was angry with your father, the great chief. He was angry because my mother had taken my brother instead of me. You told me my father was a great warrior who died in battle. What you didn’t tell me was that my mother was alive!”

He continued to shake with emotion, so much so I worried about his well-being.

Marcellious had carried much grief and resentment on his journey through time.

“When I found that out, I was miserable. I felt rejected... passed over... unwanted. I left. I didn’t belong,” Marcellious said.

I glanced at Roman to find him looking as astonished as I was.

“Wow,” I mouthed, and he nodded.

The chief stabbed the air in front of Marcellious. “Your emotions got in the way of your decisions. Look at you! What have you become? You’re nothing but a man consumed by darkness!”

Marcellious shrank back, cowed.

“Darkness has consumed your soul. Dancing Fire raised you to become a good man. Instead, you’ve become rude and impolite. A barbarian. Shame on you.” He waggled his wizened hand before Marcellious’ chest. “Dancing Fire would be angry to see what you’ve become.”

Marcellious’ expression contorted in rage. His long, greasy hair hung on his face, making him look more sinister. “I became this way because of what happened to me in Rome. I became a killer to survive. My existence in Rome was unbearable—I lost the woman I loved and my unborn child. She was the only redeeming thing in my life. She made me want to be a good man. But then...”

His mouth slammed shut, and he shuddered.

Everyone in the circle watched him, rapt, although I suspected few understood what was being said.

The chief waited expectantly, leaning toward Marcellious.

Marcellious’ voice quaked when he spoke again. “The moment I wanted all those things, the darkness took *everything*.” Spittle sprayed from his mouth as his anguished words fell from his lips. “So *I* killed the darkness myself. I slit its throat. And I, in turn, became evil from the pain I felt inside myself... from the losses of my life.”

Veins protruded from his neck. His complexion matched the glowing embers in the fires used to cook the meal.

“This is all your fault!” Marcellious said through clenched teeth. “I never would have left had you told me the truth. I became who I am because of you!”

Grey Feather flicked his hand at Marcellious, effectively dismissing him. “You made your choices, Hunting Wolf. The pain and sadness you carry are your faults, not ours. You could have prevented the heartache and pain, but you let your emotions get in the way instead. Why didn’t you come to talk to us after you overheard the conversation? Instead, you ran like a coward. You time-traveled, and you became a despicable man. The pain you put Dancing Fire through was awful. He retreated into himself, and we thought we lost him.”

The chief began to sway. He closed his eyes, and a world of grief became evident in his expression. “Dancing Fire was your mother and your father. He raised you from infancy. He taught you everything—how to fight, hunt, walk, and talk. He wanted to be your world, your everything. He also taught you how to please a woman at night.”

Even in the dim, flickering torchlight, Marcellious blushed.

“And when you left...” The chief opened his eyes and regarded Marcellious from beneath the folds of his eyelids. “When you left, you left him broken for many years. He thought he hadn’t been good enough.”

The flickering flames cast shadows on Marcellious’ face, carving lines of shame and regret on his features. He shrank into himself as if wanting to disappear.

All the fight seemed to drain from Grey Feather’s limbs, leaving him frail and old, unlike the mighty warrior he must have been at once. “You have been gone for a long time, Hunting Wolf. And your one job, the job Dancing Fire trained you to do, was to destroy and kill Balthazar. Instead, since you left, he has grown stronger. He kills freely to satisfy his hunger. He roams through time, taking without mercy. The lives that he has taken represent blood on *your* hands. You could have killed him long ago, but instead, you traveled far, far away. And so much has changed since then. You might

have killed your darkness, but Balthazar is still alive and killing as he pleases. That's on you, Hunting Wolf."

Marcellious threw back his head and groaned as if he had been physically assaulted.

I felt compelled to do something or say anything to rectify this situation. "Sitting before you, you now have three Timebornes instead of just one. Surely, that must be a comfort? How can *we* defeat Balthazar?"

The chief fixed his gaze upon me.

"I don't know much about Balthazar," I said, "but I want to defeat him."

The eyes of every person in the gathering fixed upon me.

Grey Feather looked at me with tenderness. "Balthazar is ancient and powerful, and many Timebornes have failed throughout the years to destroy him."

Having the attention of the Chief lent me strength.

"I will do whatever it takes to defeat Balthazar. Roman, Marcellious, and I will be allies and work together to bring Balthazar down no matter what it takes. If Roman and I are allied with Marcellious, we can destroy Balthazar. I know we can." My words emerged clearly and distinctly as if drawn from the depth of my being. "We will do what it takes to annihilate Balthazar."

Grey Feather's eyes became moist as he studied me. "Your conviction is admirable."

"I mean what I say, Chief Grey Feather."

The chief smiled at me. "We have been waiting for you, Little Moon."

I reeled backward as if struck. "How do you... how do you know my name?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Olivia

How could this ancient chief have known the name Moon Lee had given me in the 21st century?

Roman put his hand out to steady me, yet I could tell by his bewildered expression he, too, was surprised by my response.

All around me, faces peered at me with concern.

Even though most of my onlookers didn't understand English, I felt so oddly exposed, shot through by things I thought were my secrets.

"How... how could you know the name given to me by my friend and mentor?" I stammered.

Grey Feather's eyes softened as he studied me. "Dancing Fire, the man you know as Moon Lee, told me."

My head spun as my worlds, realities, and strange time-travel existence collided, blowing me apart. I pressed my palm to my forehead. "How can this be? I knew him in the twenty-first century, long after your time."

"I think you know the answer, child. Moon Lee is a time traveler like you. And he is my brother. When you were born, he returned to this time for advice." Chief Grey Feather picked up the last of his deer meat and popped it in his mouth as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

I looked to Roman for strength and comfort.

He reached for my shoulder and squeezed.

I glanced at Marcellious, who refused to meet my gaze.

It felt so strange that we were all connected, Roman, Marcellious, and I.

A couple of the tribeswomen rose from their seats and urged a few others to assist them in clearing the empty baskets we had used as plates.

Half of my food sat untouched, so they passed me by.

Grey Feather nodded at me. “This is a lot to absorb, child. I understand. You look like you need time to take all this in.”

“I... I don’t know what to say. You’re right—this is a lot of new information. Our lives—Roman’s, Marcellious’, and mine—are all inextricably woven together.”

I made a gesture familiar to my time: placing my fists against the sides of my head and then spreading my fingers wide as if my brain were blowing up.

The gesture translated in this century, too, as Grey Feather and Earth Bear chuckled.

Grey Feather made the same gesticulation against his head and laughed. Then, his son did the same.

“I must remember that,” he said to Earth Bear.

Laughter rippled through the onlookers as if they were in on the joke.

Soon I was surrounded by people appearing to blow up their brains.

I joined in the laughter, easing some of the tension I felt.

Grey Feather said, “Dancing Fire is my oldest brother. He was born on June 3rd, 1742. He was supposed to be chief to our people, but he couldn’t be due to his life circumstances, mainly his status as a Timeborne. I was appointed to take care of the people. Dancing Fire was a very honorable man. He was taught to defeat Balthazar but failed because destiny brought him to Elizabeth, Swift Hawk, and Hunting Wolf’s mother.”

“Wow,” I said, my head spinning once more.

Marcellious’ lip pulled back in a sneer.

“Do you want to know the truth, Hunting Wolf, about your past and your mother?” Grey Feather leveled Marcellious with a clear-eyed gaze.

Marcellious turned away.

“Your mother, Elizabeth, was a sweet and kind woman traveling from England with her maid Mary to start an adventure in the Americas. She came from England because her family disowned her. She’d slept with a man out of wedlock, a prince, and was pregnant with twins. The Kiowas, our sworn enemies, attacked her carriage when she arrived.

“Dancing Fire and I were hunting that day and saw what happened. We fought them until we killed their attackers. Dancing Fire cared for Elizabeth and ensured she felt safe and welcomed. He fell madly in love with her and wanted to marry her.

“When our father, the Great Chief, discovered that she carried twins, he told her she’d likely give birth to Timebornes—the Great Spirit had told him so. Elizabeth, however, didn’t want to hear what she considered ‘the nonsense.’ My father saw the doubt in her eyes and assured her that we could be wrong—he basically lied to her so she’d remain with them and bring Timebornes into the world.

“But she’d already decided to leave once the babies were born and flee what she considered a curse—raising children who would someday leave her as time travelers.

“But then the day came when Elizabeth gave birth to two healthy Timebornes—those twins were you, Hunting Wolf, and you, Swift Hawk.”

My jaw dropped, as did Roman’s and Marcellious’.

Roman stared at Marcellious, unblinking. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down.

The chief continued, seemingly oblivious to the brothers’ shock.

“My father became greedy—he wanted the tribe to keep a Timeborne. He told the midwife to tell Elizabeth that one son didn’t make it.”

The story from Grey Feather was just as Roman had once told me. Roman had indicated the Great Chief was greedy and separated the two brothers. I looked at Marcellious.

The loss and shock of what had happened to his mother were etched on his face.

“When Elizabeth left Dancing Fire, he felt betrayed,” Grey Feather continued. “Then, Hunting Wolf, Dancing Fire left the tribe for three years when you left. He was angry before disappearing, unable to find peace in his heart. He’d devoted his life to his son—you, Hunting Wolf—who left him without saying goodbye. When he saw your dagger missing, he surmised you overheard the conversation and left. You didn’t even allow him to explain the truth to you. You just got up and left.”

The skin bunched around Marcellious’s eyes, and he rubbed his wrists while staring vacantly.

“We don’t know where Dancing Fire went, but when he returned, he appeared renewed, as if he had been cleansed of all his wounds,” Grey Feather said. “And then Roman appeared in his life, lighting a fire in Dancing Fire’s soul. He told Roman to find you, Hunting Wolf. That is why Roman came to Rome. He pledged to find you, wherever you were, and bring you home. I guess it was fate that he met Olivia, for she was needed to fit all the parts and pieces together.”

The chief turned and regarded me with a kind smile.

I felt touched by his warmth.

“Why didn’t Dancing Fire tell me the truth before?” Marcellious asked Grey Feather.

“The Great Chief only allowed Dancing Fire to be your father and caretaker if he swore to keep the secret forever. He was told to never speak about your mother or brother again. The great chief believed that your mother couldn’t handle two Timebornes, let alone one. When your mother learned Swift

Hawk could time travel, she left the dagger with us and departed.

“I know deep down, Hunting Wolf, if your mother knew the truth, she would have kept you and Roman together. She was a wonderful and beautiful woman.”

Marcellious looked away from the chief, and a tear slipped down his face. The words and story appeared to cut through him. For one lingering second, he looked at me, his eyes filled with remorse.

Our audience began to thin as the others rose and wandered off.

Soon, only Grey Feather, Earth Bear, Marcellious, Roman, and I remained to finish our discussion.

Grey Feather’s attention flitted between Roman and Marcellious. “The tension between you two is palpable. You are clearly enemies. Instead, you must rejoice and be happy that Olivia brought you together. You are brothers. Your mother would be happy to see you reunited.”

He stopped speaking as his eyes fluttered closed, and his head bobbed slightly. After a beat of silence, he jerked and opened his eyes, blinking.

We all waited for him to speak again.

He was obviously tired.

As the chief dozed, I recalled a conversation with Moon Lee. I’d asked him if he’d ever fallen in love.

“Oh, Little Moon, I have. I was madly in love with an English woman. She was beautiful and well-born.” A wistful expression had colored Lee’s face.

“How come you aren’t together?” I’d asked.

“We came from two different worlds. She was English, and I was Native American. She didn’t think we’d ever comprehend one another.”

I’d continued probing him with questions. “Did you have any children?”

“I had a son. He was a fierce and strong young man, but one day he left me without saying a word.” Lines of anguish creased the corners of Moon Lee’s eyes.

“You didn’t look for him?”

“No, Little Moon, I did not. I know there will be a time when he’ll return to me.”

“Lee, how come you didn’t start a family again, fall in love, and have more kids?”

“Oh, Olivia, your family is my family. That is all I need right now. Keeping you safe is all I need.”

As the memory faded, I blinked my way back to the moment and turned my attention to Grey Feather.

“Chief Grey Feather,” I said softly, rousing him from his seated doze.

He shook his head like a giant bison shaking off the snow. “Yes, child?”

“I knew Moon Lee... Dancing Fire. I knew him in my time. He raised me and trained me, but I never understood his ways. Now I comprehend why.”

Grey Feather slowly nodded.

Marcellious turned to the chief. “Where is Dancing Fire? I want to see him.”

Chief Grey Feather appeared taken aback. “Dancing Fire is in the future, where Olivia is from. Haven’t you been listening to what Olivia has said?”

“That’s right. I’m from the twenty-first century,” I said.

Marcellious’ face drew back in shock. “Are all women in the twenty-first century as bold as you?”

“We refer to it as assertive. Women have gained many rights in my time. They are treated as equals,” I said. “Equal to men.”

Marcellious looked as if he might throw up.

“And yes, my entire life revolved around Moon Lee—your father, the man you know as Dancing Fire. He raised me and cared for me after my mother was murdered. He taught me how to fight, take care of myself, and train others to defend themselves.”

“How did you come to my time?” Marcellious asked.

“I was in danger, and Lee transported me there,” I said. “I believe he wanted us all to be together. The real question is this. After all that has happened and everything we’ve gone through, what will you do about it? Are you going to help us defeat Balthazar?”

I gazed into Marcellious’ unreadable gaze.

He only stared at me without answering.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Olivia

The feast had yielded many answers, but one critical need—Balthazar had to be destroyed. But how?

I opened my mouth to ask Grey Feather.

The chief, who appeared exhausted, held up his hand and said, “Little Moon, we will talk later. Your mind is questioning, wondering, plotting, and scheming. But I am an old man, and I am tired.”

I snapped my mouth shut. “Of course, of course.”

“Hunting Wolf, help me up,” the chief said.

Marcellious scrambled to his feet and stood to one side of Grey Feather while Earth Bear crossed to Grey Feather’s other side. Both men guided the elderly chief to his feet.

Before he departed, Grey Feather said, “It is good that you are here, Little Moon. We have much to talk about.”

Then, he, Marcellious, and Earth Bear lumbered away.

I turned to Roman. “Grey Feather’s right. My mind is whirling. I need answers.”

“But you won’t find them tonight, Little Moon.” A mischievous smile played at the corners of his lips. “You didn’t think to share that name with me?”

Heat flushed my cheeks. “It never occurred to me to share it. Lee gave me the name because I was born in November.”

I rolled from my feet and pushed to stand.

Roman did the same, and we started walking, our hands entwined.

“It’s a beautiful name,” Roman said.

“Thank you.” I glanced up at a star-studded sky.

The sky was a wonder when seen without the light pollution of the twenty-first century. Being able to witness the Milky Way regularly brought joy to my heart. The world was such a magical place.

“So, we have our answers about Marcellious,” I said, savoring Roman’s warmth.

“We do.” He brought my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “Some of them, at least.”

“I can see why he’s so broken. He lost Theadora, the woman he loved—the woman carrying his child. She was killed by the darkness. Amara’s entire family was taken by the darkness.” A sigh left my lungs. “I feel bad for Marcellious. But...”

I turned to look at Roman’s profile. “He, in turn, killed his own darkness. How was that possible?”

Roman’s head pivoted in my direction. “Are you wondering why we haven’t managed to kill our own darkness?”

“I guess I am.”

“I think it’s the way he was raised. The Sioux probably taught him their mystical ways of dealing with energy that you and I never learned.”

“You could be right.”

We continued to walk in silence until we stood outside of my teepee. I turned to face him and placed my hands on his shoulders. “You look great in deerskin pants. I probably forgot to say that.”

A playful smile curved the corners of my lips.

“And you’re beautiful in a deerskin dress, my beloved goddess.” He pushed a strand of hair behind my ear. “But you’re more beautiful *out* of that dress. How I wish we could make love. I long to be deeply intimate with you. It’s been too long.”

My heart pounded wildly as I took in Roman’s handsome face. Since finding him here in the Americas, I’d fallen in love with him again. I was filled with a giddy sensation of wonder and gratitude whenever I looked at him.

How did I get so lucky?

Roman stroked my cheeks with his thumbs while gazing into my eyes.

That curious and wonderful sense of intimacy we shared fell over us as we stood savoring one another. There was and would be no other man in my heart but Roman. I adored him with the kind of passion that I’d never dreamed I’d experience. He was my heart... my soul... my life. He was my everything.

“Given the circumstances....” His eyes slid back and forth, indicating our surroundings. Then he wagged his eyebrows.

“Yes?” I said, matching his playful expression.

“The best I can do right now is show you how much you mean to me with my lips.”

We inclined our heads to fit together, mouth to mouth.

He kissed me softly at first, his lips brushing mine with the tenderness of downy bird wings.

It invoked a fluttering sensation in my heart, like a column of swirling butterflies in my ribcage circling out of my throat.

I inhaled deeply, drawing his scent into my body. I wrapped my hands around his muscular back, kneading and caressing his muscles.

We ground our mouths against one another as a heady rush of pleasure flooded my core.

Our mouths grinding became a collision between galaxies, like stars exploding in the heavens and new universes birthed

into existence.

Quiet moans escaped his throat as he brought his hands around to cup my ass and pull me against his rigid erection.

I became consumed with our bodies melting, the distinctions between us dissolving into nothingness. Nothing else mattered but this kiss, this moment of shared connection.

I never wanted it to end.

I groaned as Roman thrust his hips against me, stirring my desire to rip off his clothes and join him.

As our lips continued to meld, a sense of gratitude filled my heart at finding this man. I would walk through hell and back to be with him. There wasn't a thing about him that I didn't love. I loved how he walked into my presence after battling the enemy, muscular and imposing like a warrior. Or how he became soft and vulnerable when we loved one another, the way we were doing now. I adored his intelligence, thoughtfulness, and lightning-fast responses to danger.

I forgot to bring food to Emily!

The thought wrenched me away from the kiss.

"I need to see to Emily," I said sheepishly.

"Not yet," Roman said, panting. A curious expression fell upon his face.

"What?" I said, tipping my head to the side.

"This..." He dropped to one knee before me and held my hand. "Olivia, my love... the flame of my life. Would you do the honor of marrying me?"

I took flight, soaring toward the heavens. Yet, I found myself unable to speak.

A memory floated to the surface as I blinked at Roman, tongue-tied.

While living in Seattle, I'd been in a fit of pique when my father had told me that Tristan, my boyfriend, the man I'd wanted to marry and give my life to, couldn't be trusted. He was right, but at the time, I was angry. I'd driven into town

and wandered through a street fair. I'd come upon a fortune-teller who had told me I'd marry a warrior. At the time, I'd assumed she meant Tristan.

How wrong I had been.

Tristan was a weak man. He was a sneak, a liar, and a betrayer.

Roman was a thousand times the man Tristan could ever hope to be.

But, given the challenges facing us, could we marry now? My heart and my mind warred.

Finally, I pried my lips apart and spoke. "How can we marry with so much danger ahead of us? I doubt it will be easy to destroy Balthazar."

Roman, still on bended knee, looked up at me with fierce conviction radiating from his eyes. "How can we *not* marry? There is nothing that can break us apart. Already, we've endured the emperor. We've both been captured and escaped. We've faced loss, grief, and unendurable challenges. I can't imagine another moment without knowing you are my wife—my life.

"You are why I get up each morning and lay my head down each night. The thought of seeing you on the morrow fills me with hope, even when we are far apart. No matter what, if there's the hope of seeing you again, there's a reason to get up each day. Having found you twice in this lifetime, I know we will always find one another. I will always be by your side."

My heart split wide open. Grinning madly, I said, "Yes, I will marry you, Roman Alexander! I want nothing more than to be your wife and to take you as my husband."

Roman bolted to his feet and seized me in a crushing kiss.

My body burst into flames of desire and passion. I hooked my leg around his hips and tugged him against me. God, how I wanted him inside me.

We kissed until we were breathless.

When we withdrew from one another, we gazed at one another with stupid grins.

“I love you, Olivia,” Roman said, cupping my neck.

“And I love you, Roman.” I drew a heart on his chest with my fingertip. “Body and soul.”

He lowered his head and kissed me tenderly.

“Until tomorrow, my love,” he said as he eased away.

“Until tomorrow,” I said, filled with giddiness.

He backed away from me, keeping his gaze fixed on mine.

I pressed my fingertips to my lips and blew him a kiss.

He pretended to catch it, then pivoted and disappeared into the darkness.

I threw open the teepee door flap and floated inside. Dropping to my hands and knees, I tried to be quiet as I felt my way along the floor.

Emily surprised me by saying, “I heard Roman ask you to marry him.”

My cheeks burned with heat. “I’m sorry if we woke you up.”

What else did she hear? Did she hear the part about Balthazar?

“What better way to be awoken than to hear your good friend being proposed to.” Emily fumbled to find my hand.

When we connected, she gave me a squeeze. “I’m so happy for you.”

“Thank you. It’s a dream come true,” I said.

“It proves my point. True love always finds a way. I hope to be as lucky as you and find a good man someday.”

“I never dreamed I’d meet someone as wonderful as Roman,” I said, scooting beneath one of the furs lining the floor. “I’m sorry I didn’t bring you food.”

“Oh, don’t be. A tribeswoman brought me some. Everyone has been so kind.” Her voice sounded cheerful and upbeat.

“I’m embarrassed to have been overheard. We tried to be quiet,” I said, subtly fishing for more information.

“You didn’t really wake me up. I was half-sleeping, half-awake, when I heard you outside. And I couldn’t make out much of what was being said. But I clearly heard Roman ask you to marry him. Oh, it’s so exciting!”

I relaxed. It sounded like Emily didn’t hear the part about destroying our enemy. “We’re in good hands, Emily. Oh! And I found out Marcellious is the nephew of the chief.”

Emily let out a gasp. “How is that possible?”

“It just is. I don’t really understand it myself,” I lied. I understood it far too well. That didn’t mean it made sense to an ordinary person, however. “I discovered how Roman and Marcellious were separated, and now they’re reunited. The tribe will look out for us. I think everything will be all right, Emily, I really do.”

“Oh, I’m so glad, Olivia. About everything—two brothers being reunited and you finding love. It’s wonderful.” Emily wiggled her fingers, lacing them with mine. “This is a good thing to fall asleep to. Everything working out for the better....”

She snuggled next to me like a kitten.

For a moment, I shared her joy. But as her breathing deepened, mine grew shallower. Anxiety overtook me, cradling me in a web of fret.

It seemed my life always took a turn for the worse when things started to become positive.

What made me think it would be any different this time?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Olivia

Like a small bird's claw, a soft scratching noise rasped against the teepee wall near my head, easing me out of my slumber. I pushed up to lean on my hands, cocked my head, and listened.

More scratching followed, along with a whisper.

"Olivia."

"Roman? Is that you?" I whispered back, glancing at Emily's sleeping form.

"Yes. Come outside," Roman said in a low voice. "I'm desperate for your touch."

He didn't need to ask me twice. I'd tossed and turned all night, missing his warmth, comfort, and love. But I'd felt obliged to care for Emily, so I'd stayed in this dwelling.

Scrambling to my feet, I was met with a brisk morning chill, even though I was still dressed in my buckskin attire. I grabbed one of the bison furs I'd slept in, tugged it around my shoulders, and tiptoed outside.

Dawn had barely broken, and a cacophony of birdsong filled the air. The pale sky was obscured by hundreds of geese as they lifted into the sky for their autumn migration.

Roman rushed toward me and captured my face in his hands. He pressed his lips to mine, practically devouring me in a kiss filled with longing that took my breath away.

As I responded to Roman's hunger, the fur fell away from my shoulders. The hide crumpled in a heap around my calves and bare feet, enveloping my lower legs in warmth. But nothing could touch the searing heat of Roman's skin as he plunged his tongue into my mouth the way I wished he could do with his cock.

My body ignited, wet and wanting, as we deepened the kiss, our mouths grinding against one another, our bodies pressed close.

Roman eased back slightly and murmured against my lips. "Olivia, my beautiful flame... it was hell to not be with you last night. I intend to be with you every night when we are married."

The word "married" sent a cascade of goosebumps all over my skin. Roman and I were going to be married! I couldn't believe it! But a sad little voice in the recesses of my mind mourned being unable to share this joyous occasion with Papa or Moon Lee.

"I missed you as well," I whispered.

Roman drank me in with his gaze as if memorizing my features. He pushed my hair away from my face with his thumbs and gazed intently at me. "I found you again, my love. I really did it."

"Yes, we found each other. Our love is too strong to be denied," I said.

Roman lowered his mouth to mine, claiming me with a voracious kiss.

Our passion was interrupted by footsteps and a man clearing his throat.

Roman and I turned to see who was intruding on our stolen moment.

Marcellious came into view.

Water dripped from the ends of his long hair as if he'd bathed in the creek. He regarded us impassively as if he were the mailman dropping off today's mail.

“Grey Feather needs to speak with us at once. He says it’s urgent.”

“What’s he want?” I said, jerking away from Roman.

Marcellious shrugged. “How should I know? I’m only the messenger. I was sent to fetch you, so I’ve accomplished my directive.”

He spun on his heel and tromped away from us.

“God, that man can get under my skin like no one else,” I said to Roman as I watched Marcellious’ retreating form. I picked up the furs and tossed them into the teepee.

“I know. It’s like he was born to ire. Still, we’d better go see what the chief wants.” Roman drew my hand to his lips, kissed my knuckles, then laced his fingers with mine.

Hand in hand, we made our way through the quiet encampment. Only a few teepees showed signs of smoke wisping from the tops.

“I think I shall ask Grey Feather if our marriage can occur here, and he can bless our union,” Roman said.

“Oh,” I said, feeling giddy at the idea. Never in a million years could I have imagined marrying in the middle of a Native American tribe in the 19th century. Nor could I have dreamed of marrying someone as powerful as Roman Alexander.

When we stood before Chief Grey Feather’s teepee, Roman turned to me and gently placed his lips to mine for another kiss.

“I can’t get enough of you, my darling. You’ve become more essential than food,” he said once he withdrew his mouth.

My heart soared.

“I feel the same way for you,” I said softly.

Roman drew back the teepee flap and stepped aside for me to enter.

The chief sat before a small fire, bundled in his fur robes. He nodded solemnly when we entered.

Marcellious sat at his side, staring at us with a stone-faced expression.

“Sit,” Chief Grey Feather commanded. “What I must share with you is of the utmost importance.”

Roman and I both lowered ourselves to the hides on the floor on the opposite side of Marcellious.

We waited as the chief closed his eyes and gathered his thoughts.

I glanced at Roman.

He shrugged.

Marcellious looked exhausted as he stirred the fire with a stick, sending sparks flying into the air. His eyes were lined with shadows, and a dried blood stain clung to the deerskin covering his torso at the bullet wound site.

Finally, Grey Feather’s eyelids fluttered open, and he looked directly at me.

The weight of his gaze felt like looking into a portal through time.

“Little Moon, I’ve been listening to the Great Spirit since before the sun awakened. I have been informed that Balthazar knows you, Swift Hawk, and Hunting Wolf have all time traveled together.”

The impact of the words felt like a punch to the gut, and I gasped. “How is that possible? How could he know?”

Grey Feather paused, eyes closed.

I glanced at Marcellious, who bore concern on his furrowed brow.

When Grey Feather opened his eyes again, the impact of his gaze had me swaying backward.

“When Little Moon brought you all together, the darkneses all rallied, combining their strength. They’re far

stronger now, allied as one against you,” the chief said.

A shudder rocked me to my core. I clutched Roman’s outstretched leg, and he placed his warm hand over mine, lending me strength.

“Oh, God,” I said. “What can we do? How is this possible?”

Chief Grey Feather was about to speak again, but Marcellious interrupted.

“When you time traveled for the first time, your ultimate duty was to kill your darkness when you had the chance. But since you didn’t and time traveled again, Roman’s and your darkness joined you on your journey, becoming more bloodthirsty than before. Using that bloodlust, Balthazar has been training your darkneses to become more ruthless in their pursuit of you.”

“How do you know all this, Marcellious?”

“There’s a lot about me you don’t know,” he said, but he didn’t say it in malice. He seemed to speak to me as an ally, which was stunning.

“Clearly,” I stated, gripping Roman’s thigh.

“So, how can we weaken or vanquish the darkness?” I asked.

Grey Feather said, “You can’t weaken it, but you can destroy your darkness with your dagger. But now that Balthazar is here, he wants to eradicate all of you. And, with his alliance with your darkneses, he has the power to accomplish his desires.”

His gaze slid from me to Roman and then to Marcellious.

Both Roman and Marcellious seemed to pale, but their expressions remained impassive.

I, on the other hand, was completely freaked out and scared. My empty stomach cramped into a pea-sized knot. “How can my dagger kill the darkness? The dagger is just a weapon that allows us to time travel. I wasn’t trained to defeat or kill the darkness with it. I think it would be best to know

how to kill our own darkness with the dagger and what it can do before killing something greater like Balthazar.”

I began to rock back and forth restlessly. As I waited for him to speak again, I drew my hands up to my head and squeezed my skull. I’d trained to be an excellent fighter under Moon Lee’s tutelage. Then, in Rome, I’d become more cunning and far more capable from training with Roman. But all my moves came from physical combat, not fighting with the supernatural. I was entirely out of my league when it came to destroying creatures that could fade out of sight and reappear somewhere else in the blink of an eye.

Chief Grey Feather spoke again. “Your daggers are the most powerful weapon you are born with. It might seem like just a blade that allows you to time travel, but the dagger can show you your past and present. The dagger also can control the darkness when used properly.”

I rubbed my temples, stunned to hear this.

“There must be something we do to trigger this occurrence. It can’t just happen on its own,” Roman said, flicking his fingers impatiently.

Marcellious spoke up. “When you see your darkness again, grab your dagger and point it toward the sun or the moon. Then you recite the ancient words of the dagger, and the blade will become illuminated with power. It will remain that way until the blade touches the demon’s blood. Then, the blade will control the darkness.”

I turned toward him, blinking. “How do *you* know this, and Roman and I don’t?”

“I learned how to defeat the darkness as a young boy. Dancing Fire taught me,” Marcellious said clearly, decisively.

“Seriously?” I said with a scoff.

Marcellious shrugged, back to his arrogant demeanor.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “So I hold the blade up toward the sun or the moon, intone the right words, and my weapon will move on its own?”

“Not at all,” Grey Feather said, waving his hand before him. “An alchemical process takes place. The darkness will be unable to move freely or disappear, forced to remain as a human. It becomes a fight between two people, not between humans and supernatural entities. Does this make sense?”

“Sort of,” I said, trying to fit all the pieces together. “Okay, let me reiterate. So, I possess a tool that allows me to time travel. It also has the power to control the darkness. And I can manifest this power by directing the blade toward the sun or the moon and saying the ancient scripture. Then, the dark demon can no longer move freely but stays in a human form. So, it’s easier to kill. Did I miss anything?”

Marcellious gave me a piercing glare. “It’s not easier to kill, but you have a higher chance of killing it when it’s not moving freely and disappearing so quickly. You must control the blade in your hand when you kill it because the darkness will stop at nothing until it kills you. The darkness moves fast, not as fast as lightning, but fast enough to kill you or distract you. Also, it has a way of poisoning your mind when you fight. It will say things to you to weaken you and get the upper hand. You must control your mind and not allow yourself to believe what it says.”

Grey Feather said, “The darkness has the power and ability to poison you with words, your thoughts, and your memories. It will say things just to break you or hurt you. You must control yourself and your emotions because the darkness will stop at nothing until it destroys you.”

“It can poison our memories?” I said.

Grey Feather spoke again. “From the first time you travel, your darkness strengthens against you. It watches you from afar and gathers as much about you as possible.”

At last, everything the chief said began to make sense. My sole job was to kill my darkness. Roman had to kill his, too.

And then Balthazar would be the final darkness to destroy.

“Roman told me that if we don’t kill our darkness and it kills us first, it lives forever,” I said.

Grey Feather let out a long breath. “No, Little Moon, not quite. The darkness doesn’t live forever. It just ages very slowly. Ten human years will go by, yet the darkness ages one year. Balthazar has killed many times but must still kill humans to survive. Just like your darkness will continue to kill until you destroy it. And if you fail and die, your darkness will live and continue the bloodlust even after killing you.”

“Who exactly is Balthazar, and how can he travel freely?” I said, more questions forming.

Grey Feather lapsed into silence again as if consulting with an unseen deity.

I met Roman’s gaze.

We both knew that the darkness would be our biggest test.

At last, Grey Feather spoke. “Balthazar is the oldest living darkness in history. We don’t know how long he’s existed, but stories of his existence have been passed down through the ages among my people. He has killed over one thousand Timebornes throughout history. With each killing, he grows more and more powerful. He is ruthless, powerful, and utterly evil, Little Moon. Balthazar is dangerous beyond your wildest comprehension.”

I massaged my temples with my fingertips. Fright filled every cell in my body, making me cold to the bone. Since I was a child watching the darkness murder my mother, I hadn’t been this afraid. I’d trained tirelessly by Lee’s side to learn how to vanquish my own fears and face threats with a calm and logical mind. But tranquil logic didn’t seem to apply here. I was in over my head—*way* over my head.

I took several slow, steady breaths to calm my racing heart. When I felt like I had a measure of control back, I said, “Can our dagger kill Balthazar or destroy him?”

“Your dagger is nothing but a toothpick, a little toy, to Balthazar,” Grey Feather said.

“Then how can we kill him?” I said in a clipped tone, trying hard to not detonate anyone with my words. “There’s

got to be a way to defeat him. If my dagger isn't strong enough to kill him, how can I destroy him?"

Roman raised his palm to shush me, but I pushed it away.

Grey Feather stayed quiet.

I looked at Marcellious as if he knew something.

"I need answers! I need a solution of *some* kind. How can I vanquish someone as powerful as Balthazar?" I threw my hands into the air.

The chief nodded. "There is a way."

Finally....

I nodded back, eager to hear what Grey Feather had to say.

"You must find the sun and the moon daggers," Grey Feather said.

Roman, Marcellious, and I fixed our gazes on the chief.

"What are the sun and the moon daggers?" I said, leaning forward.

"They are the first daggers ever created during the first recorded solar eclipse." The chief's head bobbed up and down. "Some say they were created in 1223 BCE in the ancient city of Ugarit. So there is your answer, Little Moon. The only way to destroy Balthazar is to find the sun and the moon daggers."

"And yet no one knows where they are?"

"There's one place you might look." The chief folded his arms over his belly.

"Really? Where's that?" I said.

But the chief's eyes were closed. He'd either fallen asleep or was blowing me off.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Olivia

As I sat in the teepee with Chief Grey Feather, Roman, and Marcellious, my mind jumped all over the place, trying to make sense of our dire circumstances. Balthazar was on the hunt for us time travelers. And I had no real way to fight him. Somehow, we had to find these mysterious sun and moon daggers to defeat Balthazar. The chief had said as much.

But where were they? As far as I knew, they could be at the bottom of the ocean.

As usual, I was left with more questions than answers.

Roman and Marcellious had lapsed into silence. Perhaps they were creating plans in their minds to find these strange weapons. But we were all feeling our way through the dark.

Outside the teepee, voices of women and men and children chattered and laughed as the tribe stirred to life. The incessant noise of the bird song had ceased, letting me know the sun had pushed past the horizon and was making its arc through the sky.

The light inside the teepee came from the hole in the top and the small fire in the center.

Marcellious kept poking and stirring the fire, keeping it alive—and perhaps keeping himself from falling over in exhaustion.

“Hunting Wolf, you look fatigued. Your wounds have taken a toll on you,” Grey Feather said in a fatherly tone to

Marcellious. He patted Marcellious' leg with one of his gnarled old hands.

Marcellious regarded him with a soft-eyed, appreciative gaze.

It was a rare glimpse at something real in Marcellious besides the sarcastic, unfeeling persona he flaunted out in the world.

“Thank you,” he said simply. “I would indeed appreciate some more rest.”

“My wife is outside preparing our morning meal. Ask her to summon a healer to your dwelling.” Grey Feather patted Marcellious's leg as if that alone could heal him.

“Thank you,” Marcellious repeated. He heaved himself to stand and shuffled out of the teepee with a grunt.

After he'd departed, Grey Feather turned to Roman and me. “There's something about Balthazar you need to understand. Once long ago, Balthazar was ruled by the folly of human emotion—he had a lover whom he adored. She was not just any woman, but she was a Timeborne. Together they had the ultimate love: the Timeborne in love with the darkness. When she was with him, she didn't know he was the darkness and that he could destroy her. But when she discovered he was a murderer, she was disgusted. She wanted to destroy him. But sadly, she was unable to kill him.”

“Why couldn't she?” I asked. *Would I be able to kill Tristan for murdering my father?* I'd once considered Tristan the love of my life. Yet, it seemed clear to me that I would do anything to avenge my father's death, even commit an act of murder.

This thought surprised me. Living in the 21st century, I always considered myself a reasonably civilized person who would prefer to let the legal system right a wrong. My morals and values had changed since living in ancient Rome and landing in the 19th century.

Grey Feather said, “My sources claimed she had found only one of the blades. You need both daggers to create a

strong enough force against Balthazar. The sun and the moon knives are a set. They act in tandem to vanquish evil. And she was still madly in love with Balthazar.”

“How can a Timeborne fall in love with the darkness? It seems unreal. The darkness is just pure evil.”

“Oh, Little Moon, you don’t understand the darkness’ love is poisonous.” Grey Feather’s gaze grew ponderous. “Once you feel the love and passion from the darkness, it’s impossible to forget or let go. That was the problem with her. She couldn’t let go of him, no matter how much pain and sorrow it caused her.”

“So, how are we to find both daggers?” I stretched out my legs before me to ease the ache in my muscles, then tucked them by my side.

Grey Feather’s gaze shifted back and forth. “This woman—we called her Fierce Wind—wrote a detailed journal. You must find the journal to find answers. It will contain all her secrets, everything....”

“Any idea where to look for the journal?” Roman said.

“And how do we even know she had it during this time?” I added. “I don’t think I’m up for another time travel so soon—not until I destroy my darkness and Roman destroys his.”

“I can assure you the journal is in this time,” the chief said. “She was here twenty-eight years ago. Dancing Fire was in major grief after Hunting Wolf and Swift Hawk left. When Fierce Wind arrived, she told us she was in great danger. Tremendous danger.”

The chief closed his eyes, perhaps gathering a memory.

Roman lifted my hand to his lips in the silence surrounding us and kissed my knuckles.

I smiled softly at him, grateful for the contact.

Roman’s and my fingers were entwined when the chief opened his eyes again.

“Fierce Wind told us about Balthazar and how he was after her, and she needed help to defeat him. She also told us that

she kept details of Balthazar's weaknesses and couldn't defeat him without finding both weapons," Grey Feather said. "I recall a conversation with her where she said, '*I was told you have someone who can help me from your time. I came here because your tribe supposedly has a time traveler who can help defeat Balthazar.*' Fierce Wind kept repeating how much danger she faced if she didn't kill Balthazar because Balthazar looked for her in every timeline and place.

"She kept repeating how she'd betrayed him, how she still continued to love him, and how neither could stay away from the other. They were soul-crossed lovers, sharing an undeniable destiny. Ultimately, she knew she'd have to destroy him, but I have no doubt it was one of the hardest things she'd ever do." The chief's body sagged as he expelled a long breath.

Roman's brow furrowed as he spoke. "This seems impossible. We're still at a dead end here, being hunted by a demon yet apparently helpless to defend ourselves."

The chief nodded. "I know it seems that way, but Balthazar has a weakness."

"How do we know Balthazar has a weakness?" I said.

The old chief's gaze shifted back and forth.

Grey Feather picked up the same stick Marcellious had used to stir the fire and poked it in the embers. As he ignited the flames, he worried his lips. Finally, he said, "Every being has a weakness. You have to find out what it is and destroy Balthazar."

"But you don't even know where this journal is," I said dejectedly. "How can we find this document?"

The chief ignored me, stirring his fire as if we weren't even in the teepee with him.

A thick and smothering silence filled the space as if a hand was over my mouth.

Before me, the fire sparked and blazed, engulfing the teepee with heat.

Sweat trickled down my neck as we waited for the chief to say something meaningful. It was stifling in here, and my irritation at hitting so many dead ends grew.

Finally, still not looking at me, Grey Feather said, “Tonight we shall have a great bonfire and ask the Great Spirit where Fierce Wind’s writing is. We shall prepare a great ceremony. Until tonight.”

He waved his hand as if shooining us from the room.

I rose and shuffled from the teepee with Roman at my tail. We would wait. And then, I hoped we would find some answers.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Olivia

The day crawled as I waited for tonight's fire ceremony. At first, staying calm and centered amid such dire news was challenging. But then, Emily and I were invited to help prepare three bison for use by the tribe. We stayed swamped with tasks the rest of the morning and into the late day.

The young woman, Laughing Maid, told me several men went out to hunt buffalo at dawn. One of them, Lightning Foot, had a special relationship with the bison. He would don the head of a buffalo, with the pelt hanging around him, and head out where a scout had spotted the animals before the sun stirred the horizon.

Lightning Foot wandered among the herd singing his song of enchantment, and the great beasts would follow the pelt, thinking him one of their own. When Lightning Foot ran, the bison ran with him. That was when the other Native Americans who had hidden over the hills on their horses burst into view. They galloped beside the stampeding buffalo and shot the animals between the last ribs, killing them.

Lightning Foot was careful not to run them too far or fast, or the meat would turn bitter. And the hunters acted swiftly, moving like wolves to cull a select few bison from the herd.

Then came the hard work of harvesting. We walked out onto the plains and sliced hides from the flesh and muscle from the bone. As I'd learned in the 21st century, the Native people used every animal piece—nothing went to waste. As

we worked, the women chatted and laughed. I could only understand what was being said—I didn't have enough mastery of the language to respond. But I interpreted most of what was said so Emily could be included.

When the sun began to dip toward the horizon, we were exhausted.

After cleaning ourselves in the creek, Emily and I decided to take a bit of respite in our teepee. As we approached our hide-covered dwelling, I spied Roman just beyond the distance, speaking to Earth Bear.

Eager to connect with my lover, if only for a minute, I told Emily, "I'll join you in a second, okay? I need to speak to Roman."

A goofy smile crossed her face, and she clasped her hands in front of her hips and swayed side to side. "Of course! Who would I be to get in the way of true love? Take your time."

My heart did giddy flip-flops as I crossed to where Roman stood.

He glanced my way, and a grin spread across his face. He held his arm to me when I grew closer, then put it around my shoulders and pulled me close. "Hello, my love."

"Hi," I said, experiencing excitement and bashfulness over all these joyous feelings bouncing around inside me.

"Earth Bear needs to show me something in his teepee. But I'm always happy for a chance to be with you, if even for a moment," Roman said.

"I'll head over and wait for you," Earth Bear said, giving me a nod of acknowledgment before turning and striding away.

Roman turned to me and planted a tender kiss on my lips. When he drew back, he said, "There. That should keep me for maybe an hour."

He laughed.

"You're quite easy if you need one little kiss," I teased.

“You’re right. I’ll take another.” He lowered his head to mine and kissed me long and hard. When he withdrew this time, his eyes sparkled. “Mm, much better. Now, what can I do for you?”

“I’ve been thinking,” I said, resting my hand on his hip. “Emily has become very important to me. I hate keeping secrets from her, especially after all she’s endured. If Balthazar is hunting us, she’s in danger, too.”

Roman nodded.

“I don’t want my darkness or Balthazar himself to kill her. That would destroy me.”

“I understand,” Roman said, cupping his hand behind my neck.

I pushed into his touch. “How would you feel if I told Emily the truth about us and who we are? Otherwise, she’s like a lamb surrounded by wolves. She’ll be caught completely off guard and be slaughtered. I couldn’t endure another death like that.”

A shudder twisted its way up my spine.

Roman placed both hands on my shoulders and looked at me intently. “My beloved, if your heart tells you it’s the right thing to do, tell her. I just don’t want you to make a mistake and alert Balthazar.”

My eyes widened. “Could that be possible?”

“I don’t know. Obviously, we don’t know all the wiles and treachery of the demon. So, I’d encourage you to listen to the quiet wisdom of your heart. If it doesn’t feel right to say anything, then don’t.” He gave my shoulders a squeeze.

“I love her so much already... I’d be devastated if anything happened to her. Completely heartbroken.” I hooked my hands around Roman’s wrists. “I don’t want her life to be in peril because of what I did or didn’t tell her.”

“She’s already at risk, Olivia. You know that.” He pulled me close and began to rock me side to side.

“I do. But the risk of not telling Emily seems too great.”

“Do what you think is best,” he said, squeezing me tightly.

It felt great to be enveloped by his warmth. For a few too-short seconds, I savored the contact.

Then, Roman said, “I’m sorry I didn’t get the chance to ask Grey Feather to bless our union. I’ll ask him tonight at the fire ceremony.”

“It’s all right. We don’t need to rush things,” I said with my cheek pressed against his chest. “I’m so happy to be engaged to you, sweetheart. But the ceremony will happen when it’s meant to happen. I need to talk to Emily, and we both have to figure out where the journal is and find out how to defeat Balthazar.”

“You’re right.” He kissed the top of my head and drew away from me. “And I need to see what Earth Bear has to show me. Until tonight, my beautiful flame.”

He brushed his lips against mine, pivoted, and strode toward Earth Bear’s teepee.

I pushed inside the teepee to find Emily on her back with her arm thrown over her eyes.

“Goodness, I’m exhausted,” she said without removing her arm. “Harvesting buffalo is hard work.”

“I know. Next, we must scrape, stretch, and tan the hides.” I dropped next to her on the fur-covered floor.

“Ugh,” she said. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to move for a week.”

I rolled to my stomach and propped myself on my forearms, gathering the courage to speak.

“Emily,” I finally said.

She whipped her arm from her eyes and turned to stare at me.

“What?” she said, alarm evident in her high-pitched voice.

“What’s the matter?” I said, wondering what alarmed her.

“That voice. That’s your ‘uh-oh’ voice.” She pushed up to prop herself on her hands.

“I have an ‘uh-oh’ voice?”

Emily nodded, her expression as severe as if we faced a firing squad.

I let out a nervous chuckle. “Well...I have something to share with you, and it will sound far-fetched. But please listen to me and let me get through the whole story. I’ll understand if you don’t believe it at first. When my father told me, I didn’t believe him. When Roman was told the tale, he didn’t believe it.”

Emily’s brows drew together. “So, Roman didn’t believe you when you told him what you’re about to tell me?”

“No, no, I didn’t tell that part right. Roman shares the same, um....” I looked toward the top of the teepee, searching for the right word. “He possesses a similar ability... It’s the same one as me.”

Emily sat up and clasped both my hands in hers. “Olivia, you’re scaring me. What are these so-called abilities?”

I exhaled and blurted, “I was born on November 3rd, 1994.”

“What?” she said breathlessly, her brow furrowed.

“What I said. I was born in a cave in Peru in the year 1994. I’m from the future. One and a half years ago, I time-traveled to ancient Rome, where I met Roman. Then, when Marcellious and Roman were about to kill one another in something called the Roman Colosseum, I time-traveled the three of us here.” I gripped her hands like my salvation depended on them.

“Wait, slow down,” she said, releasing my hands and putting her palms out. “You’re telling me that you, Roman, and Marcellious can travel through time?”

I nodded vigorously. “That’s right. I was born at the apex of a solar eclipse, and my abilities were bestowed upon me. The same thing happened to Roman and Marcellious. They’re

twins. And now, there's something called the darkness that is after me. This darkness kills the people I love."

I leaned forward and pressed my hands to her knees. "I wouldn't tell you any of this, but the chief told us this morning that there is terrible darkness, eviler than my own, that's after us all. And I'm afraid if I didn't tell you and it came after you, well..."

I clasped my palm over my mouth as a sob escaped. "I won't lose you, Emily. I just won't. This darkness has already claimed people whom I deeply loved. It's like a monster."

Emily's face grew pale. "You're scaring me, Olivia."

She reached for my hands, gripping them tightly.

"I'm scared, too, Emily. When Grey Feather told me the ultimate darkness was hunting me, I became more frightened than ever. I'm a fighter. I can take down several men at once—I've done it before. But I don't know how to fight something more supernatural."

We stared at one another in wide-eyed terror.

Then, I said, "You probably think I'm crazy. But I had to tell you, so you can decide to stay with us or go your own way."

Emily closed her eyes and exhaled deeply. "Olivia, I don't think you're crazy."

My eyebrows creased together. "You don't?"

"No, I don't. I believe you," Emily said, her hands shaking as she clutched mine. "My father knew a time traveler many years ago."

My jaw dropped open, and I blinked wildly. "What? How is that possible?"

Emily shrugged and tugged her hands away to push her messy hair out of her face. She jutted out her jaw and blew upward to assist the process. "Remember I told you Papa carried secrets?"

I nodded, placing my weight on my hands.

Emily said, “The day my family and I were arrested started as a typical morning. I went to his office to read a book and found a hidden secret journal. I couldn’t help but skim through the pages and read some entries. I felt awfully guilty.

“The journal said he found a deeply wounded and hurt woman and nursed her back to health. She spoke poorly in English in a thick Italian accent when she healed. She told my father she was in danger and needed to find a man named John James. She said over and over.

“When my father asked why she needed to find him, she said she was in danger from a treacherous man named Balthazar. My father tried to understand who Balthazar was, but she was afraid to share more. After some time, she left my father heartbroken. For years, he tried to find her and understand who she was and who Balthazar was but came to a dead end.”

I was shocked. “Emily, your father’s journal said *Balthazar* was after her?”

“Yes, my father’s journal said that. I wanted to read more to understand who this John James was, but suddenly I heard Charlotte scream. I dropped the journal, rushed toward her, and saw how soldiers had come to arrest my father and us.”

“Oh, my goodness, Emily, I’m so sorry.” I spread my arms wide to hug her. “Do you think the journal is still at your home?”

“I don’t know. When we were arrested, the soldiers started to burn the house down. I don’t know if the house is still standing. It was a big house. My father’s journal could still be there, and I’m sure it can help you with some answers you are looking for.”

“How long ago was the journal written?”

“It dated back twenty-eight years.”

“Emily, oh, my goodness. The time traveler we are looking for came to the tribe for help twenty-eight years ago. This is probably the same woman your father met. It could be her journal!”

“Yes! It’s at my home in Weston Hills,” Emily said.

“This is such good news! You have no idea. I’ve been bewildered, wondering where to find answers to the sea of questions swimming in my head. And little did I know, *you*, my dear friend, would have an essential answer. We must leave soon so we can go get it.”

Emily stiffened in my grasp. Then, she pushed away from me. “That idea terrifies me, Olivia. Why can’t we stay with this tribe, where we’re safe? They seem to have welcomed us.”

I studied her, my gaze heavy with concern. “You don’t understand, Emily. Balthazar is the darkness that is after me. None of us are safe unless he’s destroyed—not you, me, Roman, or Marcellious. He’s *hunting* us, Emily. And he’s a supernatural being who slips through time, disappears and reappears—I don’t know how to fight such an entity without assistance. We’ve got to get your father’s journal and see what it says about her.”

Emily sat facing me, quivering, looking everywhere but at me. At last, she met my eyes and released a breath. She took my hands, and with clear-eyed regard, she said, “I want to know more about my father, who this woman was, and who John James is. I will help you, Olivia, and guide you to my father’s journal as best as I can. You’re like a sister to me, and I wouldn’t want to lose you to this darkness.”

“Thank you, Emily. You are like a sister to me too. I don’t want you to worry. I will have Roman and Marcellious accompany us on our journey to Weston Hills. They’ll help protect us. You know they will.” I tightened my grip on her fingers. “I, above all, promise to keep you safe, Emily. You have my word.”

But even as I said this, I knew from experience that I couldn’t save the people I loved.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Olivia

At last, we had a path to follow in our quest for answers—and Emily might be the key. I felt a measure of hope for the first time in a while. Perhaps we could find a way to defeat Balthazar.

As night descended, blanketing the tribal encampment beneath a field of stars, Roman and I sat dining apart from the others. A slight chill hung in the air, and I huddled beside him for warmth. The ground beneath my butt was brutal and unforgiving to the touch. Or maybe I was just nervous about the fire ceremony tonight. I had no idea how one consulted with the Great Spirit and if said spirit would bestow information on us.

And I was suspicious of Grey Feather. His behavior had been shifty in the teepee—avoiding eye contact, drifting into his own thoughts, and not answering the questions directly. At times, he seemed evasive, like a 21st-century politician.

Maybe I was simply paranoid. At this point, I had a lot to be paranoid about, if the darkest of the dark demons was after me.

“So, Emily believes that her father’s journals will give us answers about the time traveler he met twenty-eight years ago?” Roman said, plucking a piece of bison meat from his dish with his fingers. He popped the morsel in his mouth and chewed.

“That’s what she said.” I wiped the juices of the meat I’d consumed from the corners of my mouth with my fingertips. “I

honestly can't believe it. I was at my wits' end with all the questions without answers we face and the utterly dire reality of being hunted by a crazy, blood-lusting demon. I'm so relieved to have a direction to follow at last. We've got to head to Weston Hills as soon as it's feasible."

"I agree. And hopefully, we'll get more answers tonight at the fire ceremony," Roman said.

"When will it start?" I asked, setting my empty basket on the ground.

"I'm not sure. I was told Earth Bear will come and get us and prepare us for the ceremony." Roman's gaze flitted beyond my shoulder, and he pointed. "There he is now."

Anxiety ratcheted up inside my stomach, churning the delicious food I'd just consumed.

"A-ho!" Earth Bear said, lifting his hand in greeting. Behind him stood Leaping Deer, the healer who had cleansed Emily and me of our sorrows in the creek.

"A-ho!" Roman said, making the same gesture.

"Come. We must prepare you to meet the Great Spirit. Little Moon, you will accompany Leaping Deer. Swift Hawk, you will be with me. We shall attend the ceremony together when your hearts and spirits have been purified individually."

I nodded, unsure of what such a purification entailed.

"Come," Leaping Deer said to me, her expression somber. "We must purify your body."

She turned toward a different structure—one made of hides but lower to the ground, with no opening at the top.

It looked like the framework had been fashioned of willow branches crisscrossed one another. Set near the creek, the structure stood apart from the other teepees.

Another similar lodge sat on the other side of the creek.

In the gloom of the night, I made out Roman, Marcellious, and Earth Bear crossing the stream in a shallow section, presumably heading toward the other hut.

I followed Leaping Deer, trepidation shaking my limbs.

When we stood outside the leather-covered structure, Leaping Deer said in her native tongue, “Remove your clothes.”

I let out a slight cough and scanned my brain for the right words.

“Right here?” I managed in Sioux.

“Take them off,” Leaping Deer said, gesturing impatiently. “Nothing can stand in the way of your prayers here in the sweat lodge.”

Whoa. I’m going to partake in a sweat lodge? This was an honor.

I looked around me in all directions and saw no onlookers, so I stripped. I folded up my deerskin garments and set them neatly near the door. Next, I removed my weapons and tucked them beneath my clothing.

“Good,” Leaping Deer said. She lifted the flap of the dwelling and motioned for me to enter. “Come.”

I stooped and made my way inside.

Red hot stones glowed brightly in a pit in the center of the lodge.

Laughing Maid sat naked, her legs tucked by her side, near a basket lined with moss that held water. She looked up when I entered, her face cast in orange and yellow highlights from the glowing stones, and smiled at me.

I returned the smile, trying not to appear self-conscious.

“Sit,” Leaping Deer said, pointing to a patch of dirt next to Laughing Maid.

I did as I was told, folding my arms over my breasts.

Leaping Deer settled next to me and directed her attention to Laughing Maid. “Call in the directions.”

Laughing Maid nodded, closed her eyes, and began to rock back and forth. She crouched, her head brushing the low

ceiling, and cupped her hands over her head as if to receive. Then, she said, “Oh, Great Spirit of the North, we come to you and ask for the strength and the power to bear what is cold and brutal in life. We come like buffalo, ready to receive the winds that blow your blessings upon the plains. Oh, Spirit of Life and Spirit of the North, we ask you for strength and warmth.”

She pivoted a quarter circle and turned her upturned palms toward the East. “Oh, Great Spirit of the East, we turn to you where the sun comes up, from where the power of light comes each day. Let there be the light bestowed upon us. Oh, Spirit of the East, let the light in our life be a celebration to you.”

I fell into a place of stillness at her intonations. Like Laughing Maid, I began to rock side to side, and my gaze softened.

Laughing Maid shifted her body again. Then, she said, “Oh, Great Spirit of the South, the spirit of all that is warm and kind, we ask you to give us this time of growth, fertility, and sweet caress. Give us the seeds of abundance such that the earth’s flowers, trees, and fruits may grow. Help us cultivate and nourish the warmth of good friendships.”

Once more, she pivoted. “Oh, Great Spirit of the West, where the sun goes down each day to come up the next, we turn to you in praise of sunsets and in thanksgiving for changes. You are the powerful cycle that pulls us to transformation. Help us stay open to life’s changes.”

She lifted her hands and then dipped them toward the ground, saying, “As it is above, may it be so below. A-ho!”

Without being prompted, I repeated the phrase, “A-ho!” as did Leaping Deer.

Laughing Maid settled back into her place.

As we sat in silence, the heat grew overbearing.

Laughing Maid scooped water from the lined basket and threw it on the glowing stones.

Steam billowed into the air, searing my face and torso. Sweat poured from my face, my neck, and my breasts.

“Let us pray. Let your prayers fit through the eye of a needle,” Leaping Deer said. She picked up a deer hoof rattle next to Laughing Maid, shook it, and said, “Great Spirit, watch over our people. Grant us your blessings as we journey through this lifetime. We ask that you bless our returned family, Swift Hawk and Hunting Wolf, and their loved ones, Little Moon and the one called Emily. Grant them the answers they seek.”

In a loud, clear voice, she said, “*Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ!*”

Laughing Maid poured more water over the rocks.

A cloud of steam billowed into the enclosure, scorching my nostrils when I breathed. Sweat poured from every skin cell until I felt like floating in a boiling sea. I could barely tolerate the scorching temperature.

Give me the strength to endure.

Laughing Maid took the rattle and began to pray. “Great Spirit, grant us abundance. Give us guidance when we have lost our way. Help us live out our lives according to your plan, not ours. And grant that Little Moon, Swift Hawk, and Hunting Wolf find the answers they seek,” she said, repeating Leaping Deer’s prayer. “*Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ!*”

She poured more water over the hot stones.

I became so hot that I thought I’d die. Perspiration dripped into my eyes, stinging them and making me blink wildly. Drenched in heat, I could barely remember my name.

The rattle was handed to me. I shook it, unable to think of a thing to say. My mind and body reeled from the intense storm inside and outside my body. I closed my eyes and continued to shake the rattle. All I could think about was the heat, the searing heat.

In a voice that didn’t sound like mine, that didn’t seem to come from me, I said, “Great Spirit, hear me. Grant me the strength to battle the darkness and slay the darkest of them all—Balthazar.”

A ferocious wind kicked up inside the teepee, raising the temperature even more. This strange gust billowed about me

like my own private tempest. A keening noise issued from my mouth, coming from some fathomless place inside me.

A hand grabbed my neck, and my eyelids fluttered open.

Leaping Deer shoved my face to the ground and said, “Stay there. Stay low.” Then, she cried, “Begone, foul wind. Leave us!”

The wind howled, shrieking against my eardrums.

I pressed my palms to my ears to keep the sound at bay. With gritted teeth, I kept up with the keening as my face pressed against the dirt, seeking the coolness it provided.

Leaping Deer chanted something I couldn't understand while Laughing Maid poured more water on the stones.

I became lost inside this strange, dark, intolerably hot world. Around me, this bizarre wind blew wildly, reeking of decay and rotting flesh, and sucked me into a terrifying vortex. I crawled on the dirt floor, trying to escape the heat, finding respite in the crack at the base of the hides. I pressed my nose to the gap like a little dog and focused on the slender slice of cool air that touched the end of my nose.

Leaping Deer kept up with the chanting, with me clinging to sanity.

At last, the door flap was thrown open, and a waft of night air came rushing into the lodge. I belly-crawled outside, spent, and collapsed upon the earth without prompting. Feeling as cleansed as if I'd been dipped repeatedly in the sea, I lay there. I didn't have the strength to move.

What was that wind that blew in the enclosure? It didn't feel benevolent, not one bit.

Soft hands fell upon my back, and I was urged onto my hands and knees and then to standing.

Leaping Deer stood back to regard me. She cocked her head and turned my face from side to side. Eventually, she nodded, satisfied with what she saw.

I felt shaky and weak, utterly exhausted, as I attached my blade and gun to my thighs. A white robe was thrown over my

shoulders, and some markings were painted on my face.

“Come. You are ready to see the Great Spirit.” She led me beneath the moonless sky toward Roman, Marcellious, Earth Bear, and Grey Feather, who sat around a blazing bonfire.

Earth Bear wielded a drum, and he beat a steady rhythm with it while chanting and singing.

I collapsed next to Roman.

He flashed me a wan smile, appearing as spent as I was. Just like in Rome, he wore a simple leather loincloth. He looked genuinely fierce, his face and torso covered with red and black markings, obscuring his tattoos.

Marcellious’ eyes looked haunted in the flickering flames.

Leaping Deer departed, fading into the night like a wraith.

While Earth Bear kept up with the drumming and chanting, Grey Feather stood and intoned the four directions similarly to Laughing Maid. Then, he sat and picked up a rattle similar to the one we’d had in the sweat lodge.

The wailing in my ears began. I pressed my hands to the sides of my head.

Grey Feather shook the rattle with his eyes closed, saying something about the Great Spirit, guidance, and answers.

I couldn’t discern everything he said—the drum and the insistent shrieking blocked out all other sounds.

Both Roman and Marcellious looked at me, their brows creased in concern.

The drum grew louder, and Grey Feather’s voice boomed.

A shower of sparks erupted from the fire.

Grey Feather shouted and raised his arms to the sky.

“Show them the path!” he bellowed.

Another fountain of sparks exploded from the fire, and then, a dark, shadowy shape emerged.

“Look,” the dark figure said to me, pointing. “Look into your future.”

My mouth gaped as a scene unfolded before my eyes.

Blood dripped from the sky, spattering against the flames. Bodies fell upon the glowing logs and disappeared as puffs of smoke. The village was immersed in blood, pain, and misery. My heart shattered with grief as I heard people scream, caught in murderous chaos.

At first, I thought the screams came from the vision. But then, glancing toward the encampment, tribal people ran with torches, screaming and shouting while chased by ghostly visages.

And amid all the chaos stood my darkness, watching me, an evil grin upon its face.

“Olivia!” a voice called out.

I peered in the direction of the shout. “Emily?”

Emily sprinted toward me, her face pulled back in terror.

A dark shape appeared, moving like lightning as it chased her.

Emily let out a scream to wake the dead. “Somebody, help me!”

Marcellious bolted to his feet and raced toward her. He grabbed her in his arms.

I rose as if hypnotized and trudged toward the darkness. With slow, plodding footsteps, I moved toward my own personal demon, unable to stop.

Roman took off after me. “Olivia, what are you doing?”

Earth Bear kept on drumming and drumming and drumming.

The chief continued with his chants.

The world around me fell away as I strode, entranced toward my darkness. Black clouds billowed around me, obscuring everything but the darkness.

As I neared it, its cloak fell away and fluttered on an unseen wind into the night.

I stopped, standing face to face with this visage of evil.

Its wild hair looked more like dark smoke coiling around its head. And its skin, if it could be called skin, appeared charred. Pieces of it fell away as the darkness undulated before me, revealing a gray, cracked surface.

One of its eyes looked at me through a blood-red orb. The other looked like a black hole, ready to suck me into its vortex of depravity.

The creature leered at me with a toothless grin and began to speak. Its words seemed inside my head, clawing at my mind and outside me, battering at my eardrums. I held my hands before my face to shield me.

“We meet again, my darling. It’s been some time since I last saw you. You feel like you’re strong enough to take me. That’s where you’re wrong—I will kill you like I killed Amara.” The darkness swayed side to side, looming over me.

I squinted at the menacing shape and shivered. “You’re nothing but a bloodsucking monster, a devil!”

The creature laughed and said, “I actually have a name. Balthazar gave it to me.”

“Tell me. Tell me what your name is,” I demanded.

“It’s Dahlia,” she said, and the word ricocheted up my spine, tearing something loose. I *knew* this darkness.

My vision began to blur, and dots appeared before my eyes. “You... you’re...” I stammered.

“That’s right. I’m your darkness. And Balthazar will kill you—he’s hunting you as we speak.”

My knees began to tremble, and I feared I might faint. I searched for my friends, for Roman, finding them in the distance, like blurred shapes through a warped-looking glass.

The drums, chanting, and screams sounded like they came from far away, through a wall of water.

“You think you have bodyguards to protect you, but you’re wrong. Balthazar tells me you are weak—all of you. You are

nothing but frightened rabbits, finding ways to hide in the field. But he sees you—we all do.”

A shiver rocked me, but I didn't let it get to me. Instead, I stood tall, leaning forward slightly as I said, “Tell Balthazar I am not afraid of him. Why did he not show his face? Why did he send you instead? Is he that much of a coward?”

The darkness laughed, issuing a wind out of its mouth, much like the wind inside the sweat lodge.

Like in the sweat lodge, this wind stank of decaying flesh and rotting corpses and made me want to gag. I threw my arm over my face to try and ward off the stench.

“Balthazar has plans for all of you, especially you, my dear.” It thrust its finger in my direction, causing a shock wave to blast through my abdomen.

I fought back the urge to vomit. Summoning every ounce of strength, I said, “I am ready to finish you once and for all.”

I reached beneath my white robe and grabbed my dagger from my thigh. I remembered what Marcellious told me about how to kill my darkness. I was to take my blade, point it toward the heavens, and repeat the sacred words. In so doing, I would be able to control the darkness.

The darkness watched me as I pointed the dagger at the moon and began saying the ancient scripture.

“Ya hamiat alqamar fi allayl, ‘adeuk litutliq aleinan lilnuwr waturshiduni khilal alzalami. Dae alshams aleazimat tarqus min hawlik bialhubi walmawadati. Mean, aftahuu bawaabatikum wamnahwani alsafar eabr alzaman walmakan mithl zilal allay.”

My darkness struck like lightning, grabbing Laughing Maid in her arms.

Laughing Maid shrieked and cried, writhing in the arms of the demon holding her.

“Olivia, help me!” she cried in her native tongue.

I lunged for her, but the darkness snapped Laughing Maid's neck before I could reach her.

Then, it dropped Laughing Maid's limp body to the ground.

"No!" I cried out, falling to my knees.

Dahlia and her black clouds disappeared, leaving me kneeling before the dead Native American maiden with shrieks and cries.

The chief rose with a young man's speed and said thunderously, "Everyone, get inside your teepee and stay there!"

"Those people," Leaping Deer yelled, pointing at me, Roman, and Marcellious. "You let them into our tribe under our protection. You allowed danger to enter!"

She rushed toward me and shoved me out of the way, reaching for Laughing Maid's limp body. "If these time travelers are here, we are in danger."

The chief bellowed. "How dare you say that? Would you also turn Dancing Fire away?"

I stumbled to my feet as sharp stabs of grief split open my heart. Why did I cause so much sorrow to those I loved? Everywhere I went, I brought pain.

I dropped my head in my hands and began to sob. My body shook with emotion.

Strong hands wrapped around my arms and lifted me.

I turned, pressing myself into Roman's warmth.

"Come on, my darling," he said, tucking me against him.

"How can we destroy the darkness?" I blubbered.

"Shh," Roman soothed. "No matter what, we will be together. We will find a way to defeat Balthazar."

"But how? Every time I stand up to the darkness, it destroys someone I care about." I felt consumed by despair so powerful it threatened to swallow me.

"Sweetheart," Roman said, turning to face me. He placed his hands on my tear-stained cheeks. "Everyone has a

weakness, even Balthazar. We will find his weakness. We will find it and exploit it. Then and only then will we be free.”

His words sounded comforting. But the reality of ever escaping Balthazar was too daunting to give me peace.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Olivia

The sun lingered behind the horizon when Emily and I awoke the next day. My heart seemed weighted as if stuffed with stones and sorrow.

We hustled around the teepee in the darkness, gathering our belongings to prepare for our departure.

“It’s so awful...what happened to Laughing Maid. The tribe must hate us right now if they think you’re responsible for her death,” Emily said, her voice tight with fear.

“They have every right to be angry. I *am* responsible. Everywhere I go, I bring the promise of pain and death, Emily,” I said, my voice cracking with grief. I felt along the hide-strewn floor for my moccasins and set to donning them.

“Oh, don’t say that, Olivia! Surely, you’re not the one who called this so-called darkness to come and kill Laughing Maid,” Emily said.

“It doesn’t matter. It always finds me. And when it does, it makes sure to kill someone I care about or have been in contact with.” Once my footwear was in place, I rose and said, “I need to go tell the chief we’re leaving.”

“Do you want company?”

“No, thank you. I feel I should go alone,” I said.

In truth, I was apprehensive about facing the great chief. But it was my duty to tell the wise elder face to face rather

than leave him wondering like Marcellious had done when he disappeared. I didn't want the chief to simply find us gone.

Outside of our teepee, I ghost-walked across the packed dirt, heading in the direction of Grey Feather's dwelling. The encampment was eerily quiet. I pictured the residents huddled inside their homes, unwilling to venture out lest the darkness hunts them down.

As I approached the chief's teepee, doubt rolled through me. Grey Feather might not even be awake. What did I plan on doing? Sneak into his lodge and shake his shoulder? What if I startled him, and he tried to attack me? He was an old warrior, and even though he might appear feeble, instincts were instincts.

Outside of his teepee, Earth Bear stood tall and imposing. "The great chief is ready to see you. He's been waiting."

I jerked back in surprise, barely able to make out Earth Bear's face in the pre-dawn. "He is?"

"Yes," Earth Bear said, pulling back the tent flap. "Enter."

My stomach cramped as I ducked and made my way into the teepee.

A small fire burned brightly in the center, shooting sparks into the air.

Shadows danced along Grey Feather's face, giving him an ominous expression.

"Sit," he said, pointing opposite him.

I lowered into a "legs to the side" position and studied him through the flames.

"What happened last night was a travesty," he said. "But it's no cause for your departure. The people will see Laughing Maid's death was not your fault. They will forgive you."

My eyebrows flew up. How could he say something like this? Laughing Maid's death *was* my fault, and the tribespeople had every right to be afraid of me. "That's kind of you to say, but that's not why we're leaving. How did you even know about our imminent departure?"

He let out a long sigh. “I have been up all night, consulting with the Great Spirit. Wakan Tanka informed me you are leaving.”

I rested my hands in my lap and said, “We are, but it’s not why you think. I need answers. You informed me to look for the journal belonging to Fierce Wind. I believe Fierce Wind is the woman who came to Emily’s father’s land and fell in love with him. Her father, Philip, supposedly wrote detailed journals of their time together. If we find the journals, perhaps we will discover the whereabouts of Fierce Wind’s writing.”

The chief jerked back as if stunned by this news. “This young maiden, this Emily... Her father knew Fierce Wind?”

“Yes, I believe so. I think she is the same woman that he met and then she came here to you. But I’m not completely certain,” I said simply. The heat pouring from the fire made my cheeks hot to the touch, almost too warm, like in the sweat lodge last night. I scooted backward.

“Will you be leaving Hunting Wolf behind?” Grey Feather asked.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Both Hunting Wolf and Swift Hawk will be accompanying us. Our journey could be fraught with danger, and I need them.”

I studied the chief for a reaction.

His face seemed to melt into an expression of sorrow as he stared at the flames.

“We’ll be back, Grey Feather, I promise,” I said, not wanting to cause him more grief. “But we must find these journals. As you can see, the darkneses are indeed hunting us.”

The chief nodded. After several beats of silence, he bid me farewell and sent me away.

I glanced at him, noting the wet tears that clung to the corners of his eyes. Slowly, I rose and crept from the teepee.

My next stop was Roman’s dwelling. Outside, the faintest glimmer of dawn pushed through the night’s shadows. The

same cacophony of bird songs accompanying every morning in the wilds filled the air.

I stepped lightly across the dirt as I headed for Roman's.

The sound of sharp, angry voices greeted me from Roman's teepee.

"What do you mean we're leaving today?" Marcellious snapped.

"What I said. Emily's father met the same time traveler who stayed with the tribe for a while," Roman said in an even tone.

I opened the flap to the lodge and entered.

Roman and Marcellious were barely visible. Their faces were lit only by the wispy morning light seeping through the enclosure's top.

"Olivia!" Roman said, turning to face me.

"Good morning. I see you've told Marcellious about us leaving," I said, inching toward him.

"How do you know this isn't a trap your friend has set up for us?" Marcellious growled.

"Good morning to you, too, Marcellious," I said.

"I can't believe you trusted her. You told her we're time travelers? That was a mistake," Marcellious said, ignoring my greeting. "What kind of fool are you? If word gets out that we're Timebornes, we could be hung, shot, or burned at the stake."

As he spoke, he gesticulated with sharp movements of his arms. "Or, did the people of your time believe in fairies and magic, so you thought this would be no big deal?"

"Not at all," I said, swishing away his concerns with my palm. "The people in my time were suspicious of anything that didn't match their reality. But I had to tell her, Marcellious, don't you see? Not telling her would set her up for the fright of her life should the darkness come after her. Now that she knows, she can be watchful."

Marcellious grunted, crossing his arms over his bare chest.

“Emily wants to *help* us,” I said, extending my hands. “She’s already like a sister to me, and I won’t allow anything to happen to her.”

“Like you can control that,” Marcellious said, sneering. “Like you can control *anything*.”

“You’re right. I can’t control anything, but I can prepare. And right now, we *need* you to come with us. I don’t know what awaits us on the way to Weston Hills. Doesn’t it make sense to band together for all our protection? Balthazar will hunt us all down if we fail in our quest, including you, Marcellious.”

Marcellious worked his jaw side to side, but he made no comment.

“So,” Roman said, “are you coming with us?”

“I’ll do it for my people. I’ll do it for the tribe,” he said, glancing from me to Roman and back to me. “Don’t think I’m joining you because you want me to.”

“I wouldn’t dream of such a thing,” I said, rolling my eyes.

The thought of a long journey with this miserable man rankled me. But, like I’d said, I needed Marcellious’ help.

I faced Roman, done with Marcellious’ snark. “Emily’s waiting. Meet me near the horses in ten minutes.”

I turned to leave, opened the door flap, smiled, and said, “Ready?”

“Yes, I’m coming,” she said, hurrying to join me. She carried a heavy satchel at her side.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to the weighted bag.

Her cheeks reddened. “I, uh, sneaked to the food storage and helped myself to some bison meat and venison. Oh, and some pemmican.”

My expression brightened. The pemmican, consisting of rendered animal fats, berries, and herbs, would fill our bellies for hours.

“It’s a long journey to Weston Hills,” Emily continued. “And I didn’t think anyone would venture outside to offer us sustenance. I would have left something in return, but I have nothing to give.”

She cast her gaze at the ground.

“Oh, Emily, how kind of you to think of us. I would have hunted something, but you’re right. This will allow us to move quickly toward our destination.” I put my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. “We’ll have to bring gifts of some kind when we return. Although I don’t think we’ll be given a warm reception upon our return.”

I scrunched up my face at the thought. But I released such worries, desiring to stay here and now.

Earth Bear waited for us out by the horse enclosure with four horses secured by their reins in his hands. The rest of the equines stretched into the distance, numbering in the hundreds.

“Grey Feather has asked that we gift you these horses. The horses you brought are white people’s steeds. They are not as swift and sure-footed as ours.” Earth Bear beamed.

“Thank you! Tell Grey Feather thank you, as well.” My throat became clogged with emotion. The people of this tribe, especially the great chief and his son, had been most gracious with us. I wanted them to know how deeply I appreciated their kindness, so I took a risk and clasped Earth Bear’s hands.

He blinked as if surprised.

“You have touched my heart with your generosity,” I said.

A warm glow spread across his cheeks.

“We shall instruct your horses in the ways of our people and teach them to be trustworthy rides,” he said.

“I’m deeply honored. Tell Grey Feather his kindness shall be returned ten-fold,” I said, reaching for the reins Earth Bear extended to me.

He handed over a horse to Emily then his gaze flicked behind me. He lifted his hand and said, “A-ho, brothers!”

“A-ho,” Roman called.

As always, my heart surged with joy at the sight of Roman.

He strode toward us with purpose and power.

“Grey Feather has gifted us these steeds,” I said, reaching for Roman’s hand.

He took it, kissing my knuckles, then turned his attention to Earth Bear. “Your chief’s generosity is great, Earth Bear. Please convey our gratitude.”

“Return to us safely,” Earth Bear said.

Roman turned to me and lifted me up to mount my horse.

Marcellious did the same for Emily.

Eyes wide, I blinked in disbelief. Marcellious doing a kind turn for anyone? This was a rare moment.

Roman and Marcellious both leaped onto the backs of their rides, and, after giving our farewells to Earth Bear, we were off.

We had to rely on Emily’s guidance, as we didn’t know where Weston Hills was.

“It’s in South Carolina.” She gave more directives, and Marcellious frowned.

He trotted his horse next to her. “You’ve got to give us more clues than that.”

Her face flushed as she said something to him that I couldn’t hear.

They chatted back and forth before Marcellious announced, “I think I’ve got it.”

The sun blazed as we crossed the plains, heading southeast. My grief lessened slightly the further we got away from the tribe. It was as if I could *feel* the sorrow and rage emanating from the teepees. But traversing through endless miles of prairie grass, I let my woes fall from my shoulders.

At a creek, we all dismounted and allowed the horses to pick their way through the stone-lined stream to drink.

Holding the reins in my left hand, I squatted in the middle of the creek and scooped some water into my hand. There were no water bottles, and we could not carry the precious liquid.

Emily rummaged around in her satchel and found the pemmican, then broke off a piece for each of us.

We all stood, munching on the bison fat, berries, and herbs. I looked at Roman, desire filling my heart. It had been too long since we'd shared a sexual encounter of any depth. We'd had a rushed, frantic experience in the Hypogeum, where Roman had been held prisoner. I missed touching him with abandon.

He turned to look at me, and the world fell away. I felt safely enveloped by our love.

But then Marcellious interrupted us, saying, "We've got a long journey ahead. Let's not stand around and make love eyes at one another."

We traversed the rest of the day, saying little, and riding our horses in companionable silence. At least Roman, Emily, and I were companionable.

Marcellious rode ahead of us, keeping to himself.

When we broke for camp, two hawks circled over our heads. I took that as a sign that this spot was as good as any to stay the night. The sun dropped toward the horizon, heralding the day's end.

A small spring bubbled nearby, so we all had a water source to sip through the night.

And, so far, no sign of the darkness.

We ground-tied the horses so they could graze, and Roman and Marcellious took off searching for firewood.

Once a nice blaze burned, Emily passed out more pemmican, and we sat around the fire, eating.

Marcellious and Emily kept to their own thoughts, saying little.

As stars illuminated the sky, Roman turned to me and said softly, “Olivia. Let’s take a walk together. It’s beautiful out tonight.”

“Of course,” I said, eager to share some alone time with him.

“We’ll be back in a bit,” Roman told Marcellious, but Marcellious only grunted his reply.

“Will you be okay?” I said to Emily.

“Are you staying with me?” Emily asked Marcellious.

“Now, where do you think I’d go?” he said with a sneer.

“I’ll take that as a rude yes,” Emily said to him. She turned toward me and said, “Yes, I’ll be fine.”

Hand in hand, Roman and I took off toward a small stand of trees. As we walked, my insides began to quiver with longing, and wet heat flooded my core. We said nothing, but a world of desire and unmet needs sizzled between us.

Once we stood with the trees obscuring us from the others, I said, “Did you need to speak to me?”

“Not in words, my love,” he said, pulling me close. “I can sense the overwhelm inside of you, the fear beneath the surface of your skin. You don’t have to carry it alone, my beautiful flame. Let me ease your pain. I can’t wait for another second. I need to make love to you.”

He tugged my supple dress over my head, running his palms across my bare skin. “You’re so beautiful,” he said, stroking my naked shoulders.

“So are you,” I whispered, delighting in the feel of him beneath my fingers.

Roman kissed my neck and jaw with so much tenderness that I could weep. My vulnerability split wide open as his lips worked along my cheekbones and eyelids.

Our bodies were close, so close, and yet still separate. “Roman,” I breathed.

“What is it, my beloved?” He pushed his fingers into my hair, massaging and stroking.

“I need to be closer to you.” I traced the planes of his jaw with my fingertips.

Roman let out a soft chuckle. “Our bodies are pressed together. How much closer can we get?”

I met his eyes and searched for his soul. “I don’t know. I just want to be consumed by you, to get lost in our connection.”

“Ah,” he said, smiling. “Then, let’s get lost together.” Roman claimed my mouth with a ravenous kiss that took my breath away. Then, with one hand around my neck, he caressed my breasts with his other hand, fingering my nipples into aching buds of need.

He broke the kiss and bit his way down my neck.

Chills cascaded up and down my spine.

Crouching slightly, he sucked one of my breasts into his hot mouth.

I moaned, tugging at his wild hair, and my head dropped back.

He sucked me hard as he moved his hand down my belly and dropped to explore the slick, wet juncture between my legs.

My body was ignited by his passion.

He groaned as he stroked me with his strong, callused fingers. “You’re so wet, my beautiful flame.”

“I am. It’s all for you,” I said, eager to have his hard cock inside me.

“Lie down,” he commanded.

Something about his tone of voice excited me to no end. Roman was a warrior, used to having his own way. I longed for him to have his way with *me*.

I dropped to my knees like a stone and spread my suede dress on the ground. I lay back as a burning fire of desire blazed inside of me.

Roman's eyes ignited with passion as he gazed at me. Undoubtedly, he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

I desired his everything, given without restraint or reservation. I'd endured countless lonely nights without him. And now was our chance, perhaps our only chance for quite some time, to join together.

Roman tugged his shirt over his head and unfastened the ties holding his deerskin breeches up. Then, he was on top of me, our lips grinding together, his tongue thrusting into my mouth with fury.

Unable to repress my urges, I rolled on top of him. I needed to be in charge and wanted to take control. I wanted to feel like I wasn't a tumbleweed being swept along by a dark wind but a powerful being shaping my own destiny.

Roman yielded to me, lacing our fingers together, saying, "Use me how you want, my love. I'm yours for the taking."

My breasts ached to be caressed, to be sucked, to be teased. I dragged them back and forth across his solid chest, feeling my nipples tighten into sensitive buds.

"Oh, God," I cried out as the ache in my breasts grew unbearable.

Roman let out a wicked laugh. "Olivia," he breathed, his warm breath dancing across my face. "I can't get enough of you. I'll never get enough of you." His hands swept my sides, exploring, and teasing my sensitive skin.

I was high on his intoxicating touch.

I propped my hands on his chest and let my long hair drape across his eyes, cheeks, and torso.

His face appeared rapturous as my silken strands caressed and enticed him.

Then, he hooked his hand behind my neck and brought my mouth down to his. He caressed my back, my ass, my

shoulders, and my arms as he kissed me.

When our lips collided, I let out a wild groan, devoured by Roman's kisses.

His hard cock lay between us, waiting to claim my insides.

I began to tremble with longing, and a plaintive, mewling sound escaped my throat.

Roman wrenched his lips from mine and growled, "I'm going out of my mind. I need to be inside you. *Now!*"

I reached between us and fit his swollen cock into me.

I hovered there, feeling him stretch me to my limit, filling me like no man ever could. Time seemed to stretch as this exquisite sensation of belonging, of being claimed by this powerful man, filled me.

There was and would only ever be Roman. He was my love, my warrior, my world, my reason for existence.

Roman grabbed my hips and began to thrust inside me, slow and steady, grunting with each thrust.

"Olivia," he cried out. "I want to be deeper, so deep inside you that we both disappear."

"I want that, too, Roman." His insistent thrusts made my body sing, caught in a storm of pain and pleasure. "Oh, yes."

As he plunged inside me, I undulated. I needed to bite, to claim, so I bit at the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

He let out a roar of satisfaction, and his hip thrusts intensified, driving relentlessly.

I let go of the world, everything, and anything that worried me and surfed on the waves of desire. There was this, only this, only this moment of ecstasy captured on the American Plains in the dark of night.

His cock felt like a knot of fire, waiting to explode, to shoot inside of me in a volcanic stream.

This agonizing tension, this blaze of heat, crackled between us, seeking release. Our bodies slapped against one

another, slick and wet with sweat.

I could feel the moment when the fiery knot unraveled and Roman spilled his seed inside me.

He shouted and cried out my name, clutching my hips.

In the distance, the coyotes howled, joining us in ecstatic surrender.

Then, I exploded like a billion shooting stars cascading through the heavens. I shook with the relentless force of our combined orgasms.

“Roman!” I yelled through gritted teeth. “Oh, Roman!”

We soared through the sky like those two hawks that marked our arrival. I felt weightless, free, and on fire.

When gravity called me back to earth, I collapsed on top of Roman.

He caressed my back and whispered, “My love,” over and over until I fell into a blissful drowse.

When he said, “*Ti voglio bene*,” I stirred in surprise.

He’s telling me he loves me in Italian.

Then, he murmured, “*Ti adoro con tutto il cuore.*”

I pushed up onto my hands. “How can you tell me you adore me with all your heart in Italian?”

A playful smile graced his face. “*Conosco molte frasi. Parlo correntemente l’italiano.*”

“You know many things, and yes, I can hear you speak Italian fluently. How is this possible?”

“Well,” he said, urging me from his hips. He pushed up to sit, and we both faced one another. “How is it *you* know so many languages? You probably studied them, as did I. My mother tutored me to the best of her abilities. She wanted me to learn Italian because she loved it. And then I learned Arabic and Turkish in honor of my father.”

“That’s so hot, Roman,” I said, grinning. “That’s such a turn-on.”

“If by ‘turn-on’ you mean you find it sexy, then I’m glad.” He reached out to place his hands on my thighs. “I find your intelligence sexy as well.”

“You don’t get it. The men in my time are such assholes. You are truly an honorable man. I never want to be away from you, Roman,” I said, placing my palms on his hands.

He laughed. “I’m guessing there are assholes in every century. You and I were destined to meet in whatever century we could. Even if we were to be separated, we’re soulmates. We’ll always find a way to be together.”

My heart soared. I would never tire of hearing Roman say words like that to me.

In the distance, a shout filled the air, competing with the chirping cicadas all around us, humming their nightly prayer.

“Hey! You two lovebirds... I’ve got to go take a piss, and I don’t want to leave Emily’s side,” Marcellious yelled. “She’s like a frightened rabbit.”

“I am not,” Emily said.

“Dammit!” Marcellious called out. “Get over here!”

Roman cupped his hands around his mouth. “We’ll be right there.” He turned to me and said, “I hope the weight and burden have been lifted off your shoulders tonight. We will conquer this together. We have each other no matter what awaits us on this journey.”

He lowered his lips to mine, kissing me with ferocious passion.

I was captivated by the warmth of his lips and the scratch of his stubble against my tender skin. Raw intensity stretched between us as our souls reached to one another to connect.

Far too soon, we withdrew from one another.

“Together, we can conquer anything, *mi amore*,” I said.

The following day we continued our journey. Marcellious kept his distance and answered questions with minimal effort. Finally, he galloped ahead of us.

The days and nights of riding, resting, eating, and sleeping became a blur. Finally, after days of riding, we came upon a home that had been badly burned. Only a few walls and the remnants of furniture, household goods, and appliances remained. Part of the roof clung to whatever it could for support.

My heart sank.

Her eyes glistened with tears. “It’s so sad. This used to be a beautiful home. We had a garden over there.”

She pointed to remnants of a fence surrounding a cluster of tall weeds.

“Our livestock lived in that field.” She pointed to a pasture to the left of the house. “My sister and I had a swing beneath that willow tree.”

A single rope stretched from the ground to a branch of the tree. All that was left of the swing was swaying listlessly in the breeze. The wood that made up the seat and the rope that had held up the other side lay in a tangle on the ground.

“Let’s go investigate,” I said. I took Emily’s hand and turned toward Roman, who still sat astride his horse. “We’re going to go look around. If anyone comes, yell for me, and I’ll be right out.”

Marcellious let out a snort.

“What’s the matter with you?” I snapped.

“Do you honestly think we might need your help if someone comes?” he said, resting one hand over the other on the horse’s neck.

“You might, yes,” I said hotly. “Three are better than two in a fight.”

Marcellious threw back his head and laughed. “You’re precious; I’ll grant you that, offering to help two trained gladiators.”

I scoffed. “Well, just keep it in the back of that thick skull. Just in case...”

I strode toward the remains of the front door, hoping I didn’t have to eat my words.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Olivia

This house had been rained on many times, but the stench still choked me as we walked through the burned remains. It was an indescribable scent, clotted with abandoned dreams and scorched decay.

I held my hand before my nose as I stepped over charred lumber, pieces of overturned furniture burned at the edges, and blackened, unrecognizable items. Light streamed into what was left of the house through the window frames. The crown glass that once perched between the wood had shattered over the floor. Fragments of ceiling and roof lay strewn across the floor like charcoal briquettes. A sturdy brick wall stood witness to the ruination.

Silent tears tracked down Emily's cheeks as she stooped to pick up a broken shard of porcelain painted with a small red rose, now smudged with charcoal and dirt.

"These were the plates we dined on," she said with a sniffle. She leaned over to retrieve a metal cup. "And this was what Papa drank his coffee from each morning. Those wicked soldiers destroyed our entire home."

"I'm so sorry, Emily. This is a travesty." I passed a pot-belly stove that stood like a sentinel amid charred debris. Its sturdy metal door hung open, revealing a mound of ash inside.

"I'm just so angry," Emily said, balling up her fists by her sides. "This was our *home*. Papa built it with his own hands. Now it's nothing but charcoal."

“I know, Em.” I patted her shoulder. “But maybe we can still find the journal. Where did you say you found it?”

“It’s in Papa’s office—or what *used* to be Papa’s office,” Emily said, her mouth fixed in a tight line. “Follow me.”

She marched toward the back of the house and headed through the remnants of a doorway.

“This was where Papa kept his books,” she said with a sweep of her hand.

Scorched wooden planks littered the floor, and a massive wood desk, now blackened, sat in the middle of what was once a room.

I began lifting the planks, searching the debris for anything resembling a journal.

I picked up the burned remnants of a small leather-bound book. “Do you think this was the journal?” I handed it to Emily.

“It could be the one I found,” Emily said, her mouth pulled down in a frown. “But this one’s badly burned.”

We both scanned the room.

Then, my gaze snagged on a metal safe in the corner. Pieces of lumber covered part of it, but it still looked intact. Like the potbelly stove in the front room, the door lay ajar. “Emily, look! Your father had a safe!” I pointed toward the iron chest sitting a few feet ahead of me.

“Oh! That could be where he kept the other journals!”

She scurried across the room, stepping over the debris with me behind her. The door creaked open with a groan when she tugged on the handle. She retrieved a leather-bound book, scorched in places but more or less intact.

“Here,” she said, thrusting it into my hands.

“Do you think I should read it?” I said, holding it like it was a sacred text. “Or, is it an invasion of privacy?”

“Papa is dead,” Emily said, signing the cross over her heart. “It’s time his secrets were revealed. Go ahead.”

She nodded encouragingly.

My hands trembled slightly as I cracked open the journal. Burn marks marred the writing at the bottom of each page, but most pages were intact. Perched on top of the safe, I read out loud.

“Dec. 12, 1783. The war is coming to an end. I was sitting on the buckboard of my wagon, heading home from town, and I discovered a woman, bruised and unconscious but very much alive. She was a slight woman, so I could lift her into the back of the wagon. I took her home. When she came to, she was scared of me. I kept assuring her she was safe, and I meant no harm, but she still tried to escape. She didn’t understand me at all. She only spoke in what I guessed was Italian. Over time, I taught her a few words until she could speak in broken English. But still, she was difficult to understand. I cared for her, letting her stay in the extra bedroom. She took to doing light chores, helping me out with the cooking and cleaning.”

“Dec. 20, 1783. She’s healing and getting better. I ask her name repeatedly, and she refuses to tell me. All I can continue to do is encourage and support. She keeps repeating, ‘I need to find John James.’ She echoes this over and over and over. I asked if he was her husband, but she won’t tell. She said, ‘He’s a friend who knows things.’ I asked, ‘Where can you find him?’ but she refused to tell me. I’m afraid I am frustrated by her need to find this John James and her resistance to telling me his whereabouts. How can I help her if she tells me nothing?”

“Jan. 9, 1784. She won’t tell me her name. Yet, despite this, she’s beautiful, and I can’t let her go. I just can’t. She is endlessly kind and quite intelligent. I admit to having never met a woman who possesses such keen intellect. Our conversations are fascinating, speaking of her travels overseas. Sometimes she is filled with joy, and she lightens my mood no matter what has happened during my day. She delights me in so many ways. Each day I fall more hopelessly in love with her.”

I looked up from the page and said, “Wow, Emily. It sounds like your father was quite enamored of her.”

Emily sat beside me and said, “It does sound that way. I wonder *how* enamored he was? Keep reading.”

I flipped the page, careful not to damage the brittle parchment. And then, I resumed reading aloud.

“Jan. 12, 1784. We continue to search for this mysterious John James. However, there are many people by the name of John James. Who is this man? Is he a sculptor, banker, teacher, blacksmith, farmer? Every John James we meet looks at us like we’re crazy.”

“Jan. 13, 1784. She finally tells me her name is Francesca. I think she’s lying—it’s in the shift of her eyes and how she fails to answer me when I call her by her supposed name. She’ll look at me blankly, like I’ve lost my mind, and then say, ‘Oh! I’m sorry. You were talking to me.’ Sometimes I catch her staring off into space with a haunted expression in her gaze. I try to comfort her and tell her she’s safe here, but it’s to no avail. How can she not know how much I adore her and only want her well-being and safety?”

“Jan. 23, 1784. Our search for John James continues. Every time she tries to explain to the next John James how much she needs to find her John James, they think she’s simple-minded or else deranged.”

“Feb. 1, 1784. The search has become a dead end. We can’t find this blasted John James. She tells me, ‘I’m in danger! I must find him!’”

“Feb. 16, 1784. I’ve become as possessed with Francesca as she is with the ghost of John James. I have given her my heart, my life, my bed, my every waking hour, but she still mourns her inability to find John James. She occupies my every thought. Oh, have I become crazy to love a woman such as Francesca? She is a mystery.”

“Mar. 13, 1784. Francesca is pregnant! She tried to hide it from me, but now she can’t hide the bump representing our baby. I am ecstatic!”

“Aug. 8, 1784. Francesca has given birth to a baby girl! I am a father! We’ve named her Emily. The strangest thing

happened, though—a necklace with a charm shaped like a dagger appeared around her tiny neck. I don't know what to make of this strange occurrence. Is it the devil's work? What could have caused such a thing to happen? As God as my witness, I can testify that it just appeared! Out of the blue!"

A jolt of electricity shot up my spine. *Emily was born with a dagger charm around her neck? Could she be a time traveler, too?*

I glanced at her.

She sat stiffly, a wide-eyed expression on her face as she fingered the necklace. "This just manifested out of nowhere around my neck when I was born? How very strange. Could it be, as Papa suggested, the devil's work?"

My heart clattered about beneath my ribs. I'd seen Emily's necklace but thought it was merely a cross. "Oh, no, Emily! Perhaps it is a sign of your unique abilities. A dagger appeared when I was born. It is the mark of the Timeborne. Perhaps it is the same for you? Let's keep reading and see if there is an explanation."

She nodded, still fingering the charm.

"Sept. 8, 1784. Last night, Francesca confessed her fright at seeing the dagger. And then, today, I find she has left me. My heart has shattered into a million pieces. The only thing I have left of her is the note she wrote. She said she had to go. Both her and the baby's lives are in danger. A man named Balthazar is after her. She asked me to look after Emily, and she signed the note with her true name—Alina."

The floor fell from underneath me, and the room began to spin. Could this Alina be *my mother*, Alina? Might Emily be my sibling, my blood?

"Olivia, are you all right? You look quite pale," Emily said, placing her hand on my shoulder and shaking me.

I looked at her, blinking wildly. "I...I...Emily... *My mother was named Alina. This is unreal. Could it be that our mothers are the same?*"

Emily's face brightened like a sunrise. "Oh, Olivia! It has to be! You and I are truly sisters!"

She threw her arms around me, and we both embraced.

A sheet of paper fell out of the journal. I stooped to retrieve it and read it aloud.

"Dear Philip,

Forgive me for not saying goodbye to you and leaving in such a hurry. Philip, the truth about me is that I am a time traveler, and I'm in danger from a man named Balthazar. This man has been hunting me, and I have no choice but to leave you in Emily's care. If I had stayed, Emily's life would have been endangered. Balthazar will stop at nothing to find her and me and kill us both. I love my daughter, and I want her to stay safe. Only you can care for her. Philip, you are a good man, and I want to thank you for everything you have done for me, for saving and healing me, teaching me English, and helping me look for John James.

"Now I have to search for John James on my own. Don't look for me, for you will never find me. Take care of yourself and Emily. I kiss you both. You both will always have a special place in my heart.

-Alina"

"There it is! There's the proof! I have a sister!" I said into Emily's shoulder.

"And I have another sister! This is wonderful news!" Emily said.

Joy filled my heart. Was I reading too much into Philip's words, though? I'd felt an instant connection to Emily when I'd met her. And we shared a similar facial structure. It just had to be!

After a lengthy embrace, I pulled away. "Let's keep reading, shall we?"

"Yes, do go on...." She bit her lip and looked at me through her lashes. "Sister..."

I laughed and turned my attention to the scorched pages.

“Oct. 11, 1784. I am utterly devastated without Alina. How can I ever move on?”

“Oh, poor, Papa,” Emily said, pressing her hand to her lips.

I nodded, empathetic to her pain, and squeezed her hand before continuing.

“I have searched for her everywhere. But she has disappeared, like a ghost. I am questioning my sanity. Did I make her up? No, because my beautiful Emily is in my care.”

I flipped the page. “Wow, your father did not write for an entire year.”

“He must have been grieving,” Emily said. “This is so sad.”

“Aug. 20, 1785. I am pulling myself out of my depression and taking Emily to a fair. I bought her a pretty new dress, and she looks like a princess.

“Aug. 23, 1785. We went to the fair yesterday, and a remarkable thing happened. There was a blacksmith there, shaping a fireplace poker in an exhibition. Children were crowded around him. Emily kept pointing at the man and whimpering, ‘See! See! Daddy, go see!’ I carried Emily in my arms, and we pushed to the front so she could watch.

“The blacksmith wiped his brow with his sleeve and glanced at Emily, noticing her necklace. He asked me where I found a charm as unique as that. I didn’t know what to say, so I said it had been a gift from my wife before she died. He said a fellow named John James crafted necklaces like that. You can’t imagine how excited I was to hear that! John James! I inquired about John James’ whereabouts, but the smithy only knew he had lived east of here, in the next town over—a place called Weststable. He said he hadn’t seen him for many years, but James’ family still lived there as far as he knew. ‘You don’t think James still lives there?’ I said. And the smithy said he’d heard tell that James went crazy. I thanked him for his time and made plans to head to Weststable to look for him.”

I flipped the page excitedly.

“Sep. 19, 1785. Today we traveled by wagon to Weststable. Baby Emily was very fussy on the ride, and I had to stop several times to care for her. It was a hot day, so I covered her with a cotton dish towel to keep her tender skin from burning. We arrived in Weststable, and I inquired at the general store as to the location of the James family. The shopkeeper looked at me like I had marbles for brains. ‘Why do you want to find them folks?’ he asked. ‘John, the husband, went crazy, and the family keeps to themselves now.’ I said I needed to find them because they might have information on my missing wife.

“At the James’ residence, they almost slammed the door in my face when I asked about John James. I assured them I meant no harm, and I think the presence of Emily helped calm them down. They invited me in when I told them that Emily’s mother had gone missing, and I’d been told John James might be able to help.

‘Ain’t nuthin’ that old coot can do to help you,’ Mrs. James replied. ‘He done took off before we could get him help for his lunacy.’ Mrs. James explained that John raved about time travel theories and delusions about being hunted by a man named Balthazar. ‘He done lost his mind,” Mrs. James said with a sniff. ‘Left me on my own without a penny to my name. And then this Italian woman came looking for him. I told her to look in the Freeworth Timberland forest. I’d heard tell that he wandered in the woods like the crazy man he is. Good for nuthin’ muttonhead, that’s all he is.’ I thanked her for her time and made haste for the Freeworth Forest.

“Our search in the forest proved fruitless. So, I am heading home with Emily, my dear precious baby girl. My heart is heavy. I will close the chapter on Alina and always be grateful for my beautiful daughter. I can’t help but wonder if Alina truly could have been a time traveler. That would explain so much about her mysterious comings and goings. But, alas, I shall never know.”

I thumbed through the following few pages, finding them blank. “Your poor father.”

“Yes. This is such a sad tale. But...” Emily looked at me with glistening eyes. “If my mother traveled to another time so

she could birth you, however, I couldn't be happier."

She clasped her hand to mine.

"Me, too." I squeezed her back and waved the journal, heedless of its fragility. "This is so exciting, Emily! I wonder if John James is still alive? He might be an old man, still living in the forest."

The wheels in my mind started spinning in all directions.

Men's shouts rang out.

I whipped my head toward the burned-out front room.

"Olivia!" Roman bellowed.

I raced toward the front of the house, leaping over fallen furniture and other debris.

Roman and Marcellious were on the ground outside, writhing as if in pain.

I rushed toward them and crouched next to Roman. "Where are you hurt?"

Roman let out a groan and pointed to his abdomen.

"Emily!" I called as she burst from the house. "See to Marcellious' wounds."

Gingerly, I lifted Roman's deerskin shirt.

Blood oozed from a nasty gash on his side.

"Oh, this is awful. How did this happen? Who did this? Was it a Native American attack? American soldiers?"

Marcellious lifted his hand, pointed to the willow tree, and rasped, "He did."

I lifted my gaze, and my skin iced over as I stared at my mother's killer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Olivia

As I looked at the evil eyes staring back at me, I cried out in horror. Memories of my ten-year-old self came back to me. This man before me had taken my mother away from me. “It’s you! You’re the man who killed my mother!”

Unlike my darkness, his visage appeared human, tall and imposing, with crystalline blue eyes and short-cropped black hair. Appearing around fifty, he wore proper men’s attire—a long jacket, breeches, and a vest—not the flowing robe and the hood that hid his face. Bulging muscles strained his clothes.

And then, unless my eyes deceived me, he transformed into a demon with glowing red eyes and skin like Dahlia’s cracked, charred covering. Sharp teeth protruded from his red gums. His face was ghastly, like I was staring into a collection of nightmares, each scarier than the last.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes, and then he was back to being human.

Same as at the fire ceremony, when faced with my own darkness, a thick, dark fog surrounded me, obscuring me from the others. This had to be some sort of trickery that the darkness employed. I searched around for Roman, Marcellious, and Emily.

They appeared as vague, blurry shapes, moving slowly beyond the fog.

I tried to step toward the demon-man, but my feet were glued to the ground as if sturdy roots shot from my legs, spreading to the earth's core. "What did you do to me? Why can't I move?"

A benign smile crossed his cunning face.

"Olivia," he said. "My dear, sweet Olivia. I need your *full* attention. You can't be running around half-cocked like a gun about to explode. I need you right here. And when I need something, I make it happen, just like *that*."

His finger snap echoed through the air like distant lightning.

"You remember me. It's true; I did kill your mother. It was a moment of sweet justice." He wiped his thumb across his lips in a slow, sensuous manner. Then, he took a step toward me.

I reeled backward, but my feet were still secured to the ground. What was he going to do? Kill me where I stood with no chance to defend myself?

Fat drops of perspiration rolled down my cheeks and neck, and my mouth was bone dry. My skin crawled like a million ants marching up and down my body steadily. This man, demon, whatever he was, scared me.

Still appearing as a human, he took another step in my direction.

I shuddered.

"Come now. Are you frightened? I'm not a scary man, see?" He stepped close to me and ran the back of his finger across my cheek. "I've waited a long time to see you again. I could have killed you when I murdered your mother. It would have been so easy."

He wrapped his fingers around my neck and gently squeezed. Intense heat poured from his fingers.

The smell of burning flesh filled my nose, and wisps of smoke feathered across my cheeks. *Oh, God, he's burning me.*

My hands flew up to pry him from me, but it was like bending iron.

He kept on bearing down as if I hadn't touched him.

Maybe I hadn't. I was too freaked out to know anything at this moment. Panic obscured my ability to think things through in a calm manner. All my training seemed to have fled from my body. My heart clattered as if it might claw its way out of my throat. My skin seemed to blister and bubble. Soon, it might start melting to muscle, then to the bone, then to...

"I could kill you right now," he said, using a soothing tone like the kind you might use to lull your kid to sleep.

"I thought you said you weren't scary?" I said, trying hard not to hyperventilate. "Threatening to kill me isn't what I'd call kind."

He threw back his head and laughed, releasing me from his hold. His gums and tongue were the color of blood. "You're fun, Olivia. I've missed so much enjoyment by not tracking you down sooner."

I gingerly touched the place where his hand had gripped me. My skin stung and felt all weepy and raw. "Shit. What did you do to me, you bastard?"

"Oh, that," he said, languidly stroking my blistered skin. "Here..."

He leaned forward and blew his hot breath on my neck.

Searing pain overwhelmed me. Without thinking, I hauled back my arm and slapped his face.

His head flew to the side. When he turned back toward me, I came face to face with the demon, staring at me with his red glowing eyes.

"You shouldn't have done that, my beloved," he said, in a tremulous, warbly voice, like something piped from the bottom of a swimming pool.

"You shouldn't have breathed on me," I spat back. I really wanted to move my legs, but they stayed put where they were.

“I was healing you,” he said, staring into me with those glittering eyes.

I reached up and touched my neck. *Huh. It no longer feels burned.* “Why on earth would you do that?”

“Because I’m not done with you.” A piece of his scorched skin fell away from his face, revealing muscle crawling with maggots and bone. He leered at me, looking more and more like a freak show skeletal monster.

He cocked his head from side to side, studying me. “Do you know who I am? Do you think you can slap me, toy with me? I am your biggest monster, Olivia. I am your downfall.”

“Who are you? What do you want from me?” I said with all the bravado I could muster.

“I am Balthazar,” he said, and his name reverberated in the air, coming at me from all directions. “Balthazar...”

His name shrieked through my head like a symphony of banshees. The sound was so awful I wondered if it would shatter my eardrums. I pressed my palms over my ears, gritted my teeth, and squeezed my eyes shut, warding off the horrible sound.

When the noise subsided, I opened my eyes, finding that ghastly leer of his inches from my face. “You’re Balthazar?”

My cheeks stuck to my teeth, void of any moisture. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. He was right—I was standing face-to-face with my greatest threat. This demon could be my undoing. He could destroy me the way he murdered my mother.

“Yes, my sweet, I’m your worst enemy,” he said. “Although, I must admit—I have been watching you for some time. You are beautiful as your mother. You fight with bravery, and your spirit is strong.”

“Why would you do that? Why would you murder an innocent woman and take her away from me? How dare you!”

I wanted to pound his chest with my fists and rip out his horrible eyes, but I didn’t dare. Not when I was fastened to the

ground, at his mercy.

I'd be dead in a heartbeat.

Balthazar swayed back and forth in a hypnotic fashion.

I turned away from his evil influence, finding only the blurred shapes of Roman, Marcellious, and Emily. They all seemed to be shouting, trying to see me.

Balthazar's claw-like hand seized my jaw and forced me to look at him.

"How can you talk about your mother as if she loved you?" he said in his warbly voice. "She regretted birthing you."

"She did not," I spat back, desperately trying to look anywhere but at him.

"She loathed you. Do you know she tried to kill you when she was birthing you? She seized several rocks and hit her belly," he hissed.

"That's a lie!" I yelled, seizing his wrists. "She would never hurt me! She loved me!"

His nails dug into my skin like razor blades.

"Is it?" he said. "Your father, pathetic man that he was, stopped her before she could end your life. Your mother was not well-suited to raise a child. She was nothing but a whore. It was a mistake for her to bring you to life."

"Stop it! These are lies, all lies!" I jammed my palms against my ears, trying to squash the sound of his voice.

"Your mother was a time traveler, and she was my lover, even while she was with your father," Balthazar said. "We were meant to be together, Alina and I. You were supposed to be *my* daughter. But instead, she opened her whoring legs to your father. In the end, I had to kill her. She betrayed me."

The word "betrayed" snaked through my head, wrapping itself around my brain like a snake. "No! I refuse to believe all your filthy lies! She was a good mother! She loved me with all her heart!"

I started crying, weeping like I was only ten, the age I was when this bastard murdered my mom. I couldn't imagine her being Balthazar's lover. The thought disgusted me. I refused to believe it.

I tried to beat Balthazar's face, to hit him, punch him, anything to bring him a measure of the pain coursing through my body from his words. But his demonic arms warded off my blows as if my hands were nothing but paper.

He shifted back to human and glared at me with his ice-cold eyes.

"You don't want to anger me, Olivia. You have no idea the pain and misery I could cause you. I could have you on your knees, begging me to kill you instead," he said, his voice back to human-sounding.

"Anger you? I will fight you until my last dying breath," I said, hauling back my fist to slug him.

"No," he said, catching my hand. He squeezed it so hard I wondered if bones were breaking. "I'm far too strong for you. You will *never* be able to destroy me."

The black fog surrounding me disappeared, and Balthazar was gone.

A high-pitched scream exploded into the air, and I turned to see Balthazar reappear in front of Emily. He grabbed her by the neck and lifted her off her feet.

Emily grabbed his wrists and hung on for dear life, her legs dangling and flailing.

"Help," she cried, then started coughing from the chokehold.

Roman and Marcellious charged Balthazar.

His free hand shot out. A stream of transparent black energy unleashed from his palm, holding the two men at bay.

"Let her go!" I yelled, racing toward Balthazar. The same force field that held back Roman and Marcellious caught me in its grip, and I slammed to a halt. "If you're going to hurt someone, hurt me."

“Olivia, no!” Roman shouted. “Don’t say that!”

“Olivia, you’ve got *such* a good heart. I love how you want to protect her,” Balthazar said, grinning. “But she’s worthless...nothing but a human, hardly worth saving. Her life can be extinguished as easily as killing a fly. All I have to do is take my knife, plunge it in her heart, and kill her.”

He released her, giving her a soft shove.

Emily stumbled back and fell to her rump, coughing violently. Her hands flew to her neck, palpating her skin. Then, she scrambled to her feet and scurried backward away from Balthazar.

Balthazar turned to me.

“You’re so weak. Your mother would be ashamed of you,” he said, sneering. “You should be stronger.”

“I thought you said she loathed me. Why would she care?” I said, struggling against his force field.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said, tapping his temple. “Let’s make this more fun.”

He threw back his head and howled like a demonic wolf. The high-pitched howl vibrated painfully against my eardrums like a thousand tiny needles.

Roman, Marcellious, Emily, and I pressed our hands against our ears.

Two dark blurs shot toward us, materializing as Dahlia and what I imagined to be Roman’s darkness. They stood to the side of Balthazar and grinned.

“Lord Balthazar, we are at your service,” Dahlia said.

“My sweet,” Balthazar cooed, stroking her hair. “I appreciate you coming so fast.”

He chuckled at his own innuendo. As he turned his attention to my darkness, the wall of energy holding us back fell away.

We stumbled forward. Roman and Marcellious started to charge the darknesses.

“Not so fast,” Balthazar hissed, putting his palm out and creating his invisible shield. Then, his expression brightened, and he said, “Oh, why not? You need to find out what you’re up against.”

The strange force dissipated, sending us tottering, off-balance.

I fisted my hands at my side. “I’m not afraid of you, Balthazar!”

His face crumpled into an ugly sneer. “You should be, my dear. You should be.”

He disappeared.

“Get your daggers! Get your daggers!” Marcellious shouted. “Point them toward the sun and state the ancient scriptures!”

With fumbling hands, I retrieved my dagger from my thigh, thrust it skyward, and began to repeat the sacred scripture.

Roman had his dagger held aloft, too.

Our darkneses circled us as I began to intone the scripture.

“Louder,” Marcellious yelled, joining in with me.

Our daggers began to glow like they’d sucked the sun into them.

“Now, move fast! Plunge and kill!” Marcellious shouted.

Roman and I faced our demons, and the fight was on.

I tried to summon every fighting technique I knew. I slashed and parried as Dahlia tried to ward off my attack. I circled, and I thrust. But my movements felt clumsy, unsure, caught in a web of fear.

I glanced over at Roman, who fought his own demon with Marcellious. I felt heartened at their camaraderie. They were behaving like allies, helping one another.

Roman's blade disappeared into his darkness' heart with a single, jabbing thrust.

The demon began to bleed, spurting a fountain of crimson as it collapsed onto the ground.

"No!" Dahlia screeched, lunging at me. "You've killed him!"

"Get back!" the voice of Balthazar boomed out of nowhere.

Dahlia disappeared in a blast of heat. Balthazar exploded into view right before me.

I leaped backward, but he surged forward, seizing me by the neck. He grabbed Roman as well.

"You're both coming with me," Balthazar snarled.

Somewhere in the distance, Emily screamed.

Everything went dark as terror wrapped its icy fingers around my heart. Balthazar had Roman, *my* Roman, in his grip.

"Roman!" I screamed as the wind whipped past my ears. I couldn't see a thing, not my hands or legs or even the vile creature holding me.

"I'm here, Olivia!" Roman called back.

Unconsciousness claimed me with all the violence of a bomb.

And then, I came to, groaning from the impact that had sent me spinning. When I opened my eyes, I hung in a dark lair, chained to the ceiling.

And Roman hung by my side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Olivia

The demon's lair I found myself in had to be the most depressing, disgusting place I'd ever seen. It was dark, dank, and musty and reeked of foul deeds and depravity. The floor consisted of scorched, cracked earth, much like the demon's skin, when the visage of his humanness fell away. The walls were covered with millions of wispy spider webs, billowing in a hot, nasty breeze that blew between the cracks.

A loud clicking sound ticked from some unknown place beneath my feet. A cockroach, the size of my hand, wriggled its way out from between the crack. It stood on its hind legs and tried to climb my legs. I kicked and writhed, catching its hard shell with my toe and sending it flying.

A decrepit old baby stroller stood pushed against the wall, the fabric covering the frame tattered and torn. An old doll sat stiffly in the baby buggy, staring at me with sightless eyes. It reminded me of the porcelain-faced figurine some old hag tried to sell my mom when Balthazar murdered her. It gave me the creeps.

I looked away from it, finding more dolls in similar strollers. It was like my own personal horror show.

My stomach lurched and rocked like a stormy sea. Fear drew its fingernails across my skin, making my breathing shallow and my mouth dry.

The smells were ghastly like dead things had been shallowly buried beneath the cracked earth, their bodies slowly

decomposing.

Roman still hung unconscious from the ceiling, his head hanging listlessly over his chest. He balanced on the tops of his feet, his knees slightly bent.

I studied him in the dim light, searching for signs of a breath or a pulse at his neck.

“Roman. Roman, wake up,” I whispered.

Please be alive.

He stirred and groaned, but his eyes didn't open.

I let out a long sigh of relief.

Rusted iron encircled our wrists, chafing the tender flesh. My arms tingled from supporting the weight of my body, which dangled so that my toes could barely touch the floor.

Spider webs stretched from the battered ceiling to the iron restraints. One busy little spider improved upon his artistry, spinning a larger and larger web.

I wished the spider could spin a means for Roman and me to escape.

A door creaked open behind me.

I pivoted to look over my shoulder.

Balthazar swept into the room, appearing jaunty and effusive.

“Good morning, my darling,” he boomed. “I trust your accommodations were suitable?”

“We're chained to the ceiling in a pig pen of a room. There's nothing suitable about it,” I snarled.

Grinning, he said, “I'll have the maid send some fresh towels. But I doubt it will improve your rotten mood.”

“Why did you bring us here?” I felt so helpless hanging here when I wanted to kick his head and choke out his life. “Why didn't you kill us? What purpose does it serve to bring us here in your hideous den?”

“Oh, be nice,” he said with a chuckle. “Surely your accommodations aren’t *that* bad.”

He sauntered to where I stood and dragged a finger across my cheek.

I snapped at him like a dog.

He yanked his hand away, his lip pulling back in a sneer. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Then, he cocked his head, his expression softening. “There’s so much of your mother in you. It’s uncanny. Especially since she didn’t love you. She often shared how much she despised your father and *loathed* bringing you into the world.”

A great ball of insecurity, like snakes uncoiling from wispy restraints, filled my chest. *Could this be true? It couldn’t, right?*

“You’re wrong. My mother loved my father and me! I saw it with my own eyes! I felt it!”

Balthazar let out a tsk and shook his head. “Your mother was a great, magnificent, beautiful creature.” He spread his arms in exultation. “We shared a glorious love that no man can experience or even comprehend. There’s no way such a love could be duplicated by marrying your pitiful, pathetic father. She felt shame over copulating with him, so how could she possibly embrace *you?*”

A sneer formed on his face as if the thought of my mother making love to my father was reprehensible. “Can you picture it? A resplendent firebird, capable of moving through time, being plundered by a maggot of a man and his tiny cock?”

He rocked his hips and shuddered.

I *never* wanted to consider my parents being sexual with one another. But the image Balthazar painted made me want to vomit, and I doubt I could unsee it, *ever*.

“Is this your best tactic? Trying to poison my mind with your vile perceptions? I’d say you are the one most despicable. Did my mother ever see you when your skin is parched, falling away from your face in chunks?”

Balthazar's nostrils flared like I'd made a chink in his calm veneer. He shot toward me, seizing my neck, and squeezing.

I let out a shriek, desperately trying to get him to ease up on my throat.

"If you were to fall in love with the darkness, you would *never* love Roman Alexander again. You'd see him as weak, a brute, nothing but a worm," he hissed.

His hot breath burned my skin.

"Your mother and I were in love through time. I had to kill her for betraying me. But you want to know what's interesting?" He released me as a cunning smile spread across his face. "Right when I was about to kill her, she confessed her love for me. She told me she had no choice but to be with your father. She pitied him. I'm sure you were conceived in a one-off encounter based on your father's own desperate needs."

"What kind of 'glorious love' is that if you felt you had to kill her," I shot back, trying to shield my mind from all his lies.

"Stop speaking!" Balthazar roared. "You know *nothing*. Your mother was full of secrets. She would have betrayed me. She would have *killed* me."

I snarled, writhing in my restraints. "Some great love if she wanted to destroy you. She was probably growing tired of you."

"You know nothing!" Balthazar's voice came from everywhere, bouncing off the walls. "She went to that blasted tribe seeking help. She sought out the man you knew as Moon Lee. And answer me this—why did the tribe never tell you that Fierce Wind was your mother? Huh? Why didn't they? The chief knew she was your mother, but they concealed it from you. Now isn't that strange?"

Something stirred in my chest. The thought of my mother crossing time to be here, to seek Moon Lee, gave me a strange comfort. I clung to it like a lifeline. She *must* have loved me, at least a little. But as for Grey Feather not telling me that Fierce Wind was my mother, I was angry that he'd kept

something so big from me. How could he do this? Did he think I couldn't handle the truth?

“Where is Lee hiding?” Balthazar growled. “You know where he is.”

“You know Moon Lee?” I asked.

“Ha, ha, my darling, Olivia! I know everything and everyone. You cannot hide anything from me,” Balthazar said.

Says the guy who doesn't know where Moon Lee is. I narrowed my eyes, considering.

“I have something to show you,” Balthazar said, abruptly changing topics. He stalked across his lair. Each place where his boot landed sent up a puff of cloying dust.

I coughed as the dust reached my lungs, wondering what toxicity level lay trapped in the ground below.

Balthazar stood next to the opposite wall and swept his arm in a flamboyant gesture. The wall sparkled in a whoosh and then dissolved, revealing an entire gallery of daggers. The blades appeared dull, lifeless, mere metal trapped in this horrible cave.

“These daggers...” Balthazar said, his tone almost reverential. “These blades represent all the time travelers I have killed through the centuries.”

I pulled back my head. *How many time travelers has he killed? There must be hundreds of weapons in there.*

Another clicking issued forth from beneath the floor. Then, another. And still, more until the room echoed with these awful clicking noises.

I glanced down, watchful for cockroaches.

“You asked me why I haven't killed you yet when I could crush you in a second,” Balthazar said, plucking one of the knives from its holder. “Life can be so mundane. I yearn for stimulation at times. I love to play with the emotions and reactivity of the human mind. You're all so weak. But you amuse me, Olivia—you pretend to be so strong. I like to see how far I can push you.”

He cocked his head. “But you’ll be broken, too, just like the others. And then I’ll have to kill you, as well.”

Locking his gaze with mine, willing me to watch him, he lifted the blade to his nose and sniffed.

The dagger shimmered as if awakened.

“Yes, yes,” he said, almost in a rapture.

I was unsure if he spoke to me or the weapon in his grip.

My stomach churned.

He took another whiff of the dagger and shuddered. And then a bulge formed at his crotch as if he was in his lover’s presence.

My lip pulled back in disgust. *What’s he up to?*

“Did you know that your dagger is your most powerful weapon? This was your mother’s knife,” he said, still daring me to maintain eye contact.

I couldn’t look away.

“And this...” He broke eye contact with me long enough to snatch a vial of crimson liquid from behind where my mother’s knife was stored. “This is her life essence.”

Oh, God. I shook with emotion. He’s got my mother’s blood.

The cockroach clicking grew louder and more insistent.

“Alina’s dagger, combined with a drop of her blood and the utterance of the ancient scripture, will show you everything about your mother. Her life will be revealed. The daggers never lie and only hold the truth.” Balthazar pierced me with a penetrating look.

A cockroach wriggled through a crack. Then, another one popped out, clicking and humming.

Soon the floor was alive with the hard-shelled monsters.

Several of them surrounded me, lifting up to their back legs, trying to reach my feet. Others used their wings to propel

themselves onto me. They crawled up my neck and arms, their legs tickling and horrifying me.

They swarmed across Roman's body.

He jolted awake and let out a roar of disgust. Like me, he twisted and kicked. Since his feet reached the floor, he stomped on a few vile creatures, and the snaps of their shattering bodies added to the clicking noise.

I was immersed in terror, watching Roman, feeling the cockroaches crawl all over me.

Balthazar shouted, "Enough!"

His booted foot landed with a solid thud on the cracked earth.

The cockroaches let out piercing shrieks and skittered back from whence they came.

My skin still prickled from where the insects had touched me. I felt clawed open, vulnerable.

Balthazar smiled. "Ready?"

"For what? What other trickery do you think you can use on us?" I said, feigning a bravado I didn't feel.

"This." Balthazar twisted open the vial and took another long, slow sniff. He let out a lusty "ahh," and the bulge in his trousers jerked. He held the dagger aloft and carefully poured a drop onto the glistening blade.

The blood sizzled when it touched the metal. Balthazar began saying the time-traveling words precisely, and the dagger glowed with images before me.

"Watch," he said, his face pulled back in a cruel visage.

"Olivia, no! Guard yourself!" Roman yelled.

But I became mesmerized when an image of my mother appeared, smiling and laughing as she looked at me. Balthazar was wrong—Mom did love me.

"Mom!" I cried out.

She held out her arms, and I longed to spread mine wide and accept her embrace.

But then, a transparent image of Balthazar appeared before my eyes with his own arms outstretched. He reached for my mom, and his body and Mom's collided together. Mom leaped up, wrapping her legs around Balthazar's hips and ass, and then they fucked with abandon.

"Stop it!" I shrieked. "Stop showing me this!"

I kicked against the image as Balthazar and my mom pounded their hips against one another, his fat, nasty cock impaling her.

The real Balthazar, the demon in his lair with Roman and me, stalked around the image of him and my mother fucking. As he did so, he palmed his turgid flesh through the fabric of his pants.

"Oh, I loved her so. I still do," he said wistfully.

The image faded. Then, several scenes unfolded around me in a half-circle.

My mother stood beneath a bridge in Paris fucking some strange man. She lay on an elegant four-poster bed with velvet curtains screwing another man in another scene. The third, she was on her hands and knees while some guy thrust into her like a dog.

In all the scenes, my mother's expression was one of rapture.

"Make these go away!" I screamed.

"Your mother got lonely when I was away," Balthazar said, reveling in my reaction. "She had my permission to fuck freely. I, of course, killed her lovers when I returned. She never knew what happened to them, but I couldn't risk her continuing to screw them when I had to leave."

"You sick fuck," I yelled. "I don't believe it. Not a word of it."

I longed to brush away the feeling of the cockroach legs crawling all over my body and scrape the images Balthazar

had shown me from my eyes.

“This is all your mother’s life. It’s not some sort of trickery,” Balthazar said evenly. “I can show you your life just as easily or even Alexander’s.”

“Don’t believe him, Olivia,” Roman said. “It’s all mental manipulation, lies, and deception.”

I wanted to believe Roman. But, somewhere inside, I knew my mother’s blade had merely been witness to her life. It stored the memories inside its metal cells as efficiently as my brain held my life memories. I remembered what Grey Feather said about our daggers showing our past, present, and, who knew, maybe our future. What I saw was the truth. My mother was a whore, and Balthazar was her lover.

“We’ll get to your life next, gladiator,” Balthazar said to Roman.

“Like hell you will,” Roman said.

Balthazar dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “Let’s get back to Alina’s life, shall we? I don’t think you’ve seen enough.”

“No!” I cried out. “I don’t want to see anything more. You’ve shown me enough!”

“Would you rather I leave and release my cockroaches? Those were merely the babies,” Balthazar said, leering at me.

My whole body quaked at the thought.

The room shimmered with an image of my mother picnicking in a field with several other men and women. The Dolomites, an immense mountain range in northern Italy, loomed behind them. Mom laughed, picking up a green and gold enameled wine goblet and tapping it with the goblets held by the others. Then, as did the others, she tipped back her head and drank.

“Your mother was popular and beloved. She and her family loved to travel to places like this when she lived in Italy. She adored Italy, and Italy adored her, embracing her passion and exuberance for life. Here she’s pictured in the

1500s when the Medicis were alive, surrounded by family and friends,” Balthazar said, much like a travel guide. “Everyone loved to be around her.”

“Don’t listen to his mind tricks,” Roman said. “Please, Olivia. He’s only trying to poison your mind.”

So captivated by scenes of my mother, I paid Roman’s voice no mind.

The next scene revealed Papa in a clock tower. He stood precariously on the ledge of the stone windowsill, gazing down at the ground from several stories up.

“Papa! No!” I screamed.

My mother rushed forward and pulled him away from the ledge.

My heart swelled. *See? My mother loved my father. She saved him. And she loved me.*

This thought was slugged from my mind like being hit by a baseball bat; the next scene showed Mom in a dark cave, her belly swollen and heaving.

That’s when I was born. It had to be!

Then, Mom picked up a stone and beat at her stomach.

My father rushed forward and wrenched the rock from her hands.

Mom fought with him, shoving and kicking. Then, she used her fists to pummel me as I tried to exit her womb.

A wellspring of grief bubbled up inside of me. I wasn’t wanted. Mom had never cherished me.

A transparent image of my mother, holding what looked like my dagger in Moon Lee’s apartment, appeared before me. She opened a vial. Smoke, or perhaps fumes, wisped from the small opening.

As carefully as Balthazar poured a drop of my mother’s blood onto her dagger, Mom poured a drop of whatever this concoction was onto my blade. She waved her hand over it as the substance seeped inside the metal, infusing it.

The memory of nearly dying when I arrived in Rome, being poisoned, and Roman and Amara nursing me back to life filled my head.

My *mother* had tried to kill me.

Hot, angry tears spilled down my cheeks as a cry of anguish fled my throat.

“Don’t believe this, Olivia! All these scenes—they can’t be true. It’s all lies!” Roman shouted.

But it couldn’t be lies. It had to be my mother who tried to poison me. *But how? Wasn’t she already dead when she’d poisoned my blade?* Then, it struck me. She’d sneaked into Moon Lee’s apartment shortly after I was born. There, she’d spread whatever poisonous substance she possessed onto my knife, ensuring I’d die once I time-traveled.

A bolt of rage flooded my bloodstream, searing my mind, and blotting out any sense of reason I possessed. I wanted to kill someone. How could my mother be so evil as to want to kill her own child? I was fueled with anger. I longed to snuff out someone’s life with a kind of bloodlust I’d never before experienced.

“Shall we continue, my sweet?” Balthazar cooed.

“No!” I shouted, squirming in my restraints. “I’ve seen enough!”

“Olivia, stop. All he’s shown you are lies, I swear it.” Roman’s expression looked wretched as he spoke. “He’s mind manipulating you. He has to be. He’s trying to poison your mind!”

“Shut up!” I yelled at Roman. “Shut up! It’s all true. I know it is!”

Balthazar stalked toward Roman. “What about you, gladiator? Do you want me to prove to you that what the dagger shows is the truth? You can be next. Don’t you want to know who your father is? I think you do.”

“Fuck you, Balthazar. My father was a bastard who left my mother. Why would I want to know who he was?”

“Ha, ha! Oh, Roman! Your father was the darkness himself. He was a demon who fucked your mother,” Balthazar said, his eyes glittering with enjoyment.

“You’re telling me lies! You’re trying to deceive me,” Roman shouted, twisting in his irons.

“Not so, gladiator. Your mother was young and stupid. She fell in love with the darkness. We have the power to charm and manipulate. It’s easy to seduce a weak mind, and your mother took the bait.”

“No!” Roman shouted.

“Surprisingly, your mother gave birth to twins. But only one of you inherited your father’s genes—Marcellious,” Balthazar said, circling Roman. “Why do you think your brother is so dark, so prone to negative outbursts? His body hums with darkness.”

Far, far away, an insistent voice whispered words of outrage and shock over Balthazar’s remarks to Roman. But my anger shoved those weak thoughts out of the way.

“You manipulative bastard! These are all mind fucks.” Roman shot out his leg as if to kick Balthazar, but Balthazar caught it in his hand and gave it a quick, sharp twist.

The bone cracked.

Roman howled.

“Don’t fuck with me, gladiator,” Balthazar hissed. “Or I’ll break every bone in your body.”

This is the part when you feel compassion, a voice in the back of my mind whispered. *Your lover was injured. Don’t you care?*

But the voice was obliterated by my overwhelming sense of wanting to kill. My mouth salivated at the thought of taking someone’s life.

Balthazar glanced at me, seeming to assess my state of mind. “And how are you feeling, my sweetheart?”

I bared my teeth and snarled at him. “I feel hurt and angry. I want to kill someone.”

“Perfect,” he said, strolling in my direction. “I can help with that.”

Once more, the clicks and hums of the cockroaches beneath the floor filled the air. But this time, I didn’t care.

Balthazar pressed his hands on the metal surrounding my wrists, and my iron restraints melted.

I dropped to the ground like a stone, stopping my fall with hands and feet slamming into the roughly-textured floor.

“There’s your next victim,” Balthazar said with a leer, pointing at Roman. He procured a lethal-looking knife from beneath his coat and handed it to me.

“Olivia, no!” Roman shouted.

I scrambled upright.

“What are you doing?” he yelled. He couldn’t put any weight on his swollen, broken ankle. All he could do was balance on his free leg, holding his injured leg in the air, hopping like a crow.

I slashed at him, and his deerskin shirt gaped open.

“Fuck! Olivia! Stop!” Roman yelled, still hopping.

I could see my mother’s love for Balthazar, and it sickened me. She loved him far more than I could ever love anyone, especially Roman. Their love was the kind that transcended time, that lived in the eternal. And so, I faced the only choice before me.

I had to destroy Roman and kill any chance we had.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Roman

Howling in pain, I tried to ward off Olivia's lightning quick movements and slashing blade. It was hard to defend myself while hanging, suspended from the ceiling, and hopping on my one good leg. The ankle of my other leg had been shattered by the fucking demon, Balthazar, crippling me. Yet, defend me, I tried, all while under attack by my soul mate, the love of my life.

Her movements were focused and accurate as she danced around me, slicing me with her knife. With each gash inflicted on my skin, my heart sank lower and lower. Finally, it slid between the cracks of the earth below my feet into the denizen of cockroaches.

"Stop! Olivia, stop!" I gripped the iron restraints and pulled my good leg upward, trying to kick her hand away.

She slashed my leg through my leather breeches. I was bleeding everywhere.

If I could reach her heart, the love we shared, maybe I could snap her out of this horrible place.

"Olivia!" I yelled. "Balthazar is controlling you with his darkness. You love me. I love you. And you need to stop—you would never want to hurt me!"

"You can't stop her," Balthazar cackled. "She's found her dark essence, and her true nature shines through. Oh, this is splendid!"

He rubbed his hands together.

His blathering only fueled my desire to stop her. If she knew what she was doing, she'd be devastated.

“Olivia,” I called again. “Remember all the times we've been together...everything we've shared.”

She hesitated, shook her head, then resumed her attack.

“Remember how we went to war under Severus' rule? And we confessed our love amid so much pain and destruction?” I tried to summon my loving regard for her, but feeling past the immediate pain was nearly impossible. My ankle hung swollen, and blood steadily oozed from the gashes.

She paused, looking at me quizzically. Then, she lifted her hand, looked at it, and dropped it again.

“That's right,” I said quickly. “You remember. You can *feel* our passion, can't you, my love?”

I did my best to summon the feeling of kissing her sweet lips, of devouring her with my mouth. In my mind, I claimed her. I kissed her tenderly, kissed her roughly, and kissed her hard. I imagined our shared love blasting through the darkness that possessed her.

Squinting, she looked at me. Then her eyes grew wide with horror. “Roman! Who did this to you?”

She rushed toward me and fingered the places she'd slashed.

“You did, I'm afraid. You were possessed by Balthazar's spell.” I longed to hold her, to draw her to my chest and embrace her. But all I could manage, hanging like a slab of beef, was an intent look.

“I did? Me?” She glanced at the blade in her hand, covered with my blood, and her expression grew tight with horror.

Balthazar, who had been watching Olivia slice me to bits with an expression of glee, scowled. “Olivia! Don't trust him. He's the one who's trying to deceive you. What you're feeling, that desire to kill...it's the truth.”

Olivia took my face between her hands, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed me.

Oh, God, the contact of her soft, pillowy lips! She tasted like sweetness and possibility...hope and passion. I nearly forgot where I was.

The strength of our connection stirred to life. I grew hard beneath my breeches, despite my throbbing pain.

Out of the corner of my eye, I sensed movement.

Balthazar dashed across the room, heading toward us.

I yanked away from the kiss and yelled, “Olivia! Look out!”

She whirled with the knife at the ready in her hand. She violently slashed at Balthazar’s neck, but he arched away from the kill shot.

Crouching, he snarled, “You made a bad mistake, bitch.”

He launched at Olivia like a bullet, seized her neck, and threw her against the wall behind me.

She let out a shriek and crumpled to the ground.

Balthazar grew larger as he stood there, fists balled into weapons, his face an ugly sneer.

The din of cockroaches increased such that I could barely hear Olivia’s groans through their awful clicks and hums.

I torqued my head to look at her.

With a long, low moan, she pushed herself up to sit. “You bastard! You tricked me into hurting the man I love!”

“You don’t love him,” Balthazar roared. “You don’t even know what love is! What Alina and I shared—that was love.”

“And where is your precious Alina now, huh? You killed her. Some love.” Olivia spat out a mouthful of blood.

Balthazar threw back his head and let out a hideous howl. “You think this is some kind of joke? Do you think you can kill *me* with your puny dagger? Take your anger out and come after me? Think again.”

He made a few clicking noises, and a new set of cockroaches pushed out of hiding. The ground shattered as they fought to free themselves. The hideous creatures were as large as my face.

“Have fun,” Balthazar bellowed and promptly disappeared, blasting from his lair in an explosion. As he fractured from sight, his wall of daggers disappeared.

Thousands of brown and black insects swarmed toward me, toward Olivia, the tumult of their noises clawing at my eardrums. I hopped, kicked, squirmed, and writhed, trying to shake the foul creatures from my limbs.

Olivia lunged to her feet and staggered. She seemed woozy, no doubt concussed from striking the wall. But she fought with the insects, slashing the ones that flew at her, stomping at others.

I hung like a wiggling worm, unable to help her. I’d been rendered helpless, unmanned by the demon Balthazar.

Olivia rallied against the swarming insects, slicing and trampling.

I shuddered against the onslaught of their tiny legs marching everywhere. They crawled up my pants legs, inside my buckskin shirt, underarms, and up my arms. I shook my head to keep them from my face, but still, I couldn’t stop their incessant wandering.

It seemed like hours ensued with Olivia and I immersed in our personal hells.

Finally, only a few insects limped in circles. The rest were either dead, killed by Olivia, or fled back into hiding.

Olivia collapsed onto the floor.

I hung, grateful for the silence, grateful that a million little legs no longer tormented my skin.

Olivia lay a hand on my non-swollen ankle. “God, that was awful.”

“Horrific,” I gasped.

“Do you think they’re making babies as we speak? They’ll soon return in the millions?” Her voice sounded faint and hoarse.

I shuddered.

“Hell, I hope not.” I regarded her, helpless to give her comfort. Then, I said, “You know he’s toying with you. He wants to kill you.”

“I know. He should just get it over with rather than torment us with bugs.” A shiver pulsed through her body as she lay there, eyes closed.

We both fell into silence. I was sure Olivia slept from the deep cadence of her breathing.

My arms were numb in places, and sharp shooting pains stabbed me in others. My ankle screamed in pain. It needed to be set and wrapped to heal.

Would I ever be able to walk on it again?

My heart ached at being unable to comfort Olivia and take her away from here. I felt like a pathetic excuse for a human being, and I slipped into despair. My head bobbed against my chest, and I fell into a restless, heavy sleep.

A clatter sounded, and I stirred from my drowse. My lips were parched and cracked, and hunger gnawed at my insides. My body was on fire, consumed by fever.

Olivia stirred, too.

“Aw, the two lovebirds are napping together,” Balthazar said, stalking toward us from a dark corner.

Olivia pushed to sit with shaking arms. The strength drained from her limbs.

“Just fucking kill us and get it over with.” She staggered to her feet and stood swaying. Then, her gaze flicked toward the knife on the ground. She stooped, nearly falling over in the process, and retrieved it. “I’m going to fucking kill you.”

She made a pitiful lunge at Balthazar.

“Just look at you,” he said, batting the blade from her hands as if swatting a fly. “You’re so weak I could blow on you, and you’d fall over.”

“So fucking kill us, then, if you’re such a badass.” She squinted as if she couldn’t entirely focus on his face.

“You’re the weak link in your family. I can see why your mother tried to kill you. She knew you would never make it.” Balthazar gripped her jaw in his hand and leered at her.

A few silent tears trickled down her cheeks.

God, I wanted to comfort her, hold her, and tell her not to believe in all his lies.

“So, kill me. Do it. Get it over with,” Olivia said in a hoarse voice.

“Not yet,” he snarled. “You’re going to do something for me.”

“Am I?” Olivia let out a mirthless laugh.

“Absolutely.” He stuck out his wretched tongue and licked the side of her face. “Ah, you taste like her. What will kissing you and having my mouth on your body feel like? If my lips ever touch yours, you will never want Roman again. Exquisite!”

I wanted to kill that man, but I could only hang here and watch him.

Olivia pulled back her head, pursed her lips, and spit at him.

A wad of phlegm landed on his eyelid.

His nostrils flared as he wiped away her saliva. “You’re going to regret doing that.”

“I doubt it. At this point, you can do nothing to harm me any worse than you’ve already tried.”

“Think so?” Balthazar said with a sneer.

“I know so,” Olivia said.

“We’ll see about that. You’re going to regret your words. I can give you so much pain.” He gave her jaw a vicious squeeze.

She cried out. Wisps of smoke coiled from her skin which blistered before my eyes.

Still gripping her tightly, Balthazar said, “You’re going to get me Alina’s journal.”

“I thought you knew and saw everything. Go get it yourself,” Olivia shot back.

His fingernails dug into the skin of her cheeks. “Oh, you pretend to be so tough. You’re just like Alina.”

“If I’m just like her, you should let me go because you love me,” Olivia taunted.

Balthazar gave her jaw another squeeze.

Olivia’s eyes filled with tears, but she stayed silent.

“You’re going to find that journal and bring it to me,” Balthazar bellowed.

“Or *what?*” Olivia shrieked.

Balthazar turned and fixed his wicked gaze on me. “You’ll just have to see what happens to your lover-man, won’t you?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Olivia

I could feel the blood drain from my face, feel the hope trickle from my limbs like sand as Balthazar leered at Roman. *Would he torture him if I couldn't find the journal? Kill him? Both?*

I eyed the love of my life as he hung from the ceiling.

Head bowed, eyes closed, he looked broken...halfway to death's door...utterly wretched...

My heart shattered into a billion pieces as I gazed at him. Losing him would destroy me. Then, something inside me snapped, and I went berserk.

I launched myself at Balthazar, clawing at his eyes, face, and neck. I scratched his lips with my blunt, ragged fingernails. I punched him. I kicked him. I bit him.

He just took it, barely lifting a finger to ward off my blows. Maybe he enjoyed it, thinking it was some kind of "foreplay."

This enraged me even more as I pictured his and my mother's perverse activity to get off.

Finally, he threw out his arms and yelled, "Enough!"

The room vibrated, and pieces of clotted spiderwebs fell from the ceiling.

I stumbled backward. "Find the fucking journal, find the fucking journal," I screamed, still in berserker mode. "Everyone tells me to find the goddamned journal, but no one

knows where it is.” My face grew red with fury. “Where should I start?” I yelled, my arms moving like the blades of a windmill in a tempestuous storm. “Here in the Americas? Should I wander throughout Italy, starting in the north where she frolicked with the family she *loved*? It could be anywhere if my mother was so active, fucking her way through the world!”

“I guess you’ll have to get creative, won’t you? Because if you don’t find it...” He stalked toward me, seizing my jaw like he’d done a few seconds ago. “I’m going to *kill* Alexander.”

I shoved his hand away from my face.

Balthazar scowled.

“If you’re so goddamned smart, why can’t *you* find it? Maybe it’s down there with your pets.” I pointed toward the floor, where the cockroaches still made distant clicks and hums. Dead insects crunched beneath my feet as I stormed back and forth. I stooped, scooped up a handful, and flung them at Balthazar’s face.

He put up his hands to shield himself from the flying body parts.

“Why can’t you just put another drop of blood on her dagger, wave your arms and say, ‘Show me the journal?’” Adrenaline surged through my bloodstream.

“You stupid, stupid girl,” he growled. “The dagger only shows the significant parts of a time traveler’s life. Writing in her journal was probably insignificant to her. It probably held no more meaning than relieving her bladder. Also, when the time traveler dies, the memories are scattered, and they don’t show the details of everything. If I could see your life from your dagger, I would see specifics because you are alive in the flesh.”

“Well, isn’t that just *perfect*?” I ground my teeth together as a new wave of betrayal shot through me. No memories of Mom’s joy at birthing me or raising me were shown. Instead,

she beat her stomach with fists and rocks when I pushed through the birth canal.

No, it couldn't be *those* memories that gave her joy. She only savored the experience of fucking Balthazar and screwing her boy toys when he was on vacation.

I kicked angrily at a pile of cockroaches, sending wings, shells, and legs flying.

Balthazar laughed, adding to my despair. This situation was *fucked*. Balthazar was a sick, twisted, depraved individual who got off on causing human suffering. *How could my mother have loved such a despicable character?*

But then another thought, more disturbing, flooded my brain. How often had I witnessed Roman coming off the battlefield, his arms and legs covered with the blood of those he had slain? And then we'd make passionate love.

If Tristan had waltzed into the bedroom, stained with blood from the patients in the emergency room where he worked, I probably would have sneered at him in disgust. Then, I'd have ordered him to clean up before touching me. But, with Roman, sometimes there wasn't time to clean the death from his limbs. We'd had sex freely, joyously, and with abandon. We'd kissed each other everywhere.

Was I as sick as my mother? Or did we both love a man with the strength of the supernatural?

I shuddered at this thought. And then I laughed hysterically. I clutched my belly as the laughter erupted from my throat.

Balthazar stared at me, his brow furrowed.

Roman groaned and lifted his heavy head. "Olivia?" he gasped. "What's wrong, my beloved?" Then, his head fell back to his chest.

Had I lost my frigging mind?

When I'd managed to calm myself, wiping the tears from my eyes with my filthy hands, I looked at Balthazar and growled. "I refuse to find your *fucking* journal."

Balthazar smiled and licked his lips. “Oh, this will be fun, then.” He crossed toward me and wrenched my knife from my grip. Then, he hauled back his arm and slashed Roman’s belly.

Roman cried out a horrible pain, much like a wild animal. He screamed and struggled in his restraints.

My limbs began to shake as I watched my lover bleed. I rushed toward him and pressed my palm to his abdomen, trying to stop the gushing stream of his life essence. He could bleed to death. He could fucking *bleed* to death right here, and there was *nothing* I could do. I was in the 19th century. There was no overt sense of sanitization. In wagon trains, people lumbered across the land, unwashed, unkempt, succumbing to famine, disease, and grisly, horrible deaths.

I recalled the memory of watching Tristan as we sat across my father’s kitchen table. Papa was bound in the living room.

Tristan drank whiskey until he was wasted, forcing me to do the same. Then, he shot my father—fucking killed him.

I knew then that he was an ugly, awful man. I’d been living a lie with him the entire time we were together.

And then I met Roman, and I knew what true love really was. I knew it with every cell in my body. I’d felt free to be myself without reservation with Roman, and he adored me.

When I was with Tristan, I’d worked my ass off all day, just like him, teaching kids and adults how to defend themselves. I might be covered in bruises from the misplaced kicks of a seven-year-old, but did I whimper and whine? No. I just did what was asked of me when I came home, and Tristan whined about how tired he was from the emergency room.

With Roman, I got to breathe. I got to live. I got to be *me*. And he loved me, from the tips of my eyelashes to my toenails. There wasn’t a thing about the other we didn’t love.

And now he bled into my hand. Gashes peppered his skin, all put there by *me* when that fucking demon entranced me.

I fell to my knees at Roman’s feet and clutched his legs. “Stop hurting him,” I demanded Balthazar. “Please. I don’t

know how or where to look, but I *will* find the journal. Just please don't kill him. I will do what you ask."

"You might have lost your chance," Balthazar said in a simpering tone.

"You wouldn't do that to me," I wailed. "Look at me. You've broken me. Isn't this what you wanted? Just let me go and find the blasted journal. But keep Roman alive."

"I thought you said you didn't know where to search?" Balthazar crouched beside me, so close I could feel his breath whisper across my skin.

"I don't. But I *will* find it. I *must* find it." I lifted my gaze to study the beautiful man hanging before me.

"How quickly you've changed your tune," Balthazar said. "I should have tortured him long before, so you would yield to me, too."

"Quit gloating. I'll do it." I released Roman's legs and rose.

Balthazar did the same.

We stood face to face, staring at one another. Only *his* glare was victorious—mine was defeated.

"If I find the journal, I'll read it," I said, cocking my head to the side, studying him for signs of a reaction.

"I won't care," he said, his gaze haughty. "You won't understand it."

"What? Is it written in a secret code?" I said, staring at him with cold, dead eyes. I'd retreated deep inside myself—I couldn't let him get to me any longer. I had to protect myself from the foul creature before me.

"Ha!" He barked out a laugh. "It's written in the language of love which we shared. It will be *meaningless* to you."

I narrowed my eyes and considered him. *Why does he want this journal so much? I remembered Grey Feather saying my mother searched for the sun and moon dagger. Balthazar's probably looking for it, too. Or maybe I just found his deepest*

secret. Perhaps I can find a way to exploit him once it's in my hands. Possibly a weakness about him revealed in the journal could prove to be his undoing. I frowned. *But then why wouldn't he find it himself?*

A wave of confusion washed over me. But then, so did a strategy.

“If I go find this journal, you’ve got to let Roman down from the ceiling. He’s in bad shape, and if you leave him up there, he’ll die, and I will have wasted a trip.” I planted my hands on my hips. “If he’s not alive when I return, I’ll destroy the journal. I’ll rip it to shreds with my bare teeth.”

“You have no right to negotiate with me. If you dare harm the journal, I will give you a slow, painful death and cut off your limbs one by one. I will keep Roman alive until the journal is in my possession.” Balthazar sneered.

“Release him now so I can see it. Carry him into a better place. He can’t just lay here and bleed to death. Your pets below ground will smell the blood and the decay and feast upon him.” I crossed my arms over my chest. It hurt to even lift them.

“This isn’t a hotel,” he stated, matching my stance.

“I’m well aware of that. It’s a hell hole.” I glanced at the dolls still lining the wall in their buggies, staring at me. A shiver shook my spine.

Balthazar snorted, staring at me defiantly.

I could practically *see* the wheels turning in his mind, assessing my motives.

Finally, he broke eye contact. “Fine,” he said. He crossed the room, stood before Roman, and touched the metal restraints.

The irons securing Roman to the ceiling melted, and he crumpled to the ground like a bag of sand.

“Roman!” I cried out, rushing to his side. I scooped him in my arms and struggled to my feet. He was dead weight in my

hands, all two hundred plus pounds. “Where can I put him? Anywhere but here,” I grunted, straining from his weight.

Balthazar coolly assessed me. Without answering, he pivoted and stalked from the room.

I staggered behind him, determined to not let Roman fall.

Balthazar opened a door, and we entered a prison cell, much like the cell Roman was kept in at the Hypogeum beneath the Colosseum.

Water dripped from the ceiling. The room was dark and dingy but didn't have the smell of decay.

“Drop him anywhere. He can drink from that leak in the ceiling, and I'll make sure he gets enough sustenance to survive,” Balthazar said, sounding bored and disinterested.

Given the weight, I crouched and lay Roman on the ground as gently as possible. Then, I let a few drops of water spill into my hands and sniffed it. It smelled somewhat fresh.

Roman pulled his legs up toward his chest and curled into a ball.

I touched his cheek, lowered my head, and whispered. “I'll return as soon as I can, my love. You heal and grow strong again.” I kissed him softly, then rose and whirled to face Balthazar.

“How do I know you won't betray me?” I said, an edge to my voice.

“You can't, can you? You'll simply have to take a chance. I promise you I won't bother to care for him while you're away, but I'll have one of my servants do the job.” Balthazar yawned.

I shook my head and glanced at Roman.

He'd already fallen asleep, probably exhausted from his ordeal and injuries.

“How will I find you again? I don't even know where we are. We could be in France for all I know,” I said.

Balthazar chuckled. “France,” he said, grinning. “Why would I take you to France? I only took my *lover* there.”

My stomach twisted thinking of my mom and Balthazar cavorting around Paris or Marseille, the oldest French cities. “So, where are we then? Are you going to leave it to chance whether I can even find you again?”

“Of course not. Leave it to me.” He swaggered toward me and waved his arm.

Suddenly, my feet were glued to the ground like he’d done when I met him. I struggled to lift my feet, but nothing happened. They might as well have been encased in cement.

Balthazar crouched and lifted my dress. He stroked my shin, my knee, and my thigh.

Bile rose in the back of my throat from his touch. “What are you doing?” I tried to grab his hair, but he shoved my hand away.

“I’m ensuring you won’t get lost or betray me.” He plucked my dagger from its sheath and held it before me. Then, he waddled behind me. He sliced my leg from the ankle, behind my knee, and up to my butt.

I screamed from the pain.

Balthazar wiped the blade of my dagger back and forth across my skin, coating it with blood from my wound. Then, he rose and showed it to me.

“This dagger will always know your exact location. And, since it’s bonded with you, you’ll be able to find it. It will be like a beacon to you and a way to keep track of you. I’ll be able to watch you from your dagger, so you won’t be able to hide from me. If I don’t like what you’re up to, I’ll simply kill Alexander, and then I will kill you.”

I glared at him, breathing in quick, angry snorts. “You’re a bastard.”

“I am. To me, that’s not an insult. It’s a compliment.” He inclined his head and studied me, a slight smile tugging the corners of his mouth. “You’re different than Alina.”

“How so?” I said, gritting my teeth.

“You’re stronger than she was when I met her,” he said, waving the dagger in the air to dry the blood on the blade.

I don’t know why, but that made me happy to hear. “Good. Then, I’ll finish the job she started.”

Balthazar clenched his jaw, and the muscles in his cheeks twitched.

“I’m going to destroy you,” I snarled. “I’m going to find your weakness. Every demon, or darkness, or whatever you call yourself, has a weakness. I will find yours and bring you down.” The strength of certainty flooded my veins like a power surge.

His nostrils flared. “That’s where you’re wrong, my sweet.”

“Stop calling me that!”

He smiled and shook his head. “One thing you will find out, Olivia, is this. As long as you live, you’ll lose everyone you care about. I’ll make certain of that.”

“I will kill you, Balthazar,” I stated. “I will find your weakness and bring you down. I will destroy you if it takes my last dying breath.”

Balthazar let out a wicked laugh. “Your mother said the exact same thing to me, and where is she now? She’s buried deep in the ground, rotting. If Alina couldn’t kill me, you can’t either.”

“You’re wrong,” I snarled.

“Stop talking!” Balthazar shouted as if frustrated. “You talk all tough, but you’re as weak as they come. Now *find me the journal!*” He swept his arm through the air in a grand gesture.

Everything around me grew dark. I couldn’t see, smell, or feel a thing. Then, the wind whistled next to my ears, and I landed with a thud on my back right next to Emily’s burned-out home, the blood from my wounds dribbling into the Earth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Olivia

I came to consciousness in Emily's old yard as elephants stampeded on my brain.

Good God, what happened to me? My head feels like it was hit by a Mack truck.

I rubbed my temples and the back of my neck to relieve the pain.

The long branches of the willow tree danced and swayed in the breeze as I massaged myself. The sun felt good on my arms, giving me comfort.

And then it all came back to me: Roman was in a cockroach-infested prison, and I was here. I'd left him bleeding, his ankle shattered, and his spirit barely clinging to his body. If I didn't find that stupid journal, he'd be dead, and I'd be ruined.

I dropped my head into my hands.

"What have I done?" I whispered.

The sound of rapid footsteps made me look up in alarm.

Marcellious rushed from inside the burnt-out remains of the house. "Olivia! Bloody hell. What happened to you? Where did you and Roman go?"

Without thinking, I scrambled to my feet, rushed toward him, and threw my arms around him. "I'm so glad to see you!"

Marcellious stiffened, holding his arms away from me, but I didn't care.

“Balthazar has Roman, and he's dying! He hung us both from the ceiling in his den of nightmares and showed me all the daggers from all the time travelers he's murdered. And then he showed me my mother's life by putting a drop of blood on the blade of her knife, and I saw her doing all sorts of terrible things with *him*.”

Marcellious gave me a few tentative pats on the back, then placed his hands on my shoulders and eased me away.

“Slow down, slow down. You're raving like a madwoman.” An uncharacteristically gentle smile creased his face. “Slow down and start at the beginning. Balthazar took you and Roman somewhere?”

“Yes, I don't know where, though. We ended up in this horrible place filled with cockroaches the size of my face. They clicked and hummed and crawled all over us.”

Marcellious' lips pulled back, and his hands dropped from my shoulders. “That does sound ghastly.”

“It was awful.” I rubbed my arms, still feeling their wicked little legs crawling all over me. “And then Balthazar did what I said and showed me parts of my mother's life. My mother had many lovers when she wasn't with Balthazar. Apparently, they had what you might call an open relationship.”

I wrinkled up my nose.

“Whoa, whoa, *your* mother was *Balthazar's* lover?” Marcellious arched backward as if I'd hit him with a log.

I nodded. “They supposedly had some sort of special relationship throughout time. And when Balthazar was away, my mother took other lovers.”

“That's not uncommon, Olivia,” Marcellious said evenly. “I find it hard to think you're that naive.”

“Of course, I know it's common,” I said, my arms shooting into the air. “But she was my *mother*. Don't you get it?”

“Mothers are only human,” he said, playing Devil’s advocate.

“How can you say that? She didn’t love me and tried to kill me when I was born. That hurts,” I said. In the back of my mind, I marveled that I was telling all this to Marcellious, who barely tolerated me.

And he was listening intently.

What had happened to him while we’d been gone?

“I know all about a mother’s rejection, so don’t think you’re special.” Marcellious’s expression grew ugly, letting me know the real Marcellious was still there.

I continued talking, wanting to take advantage of his generous mood. “So, now I’ve got to find my mother’s journal. Balthazar wants it. And he’ll only release Roman if I can produce this mysterious book, and no one seems to know where it is. Roman might die, Marcellious, and it’s all my fault. And Balthazar kept my dagger!”

A few pesky tears escaped my eyes.

“Don’t fret,” Marcellious said, patting my back. “Roman is the strongest man I know. He was a gladiator. He’s survived worse. He’ll live.”

His effusive comfort baffled me.

Emily appeared in the distance, stopped, and stared at me. Then, she broke out in a run. She threw her arms around me when she reached me and hugged me tightly.

“Oh, Olivia! You’re back! We were both worried sick. You’ve been gone for three days!”

“Three days? I can’t believe we were gone so long.” I eased away from her.

Her blond hair glistened like she’d washed it, and her blue eyes shone. She clasped both of my hands and said, “Where’s Roman? What happened to him?”

“Oh, gosh, Emily! He’s badly injured, and Balthazar is holding him captive. I had to leave him as collateral until I

find Alina's journal." I turned toward Marcellious. "We have to go back and find Grey Feather. He must know more than he lets on. I'm desperate, Marcellious. If Roman dies, I may as well kill myself."

His eyebrows rose on his forehead. "Let's not go that far. Like I said, he's a strong warrior."

"We can't go anywhere," Emily said, looking me up and down. "You're badly injured."

I glanced down, noticing a gaping cut on my arm and gashes on the back of my leg, from ankle to ass. "Balthazar threw me against the wall, and I must have cut myself on the stones."

"So, that's it, then. Let's stay here. Let me care for you, and then we'll go," Emily said.

I shook my head. "I can't stay, Em. Don't you see? If I don't find my mother's writing, Roman will die."

My voice quavered.

"When she makes her mind up, there's no stopping her," Marcellious said.

"Well, at least let me patch you up," Emily said. "I've found some healing herbs. Let me put a poultice on your wounds, and we can get on our way."

"I'll go get the horses. I'll meet you out here as soon as you're done tending to Olivia," Marcellious said, giving Emily a warm smile.

As Emily hustled me toward the house, I asked, "Why is Marcellious so nice to me?"

"While you were gone, we got to know one another. We only had each other, so we talked a lot. He is just a lonely man looking for comfort in a woman."

She dragged me into the far reaches of the house, where one lone table and two chairs sat. Both pieces of furniture looked relatively intact.

I studied Emily but said nothing.



After Emily cleansed my wounds and applied soothing herbs, we both headed outside.

Marcellious stood near the horses, holding three sets of reins. The fourth one grazed nearby.

“Ready?” he said, looking at Emily.

“I think so.” She turned to study me. “You don’t look so good, Olivia.”

I felt terrible—weak, exhausted, bruised, and battered—but I was determined to find Chief Grey Feather. “I’m fine.”

“Let me help you up,” Marcellious said, handing the horses to Emily.

I stood next to my horse, clutching his mane. Marcellious put his arms around my waist and lifted me into the air.

I swung my leg over my steed, and Emily handed me the reins. I wanted to collapse onto my horse, sink onto its back, and fall deeply asleep. Why did I feel so awful? I’d been injured before. All my strength seemed to have fled my body.

“Do you know the way?” I asked Marcellious as he helped Emily up.

“Of course,” he said with a sneer. “How do you think I got the name, Hunting Wolf? I’m an expert tracker.”

Excuse me, I wanted to snap back, but I just didn’t have the strength.

Marcellious leaped onto the back of his horse, and we were away.

We traveled for days to return to tribal land. I kept to myself mostly, conversing little, thinking about Roman.

I hope he’s okay. I hope he lives long enough for me to find the journal.

As the days went by, I grew weaker and weaker. At times, I could barely stay upright on my horse. Instead, I slumped over its neck and held on tight.

Emily and Marcellious remained on either side of me. They tried to get me to converse, but I wanted to crawl into a shell and hide.

Marcellious had to help me from my horse every evening, where I'd collapse by the fire, shaking, feverish and miserable.

Emily spoon-fed me broths she made from the game Marcellious killed. But I couldn't keep it down. By the time two weeks were up, I was barely coherent. I overheard Marcellious and Emily talking in hushed voices around the fire one night as I lay there, sweating and delirious.

"We've got to stop somewhere and let her heal," Emily said.

"I think you're right," Marcellious said. "She doesn't look so good. I'm afraid she will die if we don't get her fixed up right."

"Oh, what are we going to do?" Emily lamented. "She's determined to continue this quest, but I think it's to her detriment."

"I don't know," Marcellious said, "but we'd better think of something, fast."

That night, I dreamed Roman lay dying, covered in cockroaches. They feasted on his eyes and nose and burrowed inside his ear canals. I fought with them, stomping on them and slicing them with my knife, but they kept coming and coming and coming.

"Olivia! Olivia!" Emily hissed in my ear. "Wake up! You're having a nightmare!"

I awoke with a start.

Marcellious stood watch in the moonlight several yards away.

Embers still glowed in the fire.

I was drenched with sweat as if my fever had finally ceased. “Oh, god, Emily, it was awful. Roman died. And these horrible insects were eating his flesh.”

I dropped my head into my hands and sobbed.

Emily shushed me and fed me more broth until I could finally sleep.

In the morning, Marcellious said, “You’re riding with me today, Olivia. You’re too weak to go it alone.”

I didn’t care. I sat behind him, slumped against his back, in and out of more delirious dreams.

Late in the afternoon, I looked up, recognizing the familiar plains landscape where the Native Americans had their encampment.

“We’re almost there!” I peered into the distance.

There were no signs of teepees along the riverbank. No smoke drifting from the tops of dwellings, no herd of horses, nothing.

“It’s gone,” I said. “They’ve disappeared!”

Marcellious murmured something about how the tribe wandered and “Don’t worry, I can find them,” but I didn’t listen. Instead, I fell from the back of Marcellious’ horse and landed on the hard ground. There I drifted into welcome unconsciousness, ready to be done with everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Roman

With a hoarse, horrified scream, I awakened in this windowless, lightless prison hellhole, confident that cockroaches were eating my face. I could feel their tiny legs crawling all over my cheeks, feel the pinch of their jaws as they pulled at my flesh, sucking it into their mouths. I clawed at my skin, uncertain if I was still immersed in a bad dream or awake in this nightmare.

Only when I touched the rasp of my stubble-covered jaw, free of insects, did I realize I was caught in another delusion. I still burned with a fever, which had taken a toll on my sanity.

This place was well and truly hell, far worse than anything I experienced in the bowels of the Colosseum.

Day and night came and went in a blur. With no light in this cell, save for that which came through the door occasionally, I could never be sure what time it was.

My stomach cramped around the meager, random offerings of food tossed into this chamber by unseen hands. When I heard the jingle of keys and the click of the lock, I'd scramble across the grimy floor on my hands and knees. I didn't have the strength to rise. The sharp shooting pains stabbing my ankle continued, unabated, without mercy.

The rats emerged at the same time as the door cracked open. I had to fight with the vermin to get a meal. Sometimes the rats were too fast, and they'd scurry underground with my

food before I reached the door. Then, I'd curl where I lay and drift in and out of consciousness as I waited for my next meal.

Water dripped from the ceiling incessantly. At times it seemed to pound at my eardrums in a thunderous boom. At other times it sounded far away. When I had the strength, I'd crawl toward the sound, position myself beneath it, and open my mouth. The water, which tasted of rust and mold, filled my mouth painstakingly slowly. Often, I'd cough it all out before I had a chance to swallow, and then I'd have to start all over again.

The smells in here made me wretch and gag. I had nowhere to go to relieve my bladder or bowels, so I tried to reach the furthest corner when my body had something to give. But I couldn't escape the stench.

I had no idea how long I'd been here, but it seemed like weeks. In my heart, I knew with certainty that Olivia would never return.

At this point, I welcomed death—it couldn't take me quickly enough.

Footsteps clattered outside in the hallway. I dragged myself across the stone floor, hoping to catch the stale bread before the rodents did.

The door opened, but no bread came sailing. Instead, two black boots trekked inside and stood in my line of sight.

“Get up, you filthy pig,” Balthazar said.

Talking would take too much energy, so I lay in misery.

“I said, *get up*,” Balthazar commanded.

I couldn't get my mouth to work.

“What, are you mute? Deaf?” He crouched so his face was inches away from my face. “Get. *Up*.”

I managed to swallow, but that was it.

Balthazar rose and took a step. His boot came down on my swollen ankle.

I let out an agonized scream.

“There. I knew you still had a voice. Now use it!”

“I’ve got nothing to say to you,” I croaked. “What do you want from me?”

“What do *I* want from *you*? I’m clearly holding all the cards right now, and you’re a spider’s web away from death. What could I possibly want from you? You’re pathetic.” His boot landed on my abdomen in a sharp kick.

I let out a grunt and curled into myself, claspng my one good leg to my chest. “Why don’t you just kill me then and hasten the process?”

“I’m not done with you just yet. You’re still the perfect bait for me. Olivia hopes to see you alive again, so she’s scurrying around like a mouse to try to find the journal. Would you like to see what she’s up to?”

Olivia. A faint glimmer, like the dim glow of my heart, forced its way into my ribcage. I couldn’t imagine ever laying eyes on her again. Balthazar would make sure of that.

“No,” I groaned.

“Come now. Let’s see what she’s up to.” He crouched next to me, holding Olivia’s blade before my face.

A listless heartbeat kicked to life inside my chest as I gazed at the reflection of my beloved Olivia.

Dark circles ringed her eyes, and her gorgeous hair hung unkempt around her face. She seemed to be on a journey somewhere, with Marcellious and Emily flanking her, protecting her.

I reached for the dagger, wanting to press it to my chest and keep her close.

Balthazar snatched it away from me and placed it on the floor out of my reach. “That’s enough. We have other matters to discuss.”

“Like what?” My eyelids fluttered shut, unable to stay open.

“Like you. I want you to know your life, gladiator scum,” Balthazar said, adding a cackle of laughter at the end.

“Go ahead. There’s nothing you can show me that will hurt me.” My abdomen ached from the blow of Balthazar’s boot.

Another cackle of laughter left Balthazar’s throat. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m dead serious. My mother did her best to raise me. End of story.”

Good God, I was weak. Even speaking exerted precious energy.

“So, you never loathed the man who gave you life,” Balthazar stated rather than asked.

I struggled to open my eyes. “What do you mean?”

“You. You lived a blissful existence as the only child of a single mother. Is that what I’m hearing?” Balthazar grinned down at me.

“Pretty much, yes. We had our share of turbulence, but nothing dramatic,” I said. “My mother had to work hard as a seamstress to put food on the table and a shelter over our head, but she never complained.”

My body began to tremble. The cold stone kept me constantly shivering when I wasn’t delirious, burning with fever.

“So, why did you spend so much time looking for your father? You’ve always hated him for abandoning your mother. You despised him, a wealthy sheik, for not providing for you.” Balthazar’s grin faded, and his expression grew more predatory as if waiting for me to react.

I stiffened where I lay. *How did he know that?*

I’d never shared that with anyone, not even Olivia. My most hidden secret was my longing to know who my father was.

“Oh, I’ve seen your pathetic attempts to find your father,” Balthazar said, pacing around my prone form. “I even

followed you once when it looked like you were getting close. This was in downtown London when you were a mere youth. You tried to pretend you were much older and had the balls to swagger into a saloon where your father was said to be. Only, they threw you out, tossed you out the door onto the street like the cur you are. If I'd been two minutes faster, I would have been able to confront your father rather than witness you being tossed on your ear. He apparently left out the back door when he sensed my imminent arrival."

I remembered that day with vivid clarity. I'd heard from a friend of a friend that a Turkish sheik who matched my father's description was seen traveling through London with his entourage. And that he dined nightly at a public house called the *Thistle and Swan*. I'd always been told I looked older than my age, so I thought it would be easy to swagger in and confront my father, demanding recompense for my mother.

Only the door had been guarded by a hulk of a man who took one look at me, laughed, and said, "Not a chance, lad."

He'd grabbed my lapels and flung me from the door into a pile of slop in the street.

After landing on my back and getting up, I smelled like human feces, food scraps, and urine thrown from the window above.

The shame of that moment still lingered in my memories. I'd had to skulk home and tell a story about why I smelled so foul. I could not tell my mother I was searching for my father to get him to contribute to my mother's well-being.

My mind revisited Balthazar's statement: *If I'd been two minutes faster, I would have been able to confront your father.*

"How did you know my father?" I said, exerting enough strength to push away from the floor. I was as weak as a malnourished kitten.

"Let's just say your father and I were old friends," Balthazar said. His steady footfalls halted before me, and he crouched, taking my jaw between his bony fingers.

It hurt like hell to be held this way, but I didn't have the strength to fight him off.

"Your father is one of my kind—he's the darkness, like me. Long ago, we used to be partners together."

I tried to reel back, to pull away from his horrible grasp. "That's preposterous. My mother was a good woman. She would never have associated with someone like you."

"That's where you're wrong. One of our greatest skills is to trick, seduce, and manipulate. Your mother fell prey to Amir's charms."

"I don't believe you," I said, my voice rising, yielding to a coughing fit.

Balthazar paused, waiting for me to collect myself. Then, he said, "It doesn't matter what you believe—it's the truth. He and I were best friends, and he betrayed me. He'll be a dead man if I ever find him."

The impulse to defend my father had me spitting out words. "If you were betrayed, I have no doubt you deserved to be betrayed."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Balthazar flung my head to the side and rose to his feet. Then, he resumed pacing. "Your mother, she was a beautiful woman. I'm surprised your father didn't kill her when he grew tired of her. That's what we did. We'd fuck beautiful women, then we killed them and ate their souls. That's how we grow stronger. But for some reason, Amir—your father's name is Amir—for some reason, he didn't kill her. Instead, he said, 'I'll kill for you, but please don't touch Elizabeth.'"

Balthazar's expression grew pensive. "And, fool that I was, I listened to him until he betrayed me."

A horrifying thought swirled through my muzzy brain. "You didn't kill my mother, did you?"

Balthazar waved his hand in front of his face.

"I lost interest in her when Amir stopped seeing her. I'm more interested in finding Amir and destroying him." He

looked down at me, his lip curling in disgust. “You’re such a weak man. Your mother would be ashamed of you. Your brother, Marcellious, has ten times the strength as you. The darkness runs through his blood.”

I let out an involuntary shudder. I could barely comprehend that I was conceived from the same demonic seed as Balthazar. It shook me to the bone.

But the darkness ran through Marcellious’ blood?

“We’re twins,” I said. “He’s a lot of things, but he’s not made of darkness. Neither of us is.”

I tried to sit up, but it hurt too much, and I collapsed on the floor.

Balthazar barked out a mirthless laugh. “Your brother enjoys killing. He’s just like a dog who has tasted chickens—Marcellious can’t get the taste of blood from his mouth, nor does he want to. He will always like to kill.”

He crouched in my line of sight.

I brought my arm in front of my face in case he decided to grasp my jaw between his claw-like fingers.

“I should have brought Marcellious here to help me toy with you. He’s a lot like me. We would have had fun.”

“You’re wrong!” I tried to shout, but it came out more like the bark of a dying dog. “Marcellious is nothing like you.”

“Aw.” Balthazar tried to pat my head.

I shook it to keep his touch from my skin.

He withdrew his hand and smirked. “Do you have a soft spot for your brother? Don’t bother. The darkness is too great inside of him. Somehow it affected him more than it affected you.”

“You’re wrong,” I said again in a stronger voice. “About everything. Why should I believe a word out of your mouth if your abilities include deceit and manipulation?”

His nostrils flared as he scowled at me. “You disgust me, Alexander. Olivia will grow tired of you. She’ll come to love

the darkness of another and find nothing about you that appeals. Yes.” He stroked his chin. “There will be another darkness who will come to her and sweep her away from you, mark my words.”

A sharp stab lanced my heart. Could this be true? Could one of these foul demons who roamed the earth seduce Olivia away from me? Already I’d experienced how Balthazar had entranced her, and I had the gashes to prove it. How easy would it be for another man with the same demonic characteristics as Balthazar to seduce my wife-to-be?

“There aren’t many others left here,” Balthazar mused as if talking to himself. He sighed, dropped his rump to the ground, and brought his knees to his chest. “No, I have killed most of the darkness left on this earth. You saw it—you saw my wall of daggers in the other room.” He swept his hand toward the wall to my right. “So many lives....”

His voice sounded plaintive as if all these killings had left a mark on his soul.

Except that he has no soul...

“Even Dahlia’s usefulness will end, and I’ll be forced to murder her.”

His eyes fixed on me like a bird of prey on his next victim. A chilling smile curved his lips. “Unless, of course, Olivia kills her first. But she is too weak to harm even a fly.”

I glared at him. “Olivia will return. Together we will destroy you. We will find the weapons and murder you, Balthazar.”

“Weapons? What weapons?” Balthazar’s gaze bore into me.

I realized my mistake and said nothing.

Balthazar pressed his hand to my torso.

Like a brand, it seared me, burning through the leather and blistering my skin. I roared with the white-hot pain that ripped through me.

“Stop. Stop!”

He removed his hand with a flourish and snarled, “That’s just a taste of what I can do to you, gladiator scum.”

The acrid smell of burnt leather assaulted my nose as agony tore through me.

Balthazar rose up and stood over me. “You’ll never survive me. Death will come to you sooner than later. It’s coming your way, and you can do nothing about it.”

“You lied to Olivia!” I rocked back and forth on the stones.

“Of course I did. No one knows where you are. No one will find you here. But while you’re here, let me have a little fun. It gets so lonely being a demon.” He let out an exaggerated sigh as he sauntered toward the door. He exited and shut the door behind him with a soft snick.

Keys rattled and shook in the lock, and I was again secured in my prison.

I let out a long, low moan. I was in so much pain I couldn’t think coherent thoughts. Everything inside my head was a jumble.

Then, I noticed Olivia’s dagger on the floor, where Balthazar had placed it. Did he know he’d left it?

It took much effort, but I managed to crawl across the room. When I gazed down at the polished blade, I saw her beauty reflected in the shiny metal. There sat Olivia, slumped against Marcellious’s torso on his horse’s back.

How was it that Marcellious was the one comforting her? Was she ill? Injured? Strangely, I felt no jealousy toward my brother, only gratitude for this show of kindness.

Oh, Olivia. I’m afraid I’m dying. I can’t survive these injuries, let alone those that madman will inflict on me when he returns. I am a broken man.

The heat of fever resumed, matching the burning warmth of my scorched skin. Slowly, I rolled to my side and brought my knees to my chest. I kissed the handle of Olivia’s blade, clutched it to my chest, and curled around it, imagining her tucked against my belly as we spooned in slumber.

I fell again into delirium. Feverish thoughts of dying, cockroaches, rats, and never seeing Olivia again wracked my brain.

“Roman,” a soft male voice said. “Wake up.”

I jerked awake and peered into the darkness, seeing no one.

More fever dreams. My eyelids fluttered shut.

“Roman. You must awaken. We have no time!”

I squeezed my eyes tightly.

This is my soul talking to me, readying me for death.

A strong hand shook my shoulder.

“Roman!” the voice hissed.

“Go ahead and take me. I’m ready,” I said, unwilling to open my eyes.

“Roman! This is not a dream. You’ve got to wake up!”

“Who are you? Am I dying?” I said as my eyelids fluttered open.

“Not if I can help it.” Large arms thrust beneath me and hefted me in the air like lifting a child. “I’ve got you. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Who are you?” I asked again, comforted by this man’s cradling embrace.

“Who I am isn’t important. What’s important is to get you out of here before Balthazar returns. Balthazar must not know I was here. He will return soon. We must hurry.” He shifted me in his arms to open the door, closed it behind us, and then padded on soft footsteps down the hall. “It’s not your time to die, Roman. This is only the beginning.”

The dim candlelight in the hallway made me squint. I’d been submerged in darkness for too long.

The man trekked his way through an archway, and we were outside.

I took a deep lungful of the fresh air. “Where are we?”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is where we’re going.”

The man carried me toward two horses.

“I can’t ride,” I said. “I’m too weak.”

“You must ride. All you have to do is cling to the horse’s back. I’ll be right by your side.” He maneuvered me onto the horse’s back, where I collapsed, clutching the mane to keep from falling. My legs dangled, broken, weak, and useless.

“I’ll fall,” I said.

“I’ll be right here,” he said, mounting his steed.

I could only make him out from the corners of my eyes. When I tried to look at him directly, he disappeared, convincing me I still had fever dreams. But no dream had ever felt so real. This mysterious man was saving my life.

“I’ve got your dagger,” he said, grabbing my horse’s reins. “I’ll keep it safe until we arrive at our destination. I am here to help you.”

“But why? Who are you? Are you a figment of my imagination?”

“I can assure you I’m no figment of the imagination,” he said. “I will keep you safe. But we must hurry—Balthazar can’t find us.”

I looked at him again, peering through the darkness at his emerald eyes. How could he possibly have known where I was held captive? Why was he helping me?

My relentless questions made my head hurt.

All around us, the night insects kept up their soothing song, rubbing their wings on the backs of their bodies. A sliver of a moon shone overhead.

Taking comfort with my escape and lulled by the steady clop, clop, clop of hooves, I collapsed, gripping the neck of my steed, and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Olivia

What was wrong with me? Where was my strength?

We'd been traversing the endless plains that billowed with golden fields for days. And while I should have marveled at my surroundings, taking in the beauty and wonder of this undeveloped landscape, I was obsessed with the sickness in my body. I was both exhausted and ravenous. I couldn't eat enough food when we managed to kill a rabbit or forage greens. But after I consumed my meal, my stomach would reject the contents.

Finally, I stopped eating so much, nibbling small bites until my belly quaked.

Marcellious had been solicitous and kind—unlike the surly, angry man I knew him to be. He insisted I rode with him and clung to his back when I felt too weak.

“It doesn't matter to me if you have to hang onto me as long as you stay put on the horse,” he said.

I appreciated his kindness but longed for the day I could regain my strength.

We encountered a dead soldier in a field a few days ago. We'd taken an iron pan, a coffee pot, utensils, a hunting knife, and a flint. So at least we had something to prepare food in.

This morning I was a wreck. I'd slept fitfully, missing Roman terribly, hoping he was okay. I had no more sense of where he was than I knew where to find the journal.

“Maybe you need a different kind of food,” Marcellious said as he returned to where we’d rested last night. His hair hung in wet curls around his shoulders from his morning ablutions in the creek. “I’ll see if I can find a small deer to kill.”

He left Emily and me and took off on foot.

I curled around my cramping stomach while Emily prepared more broth over our campfire.

A small creek bubbled nearby, singing its cheerful tune as it tumbled over stones.

I tried to focus on the sound of water, wishing it would soothe me.

“You need a doctor or a proper healer,” Emily said as she spooned a mouthful of nourishing liquid into my mouth.

“No doctors. I’ll be fine,” I said as my stomach shook its meager contents.

“You keep saying that, but you’re not fine,” she said, a set to her mouth. She reached out and felt my forehead. “At least your fever is gone.”

“See?” I said as my insides pinched and contracted. “I’m fine.”

Dry heaves took over, preventing further speech. I managed to rise onto my hands and knees and wretched while Emily held my hair away from my face.

“Oh, God,” I moaned once the violent heaves had subsided. I crawled away from my sick and fell to my side.

“I’m worried,” Emily said, patting my shoulder. “You can’t keep anything down, and I don’t know what to do.”

She wrung her hands.

“I’ll be fine once we find the tribe. You’ll see.”

With the morning sun warming my body, I fell into a drowse.

Sometime later, the smell of blood awoke me. I opened my eyes to see Emily and Marcellious slicing the flesh from a small deer, as Marcellious had promised.

They worked efficiently, side by side, carving the muscle from the bone and removing organs.

They smiled, laughed, talked, and teased as they labored, sharing an easy camaraderie.

I marveled at the friendship they'd developed.

Marcellious looked over at me. "You're awake. This fare will keep us for many days. We must remain here while everything dries, and Emily and I prepare the hides. This is the perfect place for you to rest until we are ready to depart."

He said that as a command, not a suggestion.

I acquiesced and fell back into a drowse.

I awoke sometime later to the smell of cooking food.

The sun hung directly overhead, turning my skin pink.

I sat up, groggy but well-rested, to find Emily stirring something over the coals of our small fire. "What are you making?"

Emily smiled. "Marcellious showed me how to stuff the intestines with meat. It's a delicacy his tribe used to prepare for him. It's almost ready. Would you like to try it?"

Surprisingly, my stomach didn't protest. "Sure."

"Feeling any better? You slept for a long time," Emily said.

"A little, yes. But I'm anxious to get moving. We can't afford the luxury of waiting around for me to heal. I need to find that journal. Every day that passes means another day Roman could be dead or dying." I tried to lurch to my feet but fell back on my rump.

"We'll get started in the morning," Emily said. Her lips pressed into a crisp line. "We're drying all the meat for storage. We'll secure it to the horses we're not using. You'll be grateful when we don't have to go for days without food."

“I’ll be thankful when Roman is freed, and we’ve found that blasted journal,” I said. “I’ll be thankful when I can keep something down.”

I knew I behaved like a brat, but I didn’t care. I had a mission, and I’d do it or die trying.

“Honey,” Emily said reprovably, “all we’re asking is one day to rest and restore. Then, I promise, we’ll get moving again. This sleep you had has already improved your mood. You’re now merely cranky instead of miserable.”

She winked. “I think this is a good sign.”

She lifted a packet of blackened intestines stuffed with deer muscle using one of the utensils we’d found.

I looked at it, waiting for my stomach to protest, but it stayed calm.

Emily dropped the meat onto a tin plate and brought it to me. “Here. Try and get some of this down when it cools. Marcellious said the trick is to leave the undigested grasses in the guts before stuffing them. He said this is one of the most nourishing meals you can eat. It’s loaded with nutrients.”

I mused at Marcellious and Emily’s blooming friendship. Maybe that was what had improved his mood. Whatever it was, I didn’t care as long as it continued. Kinder Marcellious was far more pleasant to be around than Asshole Marcellious.



After a decent night’s sleep, we awoke at dawn, broke down our camp, and took off in the direction Marcellious had determined was the “right way.”

I continued to ride on his horse, holding onto his back. Although I’d rested well and kept the food down for once, I still felt weak.

“How long until we find the tribe?” I asked. “You made it sound like it was an easy task to find your fellow Native Americans.”

“Who said it was easy?” Marcellious said evenly. “I realize you’re doing poorly, but I am efficiently doing my job, looking for and following signs.”

“Then why haven’t we found them yet?” I said in a whining voice.

“Because they are moving swiftly, and we are moving slowly in an attempt to take care of you,” Marcellious replied.

We both fell silent.

Then, Marcellious said, “Emily was right.”

“About what?”

“She said you’re improving since you’ve begun to complain.” He snorted.

My cheeks heated to a fiery warmth. I didn’t mean to grumble and grouse, but I was tired of this endless journey. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s all right. We should find the tribe by nightfall,” he said, urging his horse to a trot.

“Really?” I released my grip on his shoulders and sat tall.

“Really. See?” He pointed to somewhere in the tall grassland.

“No, I don’t. What am I looking at?” I peered into the sea of golden grasses.

“See how there’s a line of broken stalks?” He pointed again, his head inclining.

“Oh! Yes, I do see!”

“That’s the tribe. They’ve passed through recently.”

“How do you know it’s not soldiers?”

“Because,” he said, tapping his temple, “I know.”

True to his word, an hour later, tendrils of smoke wisped into the air in the distance, and the comforting sight of teepees met my eyes.

“Hurry!” I told Marcellious. “You found it!”

Emily and Marcellious urged their horses to a canter.

I bounced along behind Marcellious.

When we entered the encampment, tribal people spilled from their dwellings and surrounded us.

“You’re back!” someone said in Sioux.

“We knew you’d return safely,” said another.

I glanced at Emily. “They’re acting kindly toward us. I wonder what happened while we were gone. They wanted us out of here.”

“I know. I don’t quite understand, but I’m happy,” Emily whispered.

Earth Bear stepped from the chief’s teepee and lifted his hand in greeting. “A-ho, friends!”

He helped Emily and me from the horses, then Marcellious dismounted.

“We are happy for your safe return,” Earth Bear said to Marcellious, warmly embracing him.

“As am I,” Marcellious said, returning the hug.

This Marcellious, this lovely warm guy, was far different from the Marcellious who had left the tribe with us. I glanced at Emily, but she stared straight ahead.

Something had happened between Marcellious and Emily while I was away with Roman. But now was not the time nor place to ask her about it. Roman was in danger, and I needed answers.

“Where is Swift Hawk?” Earth Bear asked.

“Roman is held captive. It’s a long story, and Olivia will have to explain it to you,” Emily said.

“The chief is waiting for you,” Earth Bear said to me. “Come.”

My weak legs shook as I followed him into the hide-covered dwelling.

The chief peered at me through his rheumy eyes inside the dimly-lit dwelling. “Olivia! You are unwell. You need to see a healer.”

“No, no. What I am is desperate!” I fell to my knees before him. “We haven’t much time, chief. Roman may already be dead.”

I clasped my hands before me.

Grey Feather frowned. “What has happened?”

“Roman’s been captured. We both were, but Balthazar let me go with the promise he’d keep Roman safe until I returned with my mother’s journal! I have no idea where it is, or where Roman is, or—”

The chief put up a gnarled hand and patted the air before him. “One thought at a time, please.”

“You lied to me!” I blurted. “You knew Fierce Wind was my mother. And you withheld information from me that could have saved us all! Now Roman may already be dead!”

I shook with emotion as the words tumbled from my throat. “We went on this journey to find answers, only I learned horrible, despicable things about my mother. I saw her doing disgusting acts with countless men. She was Balthazar’s lover, and she had another child beside me. She tried to kill me in her womb and poison me. I’m disgusted by her and no longer love her. I’m disowning her. She is nothing to me!”

The chief looked to Earth Bear, who stood behind me. “She is speaking too fast, and I can’t understand everything she is saying. Can you get her to slow down?”

“Olivia,” Earth Bear began, but I held up my hand to silence him.

“I get it. I get it! I’m to slow down in my speech. But I’m upset.” I exhaled a long breath and started again. “We all

returned to Emily's home and found her father's journal. He was in love with my mother, and she bore him a child. Emily is my sister! And my mother kept this journal that everyone wanted me to find. And then Balthazar arrived, and he took Roman and me to his demon's lair and tortured us. He broke Roman's ankle and released cockroaches on us and—"

The chief lifted his arm to shush me. He looked past me to Earth Bear and said something in Sioux.

Earth Bear repeated what I said in his native tongue.

Grey Feather nodded, then turned his attention back to me. "Please continue."

"I have met the darkest of the dark, Chief Grey Feather. I have met Balthazar. And now he's got Roman and is holding him captive. Balthazar assured me he would keep Roman safe, but I don't believe him. I don't trust a word he speaks. He is despicable, capable of treachery far worse than I can comprehend. And had you not lied to me, all of this might have been prevented, and Roman might be safe by my side." My hands shook with rage. "You've kept secrets from me, and now Balthazar is watching me. He kept my dagger and is using it to monitor my every move."

I leaned forward. "I implore you to tell me everything you know! You owe me this!"

Grey Feather let out a long, heavy sigh. "You're badly injured, Olivia, as well as ill. You need to heal. You need to rest."

"I *don't* need to rest! I need answers!"

"And I don't have them," Grey Feather said.

The words hung between us.

"What do you mean you don't have them?" I said, dumbfounded.

"I don't have the answers you are seeking."

"How can that be? Surely you must know *something!*"

“I’m sorry, child, I don’t. I don’t know where the journal is nor where the sun and moon daggers are. It’s up to you to find them. I’m sorry, but I can’t help you.” He paused before saying, “Forgive me for not telling you about your mother. I worried how you would feel when you heard the truth.”

My stomach churned with disgust and hatred at my mother. Despair rocked through me like an earthquake. Everywhere I turned, I hit obstacles. And now I would surely soon lose Roman, the love of my life.

“If I rest and heal, Roman will *die!*” Sobs wracked my lungs in huge, heaving waves. And then a stab of pain, sharper than a knife blade to the gut, sliced through me. I let out another cry like a wild animal whose leg had been caught in a trap and collapsed in agony.

Earth Bear hurried from the teepee.

“Come quickly,” he said outside.

He returned with Marcellious and Emily on his heels.

“Pick her up and take her to Leaping Deer’s teepee. She needs healing at once!” Earth Bear said.

Marcellious crouched, slid his arms beneath me, and stood. He shifted me in his arms until I felt steady and firmly held. Then, he hurried through the door flap and raced toward Leaping Deer’s dwelling.

Emily sprinted by his side.

I moaned in Marcellious’ arms, my entire body feeling on fire.

Emily whipped open Leaping Deer’s door. “Please! We need your help!”

Leaping Deer looked up from whatever task she was performing by her fire. She bolted to her feet and gestured to a pile of bison furs.

“Place her here,” she said in Sioux.

Marcellious did as indicated, then stepped back.

“I can’t be in here,” I wailed. “I’ll lose Roman. He’s my life! I can’t live without him, don’t you see?”

“Hunting Wolf, you go,” Leaping Deer said. “We’ll take it from here.”

Marcellious backed out of the teepee, his face pinched and drawn.

In the care of women, I fell unconscious, thankful to be far away from my tortured body.



A damp cloth dabbed at my cheeks and temple. I frowned, eyes closed, wondering where I was. Then, I heard Emily’s and Leaping Deer’s voices murmuring.

“She’s coming around,” Leaping Deer said, pressing the cloth to my eyes and forehead. “Can you hear me, child?”

“Yes,” I said, pushing up to sit. “What happened? All I remember is a huge pain and then collapsing here.”

“You are badly injured everywhere. Emily and I have tended your wounds, applying poultices and bathing you.” Leaping Deer frowned as she studied me.

I glanced at my body. I was no longer wearing the deerskin clothes. Instead, I lay naked, surrounded by furs. A pungent, acrid smell wafted from the poultices plastered upon my skin.

“Here. Drink this.” Emily held a stone carved into a basin up to my lips.

I tipped back my head, and Emily slowly poured fresh water into my mouth.

It tasted divine, like liquid gold. I drank until the basin was empty.

Emily dipped the stone into a large basket and refilled it.

Then, I drank again.

“Thank you, Leaping Deer,” I said. “Thank you for tending to my wounds. But I admit to being surprised. When we left, you were all frightened of us.”

Leaping Deer bowed her head. “Our chief explained that the darkness could have come at any time, whether you and your friends were here or not. Dancing Fire had his own demon to contend with, but he was...he *is* a much-beloved part of our family. We accept his demons, and we must accept yours. It is our collective fate as a tribe, and rather than cast you aside, Grey Feather urged us to embrace you should you return. You may be the one to vanish the evil ones and keep our tribe safe.”

I reached for her hand, and she gave me a warm squeeze.

“It is unfortunate that Laughing Maid was killed. She was my daughter.”

“Oh, no!” A fresh wave of tears assaulted my eyes. “I am so, so sorry, Leaping Deer! I never would have come here had I known the darkness would follow me.”

“Shh,” Leaping Deer said. “What’s done is done. We have sent Laughing Maid’s spirit to the sky where she shall continue to watch over me.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“Now I am compelled to heal,” I said fiercely. “I must focus on healing so I can fight once again.”

Leaping Deer and Emily exchanged a glance.

“What?” I said. “What are you not telling me?”

Emily scooted closer and clasped my hands in hers. “Oh, Olivia. We’re afraid you mustn’t fight for a time.”

My spine stiffened. “What do you mean I mustn’t fight for a time. Why not?”

Again, Emily and Leaping Deer side-eyed one another.

“Tell me! I don’t like secrets! Secrets led to me getting so badly injured,” I said, waving my hand around my torso and head.

“You’re pregnant, dear,” Leaping Deer said, her mouth forming a gentle smile.

I sat as stunned as if she’d picked up a rock and slammed it into my forehead. “I... I’m what?”

“You’re with child, Olivia!” Emily gushed. “Isn’t it exciting?”

“How far along do you think I am?” I asked Leaping Deer.

“About three months,” she said.

“Isn’t this wonderful?” Emily said, clearly more enthusiastic than I was.

In all these months, I hadn’t thought twice about missing my period, figuring the hardship of the journey had had its way with my body.

No, this was not welcome news. I was in danger—we all were—until we could find a means of destroying Balthazar. But mostly, my heart howled for Roman. Where could he be? How could I possibly find him? Was he even alive?

While Emily tittered and exclaimed her excitement, I fell hard into a pit of despair.

New life grows in my belly, yet I am in danger, possessing the worst luck of anyone I know.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Olivia

I sat in Leaping Deer's teepee, covered with poultices to heal my many wounds. But nothing could touch the stun I experienced at learning I was pregnant. *Me*. I always anticipated being a mother someday, but my circumstances were too dangerous to even entertain bringing a child into this world.

All my female notions of preventing an unwanted pregnancy had slipped my mind. I was consumed with getting used to the different periods I found myself in. Now, I didn't have a choice unless I adopted the practice of beating my stomach with a rock like my mother had. But I would never do something like that. I could never be my mother and kill my child. Roman would be a fantastic father, but the danger around me was too dire.

What was I going to do? I could barely process the fact that I was pregnant. How could I raise a healthy baby if I didn't know where the father was and I was hunted by a demon?

Balthazar wouldn't even have to blink before taking my child and killing him or her.

I rested my palms on the bison fur beneath me, trying without success to come to terms with the news Leaping Deer had given me.

"You don't look excited," Emily said, her forehead creased into a frown.

“I love children. I’ve always wanted my own child, but I’m not excited. You know the dangers we’re faced with. A demon is stalking us, and he has the baby’s father somewhere I don’t know.” I glanced down at my hard baby bump feeling somewhat betrayed.

“Olivia! Don’t you see? This beautiful child was born from the passion you share with Roman! The child is meant to be. Your and Roman’s love will find a way to conquer all!” Emily’s eyes glistened as she spoke.

“You’re such an optimist, Emily. I wish I shared your enthusiasm.” I let out a deep sigh and stroked my belly.

Emily caressed my cheek, pushing away a few errant strands. “I know you’re worried about Roman, but he’s strong, Olivia! Marcellious and I were talking one night while you slept....”

“You and Marcellious spoke at night?” I said, interrupting her. “Did you do that often?”

Emily blushed and looked away. “Marcellious can be kind. He’s endured so much in this life, and I’m trying to help him be a better man. It’s been a long journey, and we’ve gotten to know one another. I told you that.” She met my gaze. “It’s only conversation. It helps fill the time.”

A radiance glowed in her face as she spoke, but I tried not to read too much into it.

“And what did you and Marcellious discuss that had to do with Roman?” I asked.

“I’ve been worried, too, Olivia. Marcellious assured me that Roman is a fighter. He’s endured far worse and survived, so there’s no reason he won’t survive whatever ordeal he’s facing. Besides...” Her expression brightened. “Didn’t you tell me that Balthazar promised to keep Roman safe? He has a vested interest in protecting Roman. He wants that journal as much as you.”

“Yes, but here’s the thing—Balthazar is a monster. He’ll do anything to get what he wants. Lies slip from his tongue like honey dripping from a spoon. He lies. He manipulates.

And I was desperate enough to cling to the belief that he might take a measure of care with Roman.” I shook my head. “But since we’ve been away from one another, I can no longer feel Roman at night. I can’t sense him anywhere. I could always feel his love when we were separated, even when I thought he was dead. I realize now that my fear blocked what I knew—that Roman was alive. Now I feel nothing. It’s as if he’s gone to another place. That’s what scares me, Em. What if he’s dead?”

Hot tears pricked the back of my eyes.

“I know you’re worried, Olivia,” Emily said, looking at me intently. “We’ll find Roman. I know we will. And if it takes us a long time to find him, I will help you care for the child. We’ll raise the child together. You have my word.”

Her blue eyes sparkled with sincerity.

I paused in my woeful tirade and regarded her with warmth. “Thank you, Emily. You’re the best sister a woman could have.”

I glanced away from her and met Leaping Deer’s gaze.

She studied me with a motherly concern. “If you don’t want the child, I could prepare a black root and cedar tincture. Sometimes, one of our tribeswomen gets pregnant without intending to....”

“No! I couldn’t do that. It’s just that it’s not the right time to bring new life into my world. There are many things I have to deal with, including the darkness that took your daughter’s life.”

“I understand,” Leaping Deer said, her eyes moist. “Then you must hold onto faith that all will be well. Your child chose *you* for a mother. Honor your role.”

The weight of her words struck me hard, and I took them in. I would be a mother and wanted nothing more than to protect my child from evil. I knew I would be a far better mother than my own.

“Everything will be all right, Olivia,” Emily said, smiling. “You’ll see. True love will conquer all obstacles.”

“Perhaps so—but can it conquer a demon?”



After I had another rest, Earth Bear came to the teepee and called through the door flap. “Little Moon, Grey Feather would like to speak with you again.”

I roused from my drowse and looked at Emily, who lay near me.

Leaping Deer was nowhere to be seen.

“All right, I’m coming,” I called out. I found my deerskin attire and donned it. Then, I said to Emily, “I’ll be back.”

“And I’ll be here,” she said gently.

I lifted the door flap and exited, following Earth Bear as he lumbered toward his father’s place.

Around the encampment, several children played games with sticks and a small ball made from leather. Women tended to food preparation, while men sat in a circle fashioning what looked like bows and arrows.

Inside the chief’s teepee, I bowed my head. “I apologize for my earlier behavior, Grey Feather. We had been traveling for many days, and I was quite injured. Leaping Deer has taken great care to help me heal.”

Grey Feather slowly nodded, stirring the small fire before him. It seemed he always had a fire in here, no matter the weather outside. “I understand. I was most concerned about your apparent sickness, but you seem better.”

“Much. Again, I apologize. I have hit so many dead ends I’ve grown frustrated. But I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.” I hung my head.

The chief and I sat in silence.

Finally, I said, “As I mentioned, we did find Emily’s father’s journal and learned a bit about Fierce Wind. One of

the things mentioned many times in the journal was a man called John James.”

I eyed Grey Feather for signs of recognition. Maybe he knew who this mysterious John James was or where to find him.

Grey Feather tipped his head to the side and rubbed the few white hairs on his jaw.

When he said nothing, I prompted him. “Do you know who John James might be?”

“I don’t believe I do. But the reason I called you back here is this. I put my mind to thinking and recollected what may be a good memory. My mind is not as keen as it once was. Age has taken a toll on me.”

I sat forward, eager to hear what he had to say.

“When Fierce Wind arrived here, she was frantic. She told us on many occasions that her life was in peril. While she stayed with us, we gave her a teepee. When she departed, my wife, Aiyana, cleaned her dwelling. She found several sheets of crumpled paper with her handwriting on it.”

“You did?” Adrenaline shot through my limbs.

The chief nodded. “I couldn’t read it, though. It was written in an unfamiliar language.”

“What did you do with it? Did you discard it?” A surge of annoyance rocked through me. Why hadn’t he told me this? Those papers could be the journal I was looking for.

“Of course not. I put it somewhere safe in case it was needed at some point. As I mentioned, Fierce Wind arrived distressed at the danger she felt she was in. I thought perhaps someone could interpret the writing at some point.”

“You should have told me!” I ran a hand through my hair and tugged on a few thick strands.

“There is more to life than your concerns,” Grey Feather said sharply.

I sucked in a breath as if slapped.

“I am responsible for the welfare of the entire tribe,” he said. “We are also in danger. That’s why we left the previous encampment. It’s why we leave every encampment so swiftly. Just as you are hunted, so are we.”

His expression had become stern and imposing, like it had been carved in stone.

“Who is hunting you?” I asked, my chest hollowing out as I bowed my head.

“The Kiowa,” Grey Feather said in a thunderous tone. He shook his fisted hand. “They want our blood! They want to destroy our tribe!”

“But why? What did you do?”

“For a long time, our tribe has tried to make peace with them. Yet, for generations, we have failed. They always hunt us, try to take our bison, and kill our people. Long ago, Hunting Wolf killed one of their own. They want vengeance and won’t stop until more blood is shed.”

The impact of his words left me reeling. I drew my knees up to my chest.

“I am an old man, Little Moon.” His face fell as if all the skin was melting. “When the Great Spirit takes me, I want to leave knowing my tribe is safe. Now it is not safe. No one is secure. We could all be killed in the middle of the night, slaughtered in our sleep. The Kiowa are a savage tribe, and they will stop at nothing. Do you think I have time to recall a letter left here years ago that might contain nothing but the romantic musings of a young woman?”

I grew silent, unsure of what to say. I had selfishly thought of my comrades and my safety all this time. It’d never dawned on me that those around me had their own troubles.

“I understand you are worried about Swift Hawk, Little Moon,” the chief said. “But I have to protect my tribe. That is the thing that occupies my thoughts day and night.”

A look of discontent settled across Grey Feather’s wrinkled face like an impending storm. “The Kiowa want to kill Hunting Wolf and destroy the entire tribe, and I won’t

stand for it. Especially if they harm other tribal members to make their point or to threaten us.”

I wished he wouldn't keep driving home his point. I felt terrible, and each word out of his mouth hammered another nail in my conscience.

“Forgive me, Grey Feather,” I said barely audibly. “I apologize for only thinking of myself and my own concerns.”

The chief grunted, but his expression remained sour.

I bit my lips and considered my subsequent request. Based on his appearance, Grey Feather might not be in the best mood to grant favors. “Might I at least view the letter? Do you know where it is?”

“Of course, I know where it is,” he said with an angry swipe of his hand. “Earth Bear! I need your help,” he hollered in Sioux.

“Yes, Father,” Earth Bear said outside the teepee.

“Can you please fetch your mother? I think she's visiting with Red Bird,” Grey Feather said.

“Yes, Father. Right away.” The sound of retreating footsteps followed.

I sat in uneasy silence, waiting for Earth Bear and his mother to return.

The chief sat stone-faced, staring into the small fire before him.

After a lengthy, awkward time, footsteps approached.

Earth Bear held open the door flap, and a short, beautiful woman with long white hair stepped inside. She walked with grace and strength, belying her years.

“What do you need, Grey Feather?” she asked, her voice infused with decades of familiarity with the man across from me.

He quickly answered in Sioux. “Get the box where I stored that letter of Fierce Wind.”

Aiyana's forehead creased. "And where might I find that box?"

"I don't know," he said, fluttering his hand before his face. "I gave it to you to keep. Where did you put it?"

Her head cocked to the side while I sat there, heart racing.

What if she discarded it or can't remember where she put it?

"Ah!" She lifted a finger in the air. "I know where it is. I gave it to Red Bird."

"Why on earth would you give it to Red Bird to keep?" Grey Feather asked, eyes wide beneath the folds of his skin.

"Because she keeps things. You know that," Aiyana said.

"Well, go get it then," Grey Feather said.

"Not when you ask me like that." She placed her hands on her hips.

I almost smiled. Had I not been so keen to view the letter's contents, I probably would have chuckled over this domestic squabble.

Grey Feather met her dark gaze. "Please retrieve the box, wife. Our friend Little Moon wants to see if she can make sense of Fierce Wind's letter."

"Of course." Aiyana stepped closer to Grey Feather, leaned over, and kissed the top of his head.

"He can get cranky at times," she said to me. "But he merely barks like a dog before he licks your face."

She laughed as the chief scowled.

I smiled at her kindness.

Aiyana retreated from the teepee.

The silence between the chief and me wasn't nearly as uncomfortable this time.

When Aiyana returned, she produced faded parchment paper, folded it in thirds, and tied it with a piece of leather.

“You can view this in private,” Grey Feather said, waving his hand, indicating I should leave.

I glanced at him, wondering if I should apologize again. But his wife was already fluttering around him like a mother hen, tending to his needs.

I rose and quietly departed.

I wandered away from the encampment, eager to read my mother’s words with no onlookers. I hoped nothing in her letters was as revealing and awful as what I’d witnessed in Balthazar’s lair. If my mother wrote of her sexual conquests, I would personally burn the letters.

I went beneath a tree, wanting to escape the hot, late-day sun, which shone directly in my eyes. Carefully, I unfolded the brittle parchment. Leaning against the rough bark, I recognized the writing as Italian. I began to read in a whispery voice, interpreting her musings aloud.

“My beloved Philip, I deeply apologize for abandoning you and leaving you with our child. I love you with all my heart, Philip. You must believe me! I left, however, because I had to. Staying would put both you and Emily in extreme danger. I couldn’t do that to either of you.”

I looked up from the writing, feeling a stab of jealous anger.

“At least my mom loved one of us,” I muttered. A sour taste filled my mouth before continuing to read.

“I found John James.”

I sat up straight. “Wow! She what? She found the mysterious John James?”

I kept on reading silently.

John gave me instructions on how to destroy Balthazar. I must find him and kill him. I have no other choice. As long as Balthazar lives, we are all in danger. He is a wicked, wicked man. You have to believe me. At times you have found me crazy, but there are things in this world you do not understand!

Please, Philip, do not look for me. I know you will try. And you will wonder and will not understand why I left you. I simply had to, my love. The thought of putting you and our dear, sweet Emily in the way of a madman breaks my heart.

Another surge of jealousy ripped through my heart, but I quashed it. I desperately wanted to read that she loved *me*, too. I tried to erase the image of my mother trying to kill me while I fought through the birth canal and replace it with a loving statement.

But I guess you can't always get what you want, right?

I flipped to the next page.

My darling Philip, I will find you again, I promise. My deepest desire is to be with you and raise our child together. But first, I must kill Balthazar.

I looked up from her flowing writing, torn. In this letter, it seemed my mother had a kind and caring heart, and all she wanted to do was protect those she loved.

Could she have truly loved me? Were Balthazar's words all lies?

I carefully folded the letter and re-tied it with the leather strand. This letter had only accomplished one thing: to awaken the grief I felt, wondering if Mom loved me. Indeed, she was *capable* of love.

Maybe just not with me....

I thought about Emily's necklace, the tiny dagger that matched my real one. I needed to ask Grey Feather if he knew what it meant, but I was hesitant to face him again. He'd clearly been angry when I left him.

Perhaps his wife had eased his sour disposition?

I made my way back to the teepee.

Earth Bear continued to stand guard as if that were his job.

"Do you think he will speak to me again?" I asked him.

"Of course," he said, smiling. "It is like my mother said. He barks in anger, but he's soft inside. Here..."

He lifted the door flap and gestured for me to enter.

Aiyana was gone, and the chief's eyes were closed.

He blinked when I sat before him.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I have one more question."

"What is it?" he said gruffly.

"When Emily was born, a necklace appeared around her neck with a charm shaped like a dagger. It is similar to the one I carry."

The chief frowned.

"Do you, perhaps, know what it is?"

"No," he said with a shake of his head. "I have never seen this charm. Alina did tell us she had a child, though, and she mentioned being unable to defeat Balthazar."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"It wasn't relevant."

"It would have been to me."

"The most important thing you can do now is to find the sun and the moon daggers. Do you understand me? Forget the journal. It is perhaps long gone." Grey Feather picked up the stick he used to stir the fire and shook it.

"I don't know how much time I have," I said. "Swift Hawk might already be dead."

Grey Feather waved away my concerns and focused his gaze on me. "You must believe in yourself. You will find your way. Now I must rest."

"Of course," I said, rising. "Thank you for seeing me again."

The chief had already closed his eyes.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, I headed for Leaping Deer's teepee.

I met Emily as she stepped out of the dwelling.

“We are to sleep in this teepee,” she said, pointing to one several yards ahead. “A woman named Red Bird has already prepared it for us.”

I nodded and followed her.

Inside our lodge, I flopped on a bison fur, and Emily did the same, facing me.

I could barely see her in the dim light filtering through the hole atop the teepee. I shared everything I’d learned today with Emily, grateful to be able to confide in her. I was glad she was my sister, even though our mother loved her more. I truly understood Marcellious and Roman’s problems with their mother and how they had been separated at birth. I felt empathy for Marcellious’ pain and his feelings toward his mother. Maybe I was missing information about my own mother?

Only time would tell.

When I’d finished, I said, “What should I do? Maybe we should find this John James character.”

“No, no,” Emily said, wiping the air before her. “That’s surely a dead end. If my father couldn’t find him, we won’t either. Besides, he could have already passed away.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said, folding my arms behind my head.

Loud footsteps pounded the ground outside, heading in our direction.

“Olivia!” Marcellious shouted. “Come quickly!”

Given my numerous injuries, I leaped to my feet as best I could. “What is it?”

“It’s Roman! He’s here!”

Without another thought, I raced from the teepee and followed Marcellious. A faint sliver of light still hung on the horizon.

Ahead stood a horse with a man slumped over its neck.

“Roman!” I cried out. “Oh, my God! Roman!”

I sprinted toward him.

Marcellious helped me lift him from the horse.

Roman was barely conscious, but he was alive.

“Bring him to my teepee. Emily and I will tend to him,” I ordered Marcellious. “I wonder where he came from. How did he escape Balthazar?”

I hurried next to Marcellious, who carried Roman over his shoulder.

“Let’s just be glad he’s here,” Marcellious said with a grunt.

I pivoted in a three-sixty, searching for a clue.

A figure stood beneath the same tree I’d sat under earlier.

A chill launched up my spine.

The figure met my gaze. His eyes shone emerald green, and he wore all black, from his boots to his pants and shirt. Something about him was strangely familiar to me—so much so that I wanted to run to him.

He nodded at me.

Before I could call out and ask him his name, he whirled and faded from sight. His disappearing act was like Balthazar would do, vanishing from sight as if he were never there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Olivia

Night fell hard, bringing with it a sharp wind. The gusts blew through my bones as I hurried after Marcellious, who carried my lover as if he were a child.

Broken, beat up, barely clinging to life, Roman had found us here, with the tribe. I could hardly believe it. But I was also frightened. No way could Roman have escaped Balthazar—he was too severely damaged.

I glanced at the tree where the man with emerald eyes, clad entirely in black, had been staring at me. He had disappeared, faded out of sight like a thundercloud blown by a tornado. Who was he? Had he rescued Roman?

If this mysterious man had been responsible for Roman's escape, then Balthazar would have been enraged. He would be relentless in his pursuit of us.

My stomach twisted into a hard knot as I hustled behind Marcellious. This kind of stress couldn't be good for our unborn child.

A female voice called out. "Hunting Wolf! Bring Swift Hawk into my teepee!"

Gratitude filled my heart. If anyone could heal Roman's ravaged body, it would be Leaping Deer.

Once Roman settled in the teepee, Leaping Deer jumped into action.

“Marcellious, you stay here—we will need your strength. Emily, bring water from the creek. Olivia, you will be Swift Hawk’s support.”

I translated for Emily, and she scurried from the dwelling.

Leaping Deer procured a deadly-looking knife and sliced Roman’s clothes from his body. She peeled them back until he lay on the furs, naked save for the dagger strapped to his thigh, covered in wounds from nasty-looking burns to angry gashes to his swollen ankle.

Leaping Deer gently palpated his broken bones. “We will have to set this for it to heal properly. This will hurt Swift Hawk even in his unconsciousness. Marcellious, position yourself at his foot and wait for my instruction.”

Marcellious did as commanded and waited while Leaping Deer inspected Roman’s body.

“Little Moon, see those baskets over there?” She pointed to the edge of the teepee.

“Yes,” I replied, reaching for my rudimentary command of the Sioux language.

“Go get the red one and the orange one.”

I did as she requested, returning with the delicate weavings with lids.

“I have healing salves in those two baskets. Once the leg is set, you will apply salve to his many wounds,” Leaping Deer said.

“Understood,” I said.

“Now, Hunting Wolf, you are to straighten these bones.” Leaping Deer pointed to Roman’s mangled foot. “The bones will have begun to knit together, so you must act swiftly and brutally. Do what I tell you, even if Roman cries out.”

Even in the soft glow of firelight, Marcellious’ face visibly paled. “All right.”

“Olivia, you take his hand. He might bear down on you, but let him do what he must.”

“Okay,” I said, lifting his hand and clasping it with mine.

“On my word, Hunting Wolf, make the right foot match the left. See how this one is angled inwardly?”

Marcellious nodded.

“It must align like the other one in a straight line. Here...” Leaping Deer looked at me. “Little Moon, retrieve one of those arrows for me.”

I turned my attention to where she pointed and fetched the arrow.

Leaping Deer held it next to Roman’s broken ankle and said, “When you are done, the lines of the bones will match the line of this weapon. Ready?”

A look of fierce determination crossed Marcellious’ face. He gave a single nod with his mouth set in a firm line. Then, he grasped Roman’s foot and ankle with his hands.

Roman let out a moan.

Marcellious sucked in a quick sharp breath. “Let’s get this done.”

“All right, Hunting Wolf. On three. One. Two. Three.”

I held my breath as Marcellious jerked the bones into place with a loud crack.

Roman let out an ear-splitting cry that shattered my heart. He squeezed my hand so hard I thought my bones would be crushed.

But, when Marcellious finally released the leg, it matched the arrow’s line.

Roman became quiet, sinking deep into whatever tortured state of mind he roamed.

Marcellious fell back on his ass, his hands landing on the hide-covered ground.

I applied the salve to Roman’s injuries.

Then, all we could do was wait for him to heal.

I remained in Leaping Deer's teepee for three days and three nights, staying close to Roman. He moaned and writhed, wrestling with his own demons, but he stayed unconscious the entire time.

I continued to dab healing salve upon his wounds as instructed by Leaping Deer. The tribe brought me food, but I ate little. My sole focus was on Roman. No way would I leave his side.

Emily and Marcellious came and went, checking on Roman and me, ensuring I'd been fed, and offering care. Leaping Deer monitored Roman's well-being, but she slept with Red Bird since neither had a husband. Leaping Deer's mate had died of a hunting accident, and Red Bird's husband had been killed after falling from his horse a few years ago.

I was grateful for her kindness and worried to death about Roman. *What if he never comes to?*

I awoke from a hard sleep on the fourth morning and checked on Roman. The swelling in his ankle had reduced significantly since Marcellious had wrenched the bones in place. Although his gashes and burns were healing, he had not regained consciousness.

My heart grew heavy with despair.

Leaping Deer entered the teepee, carrying a basket of jerky. "Little Moon, you must eat."

"I'm not hungry," I said, despite my stomach growling.

"It doesn't matter," she said, her expression serious. "You must eat. I don't wish to care for you both. Eat."

She thrust the jerky toward me, and I took it.

I selected a piece and began to chew on it.

Leaping Deer said, "Grey Feather is on his way to speak with you."

“Oh!” I said, somewhat alarmed. “Is anything the matter?”

“Not that I know of—he simply asked to speak with you.” She lifted the bison hide covering Roman and inspected his wounds. “He looks better. I’m pleased.”

Grey Feather lumbered into the dwelling, carrying a staff to steady his steps. “Little Moon, how is Swift Hawk?”

“You can see for yourself. His wounds are healing, but he is not waking. I’m worried he won’t recover,” I said.

The chief leaned heavily on his sturdy carved stick. He studied Roman for a long time while I eagerly held my breath.

“Swift Hawk will survive, Little Moon. He is strong and will come out of it. Don’t worry about his body—his soul is shaken.”

I pressed my hand to my mouth. “What can I do to help him heal?”

Leaping Deer rose and made her way next to the chief. “You must speak to him. Even in his unconsciousness, he can hear you. Tell him everything—your concerns, your fears, and your love. Share from your soul, and you will reach his.”

My attention focused on Roman’s face, which appeared gaunt. His skin clung to his bones, making him look skeletal, haunted. Yet, looking at him with soft, loving eyes, I could see his essence, honor, and fortitude shine through in the set of his jaw, even in repose. Roman was a warrior through and through. He would make it. But could I reach his spirit? What had happened that made Grey Feather say Roman’s soul was shaken?

“All right,” I said to Grey Feather and Leaping Deer without looking up. “I’ll do it.”

I gripped Roman’s hand as Leaping Deer and Grey Feather slipped from the teepee.

Then, I gathered my thoughts, tugging them free from the fearful abyss I’d been in these last few days.

“How were you saved, my love?” I used my thumb to stroke the skin on the top of his hand. “Who was that man who

stared at me from the shadows? Did he help you escape?”

Roman’s breath stayed steady and even.

“I’m afraid we’re in more danger than before. Balthazar will surely be enraged to find you missing. And I have not discovered the journal. If he finds us, I have nothing to show him.” I ran my fingertips up his arm.

“And this news will come as a surprise as it did to me. You’re going to be a father.”

I squinted.

Did he just sigh, or was it my imagination?

“I’m worried that Balthazar will come after the child and us. I love knowing there’s life inside me that we both created through our passion. But I’m also hesitant to keep this child, knowing how unstable our lives are and how mortal life is for us now. We have nothing to call our own but each other—no home, no place to raise a child. I want to raise our children in a real home somewhere.”

A lone, wistful tear tracked down my cheek and landed with a soft plop on my deerskin-covered thigh.

“Will you even be the same man when you wake up? Grey Feather said your soul is shaken. What happened, my love? What despicable things did Balthazar do to you and say to you?” I let out a long sigh. “I’m so glad you’re here with me. I promise to do everything I can to care for you until you’re strong again, side by side with me.”

I stretched out my cramped legs. “We need a plan. We found her father’s journal when Emily and I were at her home in Weston Hills. After reading it, we discovered that my mother had a relationship with Emily’s father, and Emily is my half-sister. They had been searching for a man named John James.”

I lapsed into silence, my heart pulsing with love for my fallen warrior, lover, and life.

Several beats passed, one stretching into the next, but I felt deeply connected to Roman as I sat caressing his skin.

Our silent respite was broken by Marcellious, who lifted the door flap and softly said, “May I enter?”

“Of course,” I said, blinking at the intrusion of light streaming in.

Marcellious slipped inside and closed the door, enveloping us in the faint light.

“How’s he doing?” Marcellious said, sinking into a cross-legged position on Roman’s other side.

“I don’t know. I don’t know how he’s doing. Grey Feather and Leaping Deer seem certain of his recovery,” I said, meeting Marcellious’ eyes.

“They said as much to me, as well. They also encouraged me to share with him—to unburden my soul to him, even though he is not awake.” Marcellious’ gaze dropped toward Roman. “So, I should like to do that when you’re ready.”

“I just did the same.”

“Did it help?” he said.

“I don’t know the answer to that, either, at least not as far as helping Roman. But it seemed to bring peace to my heart, so...” I shrugged. “I need to go relieve myself, anyway. I’ll go do that, and you can share.”

“I don’t need for you to be gone,” Marcellious interjected. “If you need to be by his side, please stay.”

Who is this new, courteous Marcellious, anyway?

I smiled at him. “Go ahead and say your piece. I’ll be back.”

After relieving my bladder in the woods and sipping water from the nearby stream, I padded back to the teepee. I hesitated before entering, hearing Marcellious’ heartfelt words.

“Roman, forgive me for everything I did to you in Rome. Seeing you this way, brother...seeing you lay broken by the hands of our shared enemy has awakened something inside of me,” Marcellious said in a hoarse voice. “Forgive me for

forcing you to kill your best friend, Marcus, in a fight to the death. Forgive me for forcing you into a life of servitude to Severus. And I'm terribly sorry for capturing Olivia and holding her prisoner. I'm deeply ashamed of my actions."

I paused, not wanting to break the mood of confession inside the teepee. I couldn't believe what Marcellious was saying—I never in a million years thought I'd hear words of regret coming out of his mouth.

"I tried many times to kill you. I was always at war with you, yet you saved me several times. You saved my life just as I was trying to end yours. I'm a wretched, wretched man." His voice cracked. "I was angry when you arrived in Rome and bested me in championships. I wanted all the glory for myself. It was mine! I didn't want to share my success with anyone. I wanted to reign supreme, and you took it away from me. You took everything I had worked for. You became my ultimate rival. I only wanted what you took from me. I am ashamed of my actions."

Was Marcellious crying?

"You are an honorable man, Roman. I hold great respect for you. I always knew that you were a better man than me. All I wanted out of life were what most men long for—a good wife, a family, and a place to call home. I ended up with nothing. I became a terrible man who lusted for power." Marcellious sobbed. "You are the kindest, strongest man I have ever met. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me and accept me as your brother. I hope we can make things work between us. I promise I will be a better man."

I crouched next to the teepee. *Should I enter now? Stay out here? What should I do?*

Marcellious said nothing further. When his sobs subsided, I pulled back the door flap. I entered, hoping to appear as if I'd just arrived and hadn't overheard his private confessions.

Marcellious' eyes appeared puffy, yet a new softness radiated from his expression.

“How did it go?” I said, settling next to Roman. “Feel better?”

“I’m not sure,” he croaked.

Roman seized Marcellious’ hand. We both gasped.

“I forgive you, brother,” Roman said, his rasping voice sounding like he had emerged from the bottom of a deep well. “I am honored to have you as my brother. As long as we are alive, we shall always be warriors, side by side.”

His eyelids fluttered open, landing on Marcellious, who had resumed crying.

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness,” Marcellious blubbered. “But thank you.”

“Everyone deserves to be forgiven and given a chance to start over,” Roman whispered.

“I need to be alone to gather myself,” Marcellious said. “Thank you for your kind heart, brother. Thank you for forgiving me.”

Roman squeezed Marcellious’ hand. “You’re welcome.”

After Marcellious exited, Roman turned his head toward me with apparent effort. He took my hand in his, and his eyelids fell closed.

Weeping silently, I clasped my hands around his.

Without opening his eyes, Roman said, “I heard everything you said, my darling. It seemed to be whispered to me from a distance, but I heard it all.”

“Oh, Roman,” I gasped. “You’ve returned to me. I was so scared I’d lost you.”

His eyelids slowly opened, and I met his intense gaze. “Never, Olivia. You will never lose me. I’ve told you before, and I’ll repeat it—I vow to always return to you, even if death has claimed one of us. But this time, I survived death.”

I lowered my head and kissed his parched lips, moving gently as his lips felt tender and ravaged. The kiss was a homecoming, a welcoming of one another.

I was met by glistening adoration radiating from his blue eyes when I withdrew. “I can breathe again now that you’ve returned to me. I held a vigil for you for days.”

“Did you find the journal?”

I shook my head.

“We’ll find it together,” he said, caressing my hand with his thumb.

“I’m more afraid of Balthazar than ever before,” I admitted. “He’s not going to be happy you’re gone. How on earth did you escape? I saw a man after you arrived. He stared at me, but he didn’t seem malevolent.”

I held back the part about how it seemed like I knew that man.

“I’m as mystified as you are,” Roman said. He turned to lie on his side.

I lowered myself to lie facing him.

“I was fraught with fever and delusions, so I thought I imagined him. Balthazar lied to you about caring for me and keeping me alive. Those were clearly not his intentions. He only wanted to make me suffer and then kill me.”

I shuddered. “Of course. I figured as much, but I had to risk it. You have to know that. I would never have left you to Balthazar’s mercy had I known he would torture you.”

More tears leaked from my eyes.

Roman brushed my hair back with his palm. “You had no choice. We both knew that. It was stay and risk both of us being killed or entranced by him, or take a chance and believe him. I don’t blame you one bit. I would have done the same thing. I would have loathed each second we were apart, but I would have left you.”

“Oh, God, how I ached for you. I couldn’t find you in my heart. I worried that he’d killed you.” I clutched Roman’s hand to my cheek.

“Shh, sweetheart. I’m here. And Balthazar has no way to find us. He left the dagger on the floor of my prison cell. The man who rescued me brought it with us.” The sweetest smile crossed his lips. He lowered his hand to caress my belly. “So, we are to have a baby, Olivia. I’m overjoyed. I will do everything to protect the child. It is such a gift. We will protect it. It is our duty.”

His eyes glistened as he spoke.

I kissed his palm, overcome with emotion.

“And, we must get married immediately,” he said.

When I opened my mouth to protest, he cut me off.

“I’m not marrying you because you’re with a child. I simply must marry you. I realized how precious you are to me in that pit of a hellhole I was in. I can’t live another moment without knowing we will be wed at once. There will always be problems to face. I want to face them together as lawfully wedded husband and wife.”

His gaze was so intense I could feel my soul stirring.

I didn’t know how I would have reacted in my twenty-first-century reality. Still, at this moment, in this century, I was in a state of one-hundred-percent agreement. “Yes, Roman! Let’s do it!”

We simply smiled at one another like two goofy lovesick teenagers.

Then, shadows fell across his face.

“What is it?” I said, my stomach tying itself into knots of alarm.

“It’s nothing,” he said, withdrawing from me.

“Don’t say it’s nothing. I can feel you drawing into yourself. It’s what you experienced with Balthazar, isn’t it?” My stomach clenched around my certainty.

Roman glanced away from me, letting me know I was right.

“Tell me, Roman. Tell me what he did to you. You said you want to marry me, so we can share our trials, tribulations, and joys. Please share with me.” I ran my palm over his forehead and down his cheek.

His jaw set into a firm, unyielding block of stone.

I waited for him to speak.

He rolled onto his back, and it felt like he was moving miles away from me.

I placed my hand on his arm for comfort and connection.

Finally, his gaze fixed on the hole in the center of the teepee, he spoke in a vacant-sounding voice as if he were back in that horrible dungeon. “I was in the bowels of hell—a windowless, lightless place. I never knew whether it was day or night. And I was sick...so sick, burning with fever. At times I saw monsters creeping around my prone form. I still can’t say if they were real or imagined. They seemed so alive.”

I stayed very still, allowing him space to share.

“I had to fight with the rats for the meager offerings tossed into the chamber as if I were a dog. Sometimes I won. Sometimes the rats won.”

My breath came in ragged bursts as I struggled to contain my tears.

“And when I was the victor, it was often not worth the energy I’d just exerted. The bread tossed to me was often mildewed and unfit for consumption. I willingly shared with the rats when I got bread like that, hoping it would kill them.

“And Balthazar...” Roman’s voice sounded like pebbles falling over a pool of terror. “He would enter and torture me... slice me with knives or stomp on my broken ankle. I’m still not certain if I’ll ever walk again.”

“Marcellious set it for you with Leaping Deer’s guidance,” I said.

Roman frowned. “I experienced excruciating pain. I thought I was having another nightmare. But now I sense it’s healing.”

“It was an awful moment,” I said. “One we all shared—you, me, Marcellious, even Leaping Deer.”

Roman’s frown deepened, and he rolled to his side. His face was covered with shadows as he regarded me with his haunted gaze.

“My father,” he said, barely getting the words out. He cleared his throat and began again. “My father was Balthazar’s friend. For so long, I’ve wanted to know who he is, picturing him as a noble, proud man. Then, to find out he was friends with that *demon*.”

He curled his lip into a sneer.

“What do you mean? Balthazar doesn’t have friends.”

Realization dawned like a festering splinter.

“Unless...” I pressed my palm to my mouth. When I removed it, I said, “Oh, no. Your father...was he...is he a demon of the dark?”

“Yes,” Roman said in a strangled tone. “And Balthazar... He told me... He told me Marcellious possesses most of the darkness. That is why he is the way he is.”

“No, baby, it’s all lies. You know it is! That’s what you told me when Balthazar showed me stories of my mother.” I blinked away fresh tears.

“Yet do you believe what he showed you?”

“Yes,” I managed to choke out. “Yes, I believe what I saw.”

Roman’s gaze grew somber. “So do I. I believe what he told me. He said my father betrayed him, and Balthazar would kill him when he found him again. But my father... he insisted that Balthazar spare my mother.”

Roman’s nostrils flared. “Please don’t tell Marcellious any of this. It will influence him if he knows our father was a demon. Perhaps his actions today—his confession—will be the beacon of good that keeps him on the righteous path.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I hope that’s true.”

“And when my health is restored, my beloved...in one week, maybe two...you and I shall be wed. Promise me this. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe. I don't want you to carry the world's weight in your heart.”

“I don't want that for you, either.” I raised his hand to my lips and kissed each fingertip. “We will share the load. Don't you remember what you said to me in Rome? Your problems are my problems. We share a life.”

I brought his hand to my belly and lay my hand over his. “Do you have any idea who this man is who saved your life?”

Roman shook his head. “No. He moved swiftly like the darkness. He was strong and looked to be around my age. Maybe not all darkneses are bad. I don't know. I was consumed by pain and fever, but we seemed to move quickly as if time traveling, but I don't think we traversed time at all. And he was as real as you or me. But I don't know who he was or why he came to rescue me. I owe him my life, however.”

I frowned. Could it be another darkness that saved Roman? But why? It didn't make sense. I'd believed all darkneses were evil.

A noise sounded outside the teepee, followed by Grey Feather's voice. “Swift Hawk, you are awake!”

Light split the dark interior, and Grey Feather entered.

“It is good to see you alive.” His weathered face creased with a smile.

“Chief,” Roman said. He struggled to sit up but fell back onto the bison skin. His cheeks were stained with a rosy hue as if embarrassed by his weakness. “I would like to marry Olivia as soon as I am able. And I would like you to be our officiate.”

The chief's eyes shone. “It would be my honor, Swift Hawk. I know of no two other Timebornes who have married before. I will tell the others, and we shall prepare!”

He departed on the heels of that statement like a rush of wild wind.

I was going to be married. But my heart and mind lingered on the thoughts of the man who had saved Roman. Who was he? Why did he save Roman?

Why did I want to run to him when I saw him?

CHAPTER THIRTY



Olivia

A couple of weeks went by, and Roman had healed. Today, November 14, 1812, a week after my twenty-sixth birthday, I would marry the most handsome, courageous, honorable man I'd ever met—Roman Alexander. Yet, I was far more nervous than I'd thought. So much was at stake with Balthazar hunting us, as I was confident he was. Everyone I knew and cared for, even my unborn child, could be slaughtered by that evil demon.

Still, deep in the furthest reaches of my soul, a knowing calm and strength resided. Roman and I shared a fated love, the kind of union that came along once in a blue moon. It made all other relationships I'd been in, especially with Tristan, seem nonsensical. Getting married to Roman matched all my 21st-century feminist notions of equal rights and power for women. Roman and I were on equal footing—there was no debate. We fought side by side with cunning and power. And we loved one another with a similar passion.

The entire tribe was involved in the ceremony, and I'd been told it would be an all-day affair. I'd been required to sleep alone last night, with the advice that “my soul needed solitude before the wedding ceremony.”

Leaping Deer awoke me at dawn and showed my attire for the day—a beautiful white deerskin caftan decorated with elaborate beadwork.

“But first, we clean and purify you,” Leaping Deer said as she scurried around the teepee with far more energy than I was ready for.

“Put this robe over your shoulders and come with me.”

She led me to the creek, where several young women stood laughing and talking.

When the other women saw me, they pointed, smiled, and passed conversation back and forth.

I caught snippets like, “We must make her beautiful for Swift Hawk” and “What an exciting day! Two Timebornes!”

But otherwise, their conversation jumbled and blurred as my nerves began to amp up.

“You, there! Chumani and Kimimela,” Leaping Deer snapped at two of the most boisterous young maidens.

They looked to be all of twelve years old.

“Guide Little Moon into the middle of the creek.”

“Yes, auntie,” they said simultaneously, giggling.

Oh, boy. Here we go with my freezing cold ablutions.

“Robe, off,” Leaping Deer said.

I looked around to make sure the men of the tribe were all occupied—and didn’t see one. So, I let the soft suede robe fall from my shoulders, then removed my dagger from my thigh and set it on the ground.

Chumani and Kimimela stood on either side of me and took my hands. They kept their gazes trained on the ground or each other—never at me—as they led me into the creek.

I gasped as the icy water touched my thighs, hips, and belly.

Chumani and Kimimela giggled, saying, “White woman skin can’t take the cold,” and “She cries like a baby.”

“Chumani and Kimimela!” Leaping Deer snapped from the creek bank. “Show some respect.”

“Yes, auntie,” the girls said, contrite.

“Little Moon, please crouch in the water. The girls will remain standing.”

I crouched, sucking back my gasps of protest at the cold liquid.

“Now, douse her with water while I pray for her soul.”

The two girls exchanged a glance of pure mischief.

Uh oh. My gaze bounced between the impish pair.

“Girls!” Leaping Deer called. “Follow my actions.”

She crouched at the water’s edge and scooped water into her hands. Then, she lifted her hands high. Water dripped between her fingers into the stream. She said, “Wakan Tanka, teach Little Moon how to trust her heart, her mind, her intuition, her inner knowing, the senses of her body, the blessings of her spirit.”

The girls scooped up water similarly and poured it over my head.

I couldn’t help but let out an exclamation.

The girls laughed.

“Girls!” Leaping Deer chided.

They both quieted down.

Leaping Deer cupped more water and held her hands high. “Teach her to trust these things so that she may enter her sacred space and love beyond her fear. Thus you shall walk in balance with the passing of each glorious sun.”

The two girls followed suit, dousing my head and face with the creek’s icy blessing.

I shrieked.

Kimimela exclaimed, “See? She is a baby.”

“Is not,” Chumani said.

“Is, too,” Kimimela shot back, adding a splash of water.

“Is not!” Chumani slammed her hand through the water to create a wave that thoroughly drenched Kimimela.

Kimimela began to cry while I shivered in the middle.

“Girls! Girls!” Leaping Deer clapped her hands. “Bring Little Moon from the creek and straighten yourselves out.”

I staggered from the creek, shivering, teeth chattering. I’d often bathed in this creek, but it seemed filled with snow melt today.

Leaping Deer held the robe up for me, and I gratefully clutched it around my body, seeking warmth. I replaced the dagger around my thigh and nodded at Leaping Deer.

The women led me back to my teepee, where they combed aloe vera through my hair as I huddled on one of the bison furs. Next, they rubbed the plant juice onto my face, neck, belly, arms, and legs. After that, I was dressed in my beautiful dress.

“Red Bird did this beadwork for you,” Leaping Deer said, nodding to the old woman beside her. “She wove many prayers into the garment.”

“Thank you, Red Bird,” I said, smiling at her. “This is beautiful.”

The elderly woman grunted, but a smile crept across her wrinkled cheeks.

Kimimela and Chumani, the two young girls, sat next to me, braiding flowers into my hair.

When done, Leaping Deer said, “Stand up and turn around.”

Leaping Deer and Red Bird scrutinized me as I slowly pivoted.

When I faced them, Leaping Deer said, her eyes moist with tears, “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying to shove away the guilt over her daughter, Laughing Maid, dying because of my presence.

Then, Leaping Deer led me to a large circle near the teepees consisting entirely of women, all dressed in their finest beaded garments. I was told to sit in the center.

I became overwhelmed with hunger as the smells of cooking food wafted in thick clouds.

Four women stood opposite one another in the circle, beating drums while others swayed to the beat and chanted. Several other women danced around me. Rattles were shaken over my head, and words and phrases I couldn't quite make out were whispered in my ears.

I stood in awe of the beauty of the dancers. I was hypnotized by all the sound and movement around me.

When the dancers tired, they fell back in line in the circle. Then, they were handed food, while those on the periphery took their places, weaving and leaping in patterns.

This process continued as the sun passed leisurely through the sky. No food was handed to me—I simply had to sit there, regain warmth, and take in all the blessings.

As the hours passed, I became entranced, slipping into a dreamlike state of consciousness. My eyelids fluttered closed.

In my mind's eye, in the distance, the darkest clouds I'd ever seen rolled in our direction. I became agitated, wondering if Balthazar was coming to destroy my happiness. The clouds transformed into black ink, staining everything they encountered. When the ink reached me, it spread over my entire body, turning everything shadowy and murky. It filled my eyes, nose, and mouth. I began to panic, gulping air, sure both the baby and I would drown.

I whimpered, and my arms and legs shook like a dreaming dog.

I shot into my body with a startled cry, and my eyes flew open.

Colorfully dressed dancers continued to prance and leap around me, arms outstretched, as they chanted and sang.

I sat covered with a sheen of cold sweat, frightened by the vision I'd just witnessed. I prayed, *please don't let anything happen to Roman or our baby. I'm begging you. Keep us safe on this most sacred of days.*

Finally, that part of the ceremony ended.

Leaping Deer and Red Bird stood on either side of me, helping me to walk to a teepee I didn't recognize. I was ushered inside and told to wait. I sat on plush furs covering the entire floor.

The sounds of men's voices, laughing and talking, filled the air outside the teepee.

The door flap flew open, and Roman stumbled in, shoved from behind.

The men who pushed him inside all engaged in wheezing belly laughs.

Roman managed to steady himself before tumbling to the ground.

"A-ho!" he said, grinning at me.

"A-ho to you, too," I said, regarding him with amusement. "What are you doing in here? What is this part of the day?"

"We're to inspect our new teepee, beloved betrothed, as well as chat about our future." He settled into a cross-legged position next to me. "And the men outside are keeping watch to ensure we don't engage in carnal activities before we are wed."

"Seriously?" I said.

Outside, the murmur of voices came from every direction.

"Quite serious. Carnal relations before marriage are quite forbidden—at least today. We could have freely participated before marrying, and no one would bat an eyelash. Native Americans have different views on marriage and sexuality than Western cultures."

"How so?" I said, taking in his handsome appearance.

He had been dressed in deerskin pants and a shirt with beautiful beadwork. His face bore new strength and fortitude since he'd healed. But sometimes, when he thought I wasn't watching, I'd glimpse his haunted eyes.

“Oh, I’ve been taught many things today, Little Moon,” he said, resting his hands on his head. “Besides numerous purification ceremonies, I’ve been instructed that the Sioux regard marriage as an ‘as long as it lasts’ sort of thing, not a ‘death do us part.’”

“Honestly?” A stab of insecurity jabbed my insides.

“But I told them our culture regards this as a lifelong commitment. I don’t plan on ever leaving you, my beautiful flame.” His eyes grew soft as he studied me. “You look every bit as beautiful as the day we met. I shall never tire of gazing at your beauty, even when we’re old and gray.”

He leaned close, brushed a lock of hair away from my face, and then held one finger before his lips. “Shhh,” he said quietly. Gently, he pressed his lips to mine in the sweetest of kisses.

I savored the feel of his warm skin and the slick sensation of his tongue as it gently probed my mouth.

That was when I realized the entire day made me acutely aware of *everything*.

A whack against the hide walls made us both jerk apart.

“Can they see inside this structure?” I said, laughing.

“Who knows? But let’s keep it chaste, just in case. We’ll be wed soon enough. I think they’re hoping that refraining from carnal relations will make us so horny we’ll entertain the whole tribe tonight.”

I blushed at that idea.

A slice of light streamed in as the door flap opened.

Leaping Deer and Red Bird entered, carrying trays of food.

My stomach let out a loud growl.

“You must eat,” Leaping Deer said. “And then, the joining ceremony shall commence.”

She and Red Bird sat numerous food baskets on the floor, smiled at us, and departed.

“Goodness,” I said, reaching for a bite of food. “I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Nor have I. But allow me.” Roman intercepted my hand and plucked a juicy morsel of deer meat from the basket with his fingertips. He lifted it to my lips and fed it to me.

I sucked on his fingers as I drew the meat into my mouth. The slipperiness of my cheeks against his fingers hinted at other slick places welcoming something else hard and delicious.

An erotic sensation swirled in my belly.

The roasted deer tasted better than anything I’d ever eaten.

I picked up cooked wild turnips and fed them to Roman. A gush of heat flooded my core when his mouth closed around my fingers.

“Mmm,” I said.

We continued to feed one another that way until nearly all our food had been consumed. Once we were done, our arousal was at an all-time high.

More voices headed our way.

Leaping Deer held the leather door open and said, “Retrieve your daggers. Place them in Red Bird’s hands and come with me. It is time.”

We stood and retrieved our knives from their sheaths on our thighs. Then, we stood in the doorway and handed them to Red Bird.

She gazed at us with solemnity as if holding our most treasured objects was her honor.

The memory of the purification ritual, the long dance ceremony, and even my dark vision washed away as we were led from the teepee.

Ahead stood a circle of tribal members.

Many held torches to ward off the waning light. A few stars twinkled in the deep-blue sky while a thin strip of orange hovered at the horizon.

Chief Grey Feather stood in the center of the circle with an elaborate feather headdress covering his head. He leaned against his sturdy staff for balance beneath a hand-woven blanket held high at each corner by a young warrior.

Marcellious and Emily flanked one another at the opening of the circle.

Emily beamed at me, practically jumping up and down with excitement.

“You look beautiful,” she whispered.

Marcellious appeared calm and regal. He and Roman exchanged a nod.

Emily and Marcellious fell into step beside us as Roman and I walked toward Grey Feather, with Leaping Deer, Red Bird, and Earth Bear behind us.

A sudden chill, as if I were in the presence of unseen entities, launched up my spine. Roman and I took our places beneath the blanket, with Marcellious and Emily flanking us.

“Let us begin,” Grey Feather said. A stone bowl with a bundle of smoking sage sat at his feet. Coils of the smoke curled around him in lazy wisps.

He picked up the stone and invoked the four directions. An air of solemnity surrounded us.

Out of the corner of my eye, I swore I glimpsed the spirits of many ancestors, their visages transparent, as they stood witness among us.

We stood silently until Grey Feather said, “This is an honor to our tribe. There has never been a marriage between two Timebornes. Darknenses have wed time travelers but never have two time travelers married. This is an auspicious ceremony. And you two, Swift Hawk and Little Moon, have been drawn together through destiny, finding one another through time. Your union was meant to happen.”

I took Roman’s warm hand and flashed him a loving smile.

“On this most sacred of days, let us bless this union.” Grey Feather nodded to Earth Bear.

Earth Bear approached, carrying the stone bowl with its bundle of burning sage and an eagle feather. He waved the feather over the bowl, and fragrant smoke wafted over and around Roman and me. Then, Earth Bear nodded to his father and stepped away.

“You must give me your daggers,” Grey Feather commanded.

Red Bird stepped before us and presented the weapons.

I took mine, Roman took his, and then we handed them to Grey Feather.

Grey Feather gazed at each of us in turn. “I’m going to slice your hands and draw blood. You will press your palms together and combine your life essence. In so doing, any time you are separated, you can keep track of one another by dropping blood on your blade and reciting the ancient scripture. Right now, you can only see yourselves in the gleaming surface of your knives. But, when your blood unites, you can see and protect one another.”

Another shiver washed through me. Everything about this ceremony spoke to my soul.

“Hold out your hands,” Grey Feather said.

We each extended our palms to him.

Grey Feather took my knife and dragged the tip across Roman’s skin, from the wrist to the base of the fingers.

Roman didn’t flinch.

Grey Feather placed the dagger back in Red Bird’s hands. Then, he picked up Roman’s knife and made a similar cut across my palm.

I winced at the bite of the deadly blade as it parted my skin. Beads of blood seeped from the cut.

“Clasp your hands together,” Grey Feather said, placing Roman’s knife upon the leather next to my blade.

We pressed our palms together and looked into each other’s eyes.

Grey Feather's weathered hands clasped our hands, and he began to intone the sacred scripture.

The torches held in people's hands flickered and danced, shooting flames high into the air.

A collective gasp sounded all around us.

The two daggers resting on the suede pulsed with an iridescent glow. Electrical currents vibrated from one blade to the other like miniature lightning bolts.

Our conjoined hands grew hot.

I felt as if we were both plugged into the current of the sacred earth.

A benevolent smile tugged at the corners of Grey Feather's lips. "You are always joined from this day forth. I shall now bless this union, a role I am honored to perform. My only wish was that Moon Lee could be here. I hope he gets the news, wherever he is, that you are married. Roman...he loved you as a son, and you, Olivia, as a daughter."

Tears welled in my eyes.

"If you have any words to say, please say them," Grey Feather said, stepping back.

With our hands still clasped, Roman said, "Olivia, when I met you for the first time, I thought you were crazy."

Earth Bear translated this for the tribe, and everyone laughed.

Roman continued once the laughter had subsided. "The strong fire inside of you matched your gorgeous hair. Getting to know you has been an honor, and I am so grateful to be your husband. I promise to keep you safe. We might always find ourselves in danger, but I will always protect and watch over you. If we are separated, I will find you. And most importantly, I will always love you."

Tears streamed down my cheeks. Roman's tender sentiments split my heart wide open. I so wished my father could be with me today to witness me marrying this incredible man.

I managed to compose myself. “Roman, when I met you, I wanted nothing to do with you. I had been deeply wounded and betrayed by a man I thought I loved. Hence, I despised all men. You taught me to love again and that there are good people in this world. Not all men are schemers. You turned out to be a wonderful man who always had my back. You took away the pains of my soul and molded them into the fires of love.

“As you know, many dangers await us. Yet, I’m ecstatic to be having a child together. I hope we will conquer everything together. If we are separated, I will only be faithful to you. You have my word. And I will love you forever, my beloved husband.”

The world fell away until only Roman and I stood in a cocoon of love. My heart swelled as I looked at him, grinning so hard I thought my cheeks would break.

“And so it is done!” the chief said, breaking the spell between us.

Roman and I gently peeled our hands apart. Both our palms were crusted with dried blood. We drew together for a kiss.

I swear sparks flew between us as our mouths connected.

The tribespeople cheered and shouted, surging forward to enfold us, jostling us apart.

I tried to catch Roman’s gaze as we were pulled from one another, him by the men and me by the women.

Woman after woman expressed her joy at our union. They grabbed me and patted me, turning me this way and that to greet another tribal member.

I nodded and smiled while longing to be in my new husband’s arms.

Drums beat, and people danced all around me. Everywhere I looked, tribal members were celebrating. But I couldn’t find Roman anywhere.

Marcellious and Emily stood close to one another, laughing and chatting. Marcellious leaned in close and planted a quick kiss on Emily's cheek. He nuzzled the side of her head before drawing away.

My mouth dropped open.

Marcellious turned to leave, and Emily caught my eye. She gestured for me to approach.

When I stood before her, she threw her arms around me and squealed, "I'm so happy for you and Roman, sister! You both deserve happiness—you are true soul mates."

I embraced her before easing back. "Thank you, Emily! I'll be even happier when I get to spend some time alone with him."

She looked absolutely radiant, with a flush to her cheeks and bright, sparkling eyes.

"I know that look isn't entirely because of Roman and me," I said. "What's going on with you and Marcellious?"

Emily clasped her hands and twirled in a circle. "Oh, Olivia! I think I'm falling in love with him!"

A surge of protectiveness rocked through me. Sure, Marcellious was behaving kindly toward everyone. But I'd seen him at his worst, and Roman's words about their father being a part of the darkness troubled me.

Emily frowned. "Aren't you happy for me?"

"Of course I am, Emily!" I said, forcing a smile. "But don't forget—I've known him longer than you and seen him at his most treacherous."

"People can change, Olivia! Marcellious has confessed some of his crimes against Roman and you and begged me to see him in a different light. He's changed, I swear it!"

"He told you how he tried to kill Roman on many occasions and captured me?" I said.

"Not exactly," Emily said, shadows flitting across her cheeks. "But he told me he was a bad man for a while. Still,

he's seen the error of his ways. I know it."

She cast an earnest gaze in my direction.

"Okay, Emily." I reached for both her hands. "It's good to see both of you happy. I know you have each suffered much. Maybe you can bring out the best in each other."

"Oh, we will, Olivia; you just watch. I will make him a better man and heal his broken heart."

Marcellious reappeared, bearing two plates of food. "Hello, Olivia. Congratulations on your nuptials. I'm sorry I didn't bring you any food."

"It's okay," I said. "You didn't know I'd be standing here when you returned."

I smiled at him.

"I'll go get Olivia some food," Emily said.

"No, no, that's okay, Emily," I said, but she'd already zipped away.

Marcellious stood holding the two baskets, a sheepish look on his face.

"Emily told me she's falling in love with you," I said, giving him a stern look.

"It's true. I can't believe it. I never dreamed I'd find love again after Theodora's death," Marcellious said, sounding sincere.

"You'd better not break her heart. We're family now, but I'll still fight with you if you ever hurt her. She's my *sister*," I said.

"You have my word," Marcellious said solemnly. "No harm shall ever come to her. I will always protect her."

Our gazes locked. I believed he meant what he said.

Emily skipped back, holding a platter of food for me. "Here you go, Olivia."

"Thank you. I don't think I can eat that much," I said, taking the food.

“Eat what you can. There’s plenty.” She gave Marcellious a warm smile, and he returned the smile.

Someone grabbed my arm. I handed the platter back to Emily, and the woman who seized me ushered me away for the next rounds of congratulations.

Finally, Leaping Deer and Red Bird approached me, bearing a blanket. They spread it at my feet, and Leaping Deer pointed at it, saying, “Sit.”

What now? I grumbled inside. *When can I be with Roman?*

I politely sat in the center of the finely-woven blanket.

Leaping Deer, Red Bird, and four other women grabbed a part of the blanket and lifted me in the air. They talked excitedly and marched me toward the teepee that Roman and I had sat in earlier.

Excitement bloomed in my chest. Would this be when we got to be together, alone at last?

The door flap had been tied open, and a warm fire burned inside.

The women all squeezed through the opening.

Roman sat before the fire, gazing at me with as much longing as I had for him.

The women maneuvered me around the fire and deposited me unceremoniously at Roman’s feet.

“Say it,” Leaping Deer told him, smiling broadly. “Say the words.”

Roman glanced up at her and back at me.

“Forgive me, Olivia, but this is part of the ritual,” he whispered in English.

I blinked at him. “What are you talking about?”

He grabbed a handful of my hair, picked up a stick next to him, and gently whacked the side of my head.

“And now you are mine,” he said in Sioux. In English, he said, “That’s an act of counting coup and claiming you.”

I stared at him in disbelief.

The tribeswomen shrieked and laughed as they exited the teepee, closing the hides behind them.

I glanced toward the door. “Is that it? Will we be left alone for a while?”

“That’s it,” Roman said. “What a ritual!”

“I’ll say. I had no idea. But now, I’d like to get to a different kind of ritual.”

“And what might that be?” Roman said, a sly smile curving his lips.

“The consummation of our marriage, of course.” I swallowed, suddenly overcome with anxious expectations. I’d longed for this moment all day, and now that it was here, I felt nervous and shy. “Oh, dear. I’m afraid I have performance anxiety.”

He frowned slightly. “Performance anxiety?”

“It’s a phrase from my twenty-first-century culture. It means I’m scared I can’t do what’s expected of us—you know, sealing the deal.” I smiled, a little embarrassed.

“Shh. This is just you and me here together. Just you and me....” He ran a fingertip down my cheek. “You’re absolutely breathtaking today, my love.”

He looked into my eyes with longing. “You have made me the happiest man on earth. Tonight, I will give you the most loving night, a night you will never forget. I worship you and forever will desire you.”

He stood behind me, removed the flowers from my hair, and dropped them to the floor. Then, he untangled my braids.

The way he massaged my hair sent electric bolts down my spine.

He caressed my neck with his fingertips, lowered his head and kissed my shoulders.

My heart pounded in my chest.

Roman urged my dress from my shoulder and rained kisses across my skin.

My head rolled back to rest against Roman's chest. My breath quickened as he trailed his hands down my belly to my inner thighs.

He slid his fingers along my wet core, driving me wild.

I panted with desire.

He inserted two fingers into me. "Olivia, you're so wet."

I widened my stance, wanting to give him better access.

His warm breath landed on my ear, and he whispered, "I want you so badly."

"Then take me," I said.

"Not yet." Removing his fingers, he spun me around and captured my mouth in a hot, demanding kiss. Then, he slid his fingers inside me again, working in and out, using his thumb to stimulate my clit.

He thrust his tongue into my mouth, claiming me with passion and desire while driving me mad with his hand.

I inhaled his breath as his tongue swept the contours of my mouth, probing, driving, overpowering my senses. He tasted like unfettered wildness, like a tempestuous wind blowing through me, claiming everything in its wake.

I was utterly entranced by his lips, tongue, and relentless fingers, stirring me to orgasm.

Before I could surrender to bliss, he withdrew his hands and mouth and looked into my eyes.

"I want you," I mewled like a wildcat. "I want you inside me so badly."

"Not yet," he said, smiling at me wickedly. He lifted his hand to his mouth and sucked on his fingers, savoring my taste. "You taste like heaven, Olivia."

I let out a moan, wanting those fingers back inside of me.

He removed my dress, pushing it down to the floor.

I stood there, overcome with shyness.

Roman stalked around me, claiming me with his eyes. He caressed my cheek with his callused hand when he stood in front of me again. “Don’t be shy around me, Olivia. I love your body. You’re flawless, and I love you, heart and soul.”

Emboldened by his words, I pressed my body against his, wriggling my hands beneath the waistband of his breeches. I guided his pants from his legs, and he stepped free of them.

His stiff cock bobbed.

This was what I was waiting for, this moment, this union.

“My God,” I said. “You’re perfect, Roman.”

“As are you,” he said, giving me a heavy-lidded gaze. He seized my breasts and sucked my nipples, first one, then the other.

I yanked off his shirt, desperate to be skin-on-skin with him.

We fell to the ground and melted together.

He brought his lips to mine, devouring me in another searing kiss. This kiss was one of utter desperation, of need, of a longing that refused to be quelled.

As we consumed one another, we burned in a blaze of passion. A cascade of shooting stars broke free in my soul, creating streaks of light and sensation upon my inner horizon.

When I could stand it no more, I wrenched away and looked at him. “I’m the luckiest woman in the world to have a man like you.”

Roman laughed, wrapped his hands around my hips, and urged my legs around him.

I hooked one foot around the other, pressing his erection against my swollen, slick tissues. Then, I rocked, sliding up and down the outside of his rigid cock, eager to have him inside of me.

“You’re torturing me, Olivia,” he said before peppering my lips with a thousand butterfly kisses. As he kissed me, he

thrust his hips against me.

I fell into a swoon, enraptured by his mouth and loving regard for me. Every cell of my body felt adored, and worshiped by him.

He ceased his kisses and said, “I can’t stand it anymore. I’ve got to be inside of you.”

He reached between us and fit himself inside of me.

We both let out a delighted groan.

Then, his fingers digging into my ass, he entered me. His hips bucked wildly, our flesh slapping against one another, our bodies slick with sweat.

His face inches above mine, Roman grunted as he thrust inside me, over and over again.

As pleasurable as this felt, I needed to dominate.

“Wait!” I urged him onto his back and rolled on top. Now, *this* was a perfect position. I balanced my hands on his rock-hard abdomen and ground my hips against his.

The friction of his pelvis stimulated my clit, driving me to madness.

Roman grinned and seized my nipples between his callused fingers. He rolled my tender flesh into hard nubbins. Pushing up to his forearms, he hungrily sucked a breast into his mouth.

I continued to rub my clit against him as his cock filled me, slamming into me with unceasing fury. Each thrust of his cock sent a stab of pleased pain through my core.

I didn’t want it to stop. A volcano of bliss bloomed inside my core. It was maddening and intense, and I didn’t know whether to slow it down or keep riding it. I kept riding that wave, going higher and higher. Unintelligible sounds, grunts, and groans tumbled from my lips. I was like a lion on the savannah, copulating with my mate in unbridled passion.

Roman wrenched his mouth away and grabbed my breasts in his strong hands. His blunt nails dug into my skin as he

kneaded me.

Waves of pleasure cascaded through me, begging for release, pleading for that moment of surrender. Finally, I could hold them back no more.

“I’m going to come,” I cried out.

“Come for me, my beautiful wife,” he said. “Come all over me.”

When that tidal rush of orgasm crested, I let go, drowning in nothing and everything all at the same time. Wild tremors sizzled up and down my spine, eliciting a spinning sensation like I was swimming untethered through the galaxy.

Roman let loose, too, thrusting into me with a fury. “Olivia! My love!”

He let out a long moan as his orgasm crested.

I continued pulsing around him, shooting through the sky like an exploding star. My body shivered with pleasure as this glorious orgasm claimed me. I felt exalted. Cherished. Desired. Had I known it would have felt so wonderful to marry him, I would have done it long ago.

When I came down from my pleasure, I collapsed on top of him.

He made lazy sweeps up and down my body with his hands. “Olivia, my heart, my love, my wife. I will always be loyal to you. I will protect you with my life.”

“And I will protect you, as well,” I said, closing my eyes.

“I mean it with all my heart. I will always love you, Olivia Alexander.”

Contentment should have filled my heart at his words. But instead of drifting to sleep, my mind was assaulted by a horrible dark sensation.

Something awful was coming our way.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Olivia

Trouble was indeed chasing us, tracking us with relentless fury. The entire tribe kept up a steady, persistent trek to escape the Kiowa for the next two months. Our scouts reported continued sightings of the enemy tribe whenever we'd set up camp in a new location, so we kept moving. It was getting old and tiresome, especially as my belly grew with the baby.

Yet, as January began, a bitter cold descended on the plains, drawing our unceasing "pick up and move to a new location" progress to a halt.

"You see the bright spots on either side of the sun?" Earth Bear said to me as we stopped to drink water from a spring.

I squinted into the sky. "Sort of. I see a couple of solar flare spots."

Earth Bear nodded sagely. "Those are fires the sun has made to warm its ears. Severe cold is coming."

I tugged my thick fur robe around me as if to ward off the chill.

"And the clouds are coming from the north, bringing a blizzard." He crouched before the spring, filled his hand with the icy water, and slurped it into his mouth. "Also, I've noted woodpeckers sharing nests and trees. Not good. The harshest of weather will soon be here."

"Is this information passed down through the generations?" I crouched by his side and slurped my own

handful of ice-cold spring water.

“We are great observers of everything,” Earth Bear said. “Cold is a spirit that deserves our respect and attention. We shall listen to what it has to say.” He paused, then a rueful smile formed on his face. “The young people don’t always pay attention, especially when courting another. Nothing will stop them from spending time with the person they’re attracted to. Many youths have sneaked off for a quick tryst and found themselves trapped in a blizzard—they learn, hopefully not with their lives.”

He let out a big sigh. “One of my friends, when I was much younger, did just that—he and his love interest sneaked from their respective teepees for a tryst. Our elders had warned us of an impending storm.” A faraway look appeared in his brown eyes. “We never found them. The snow came so hard and fast that we had to retreat. When we could finally emerge, it was too late.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I said, pausing in my quest for water.

“Thank you.” Another sigh left Earth Bear’s lungs before he turned to give us his full attention. “My father and I have been conferring. With an impending blizzard, Grey Feather advised that we will settle at the top of that cliff where we can see but not necessarily be seen. That’s where we’re headed.”

He pointed to a high ledge directly ahead. Then, he turned to look behind him at the other tribal members who were waiting their turn to hydrate.

“A-ho!” he yelled in his native tongue. “Drink your fill. Then, we head up there.”



We all busied ourselves at the campsite, high on an outcropping overlooking the plains, readying for the winter storm. Roman and I had already prepared our teepee, lining it with several layers of thick bison furs.

I loved sharing a bed with Roman again. And, although I missed nightly conversations with Emily, she'd been invited into Leaping Deer's teepee. Emily kept the older woman company and learned all she could about Leaping Deer's extensive knowledge of healing.

Roman and I set off to gather fuel for the fire. Anything that could burn—horse dung, pinecones, old pine needles, and small branches—was used to heat a pit of rocks each night. The hot stones helped stave off the cold.

As Roman and I brought an armload of firewood back to the camp, Marcellious and Emily stood near Leaping Deer's teepee, laughing and flirting.

“Can you believe those two?” Roman said, pausing at our door before ducking to enter.

I followed him and dropped our bundles in our designated fuel pile.

“Things are getting serious,” I said as I pushed the pinecones and small branches into a neat pile. “Emily told me she and Marcellious plan to marry.”

Roman's eyebrows lifted. “Really? Do you think my brother has turned the corner and that his dark ways are behind him?”

I settled on the furs cross-legged and patted the area next to me. “Let's hope so.”

Roman said, “One moment. I'm preparing our fire for the night. It's getting cold, and I want my sweethearts to be warm.”

He flashed me a smile that reached inside me and made me feel safe and content—at least for a moment.

Once the fire blazed around the stones, Roman sat beside me and guided me down to a reclining position. He lay on his side next to me and stroked my belly.

He'd been doing that a lot lately, marveling over the life we had created.

Although I wish the circumstances could have been different, I had no doubt Roman would make an excellent father.

While we lay together, side by side, we mused about our journey since getting married two months ago. Every time we encountered another person, another tribe, an outpost, or a town, we'd inquire as to whether anyone knew of the sun and moon daggers or heard of John James. So far, all we'd discovered were dead ends.

"I'm beginning to think we'll never find the journal, John James, or any clues to help us find the sun and the moon knives," I said, stroking Roman's arm.

"Don't give up hope, my beloved," he said, tracing circles on my belly through the deerskin covering my body.

"I'm trying not to." I rolled onto my back and folded my arms beneath my head. I stared at the coils of smoke disappearing out the top of the teepee. "But I'm sure Balthazar is out there, hunting us. Just because we haven't seen him doesn't mean he isn't watching us. He's going to appear when we least expect it."

A shiver rocked through me.

"Expecting it or not," Roman said, propping his head on his hand as he faced me, "we'll be ready."

"Will we?" I let out a sigh. "I've been reading and re-reading Philip's journals. There are no clues we haven't followed, and still, we have nothing to show."

"We mustn't give up." Roman stroked my cheek with his fingertips. "Stop worrying."

Footsteps approached the teepee, followed by a soft scratching on our door flap.

"Are you two decent? I have news," Marcellious said.

"News?" I popped upright. "Come in."

Marcellious entered.

Roman said, “The lovebird returns to us from his tree. Haven’t seen much of you lately.”

Marcellious scoffed and ignored him. “A scout just arrived with some interesting news. Word of your quest for answers has spread, and the scout followed us. He says he has knowledge of the sun and moon daggers.”

“You’re kidding! Really?”

“Sure, Olivia, I’m kidding. I came over to tell you a lie.” Marcellious sneered and crossed his arms over his chest.

“At least being in love hasn’t changed your attitude,” I said. “You can still be an asshole.”

“I retain the right to be whatever I need to be,” Marcellious said. “So, do you want the news or not?”

“Of course! Tell us!”

“He said a friend of a neighboring tribe knows of a man in the nearest town who trades in exotic merchandise.”

“And he’s got the knives?” I practically vibrated with excitement.

“Calm down. No, he doesn’t have them. The storekeeper says they are in Italy,” Marcellious said. “Or, at least, that’s where they were in 1580 A.D., according to books and old documents.”

I blinked several times. “Italy? How can we get a ship to Italy that arrives in 1580? I don’t know how to time travel to a certain place and time.”

“We can’t,” Roman said, sitting up. “Not now, anyway. We’re here for the duration or at least until the blizzard passes.”

My shoulders sagged. “Obstacles, obstacles, always another obstacle.”

“Yes, but at least it’s something,” Marcellious said, expressionless. “It’s more than you had before I arrived.”

“True,” I said, nodding. “Thank you for telling us.”

“You’re welcome.” He turned to leave, lifting the door flap and peering out at the blue-gray skies. “Snow’s here. See?”

He stood aside.

Fat white flakes drifted from the cloud.

“Here we go,” I said. “Stay warm, Marcellious.”

“You, too. Let me know if you need anything,” he said, before tromping away.

By nightfall, snow blew all around us in the howling wind. Roman and I huddled in our teepee, emerging only when necessary and quickly returning to the warmth.

The blizzard raged for two days until we were completely socked in. We couldn’t even open our door flap without snow tumbling inside. Our waking hours were spent digging our way out of our lodges or re-fueling with jerky or stews cooked over the fire.

Roman and I snuggled under the furs at night and made love or curled around one another like puppies.

At least we saw no signs of Kiowa or Balthazar.

Two weeks after the heavy snowfalls, a relentless rain poured from the sky, washing away the icy blanket which covered the land.

I rejoiced in the rain since it meant we could move among the encampment and visit with others.

My joy was short-lived when Grey Feather called us to his teepee.

Grey Feather sat with Earth Bear, Marcellious, and several of his strongest warriors when we entered his dwelling. His prayer pipe rested in his lap, and a fragrant smoke scented the air, indicating the group had been in council.

“Come. Sit,” Grey Feather said gruffly.

Roman and I sat together, facing Grey Feather.

“A scout has advised us that the Kiowa are nearby. He has secured their location. We are through being chased like prey.”

He sliced his weathered hand through the air.

Several of the men, their faces stony, nodded.

“Before dawn tomorrow, we shall find them and ambush them. We shall put an end to their tyranny!” Grey Feather lifted his fist into the air.

His warriors did the same, shouting words of assent.

Roman had lifted his fist as well.

I reeled back in horror. “Roman! You can’t possibly fight.”

Roman frowned as he looked at me. “What do you mean I can’t possibly fight? My brother and I must go. We’re gladiators—we can handle anything the Kiowa throw our way. You know how skilled we both are at battle.”

I shook my head. “The tribe has enough men to go and fight. You don’t need to go. I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“What’s going on, Little Moon? Why are you against this?” Grey Feather said, glaring at me.

“I just don’t want anything to happen to Roman. To any of you...” I swept my arm toward each man, hoping I was not acting like a hysterical woman. The pregnancy hormones had their way with me, taking me on a roller coaster of daily mood swings.

“It is decided,” Grey Feather said, stabbing his staff into the ground. “We shall depart before the sun rises. We have a day’s ride ahead of us, but we’ll move like ghosts. They won’t be expecting us.”

Overcome with fear, I turned to Roman and grabbed his sleeve.

“What if I never see you again?” I whispered.

“Olivia, please don’t say that. You have nothing to worry about. We have the advantage—rifles, spears, weapons of every kind. We’ll be all right.” His gaze bore into mine. “I’m a man of honor, you know this. I’ll return to you—you have my word.”

A placating smile crossed his face.

My jaw was set in stone, and I shook my head.

“Olivia,” Roman hissed. “I’m going to fight. We must do this for the sake of the tribe. Dancing Fire would have wanted this. He would insist we fight to protect his people.”

“If it’s any consolation, Little Moon,” Grey Feather said, “we’ll attempt a peace treaty first.”

That did sound better, but the words did nothing to quash the anxiety looming in my heart.

I said little about the topic the rest of the day, but my fears got the best of me at night. I tossed and turned by Roman’s side, hoping I didn’t disturb him.

In the middle of the night, a hand jostled my shoulder.

“Olivia,” Roman said.

“What? Huh?” Somehow, I must have managed to fall asleep. “Is it time?”

I sat up, wiping the sleep from my eyes.

Roman crouched before me, his face lit by the glow of the hot rocks in our stone pit. Red and black markings had been painted on his face, giving him an expression of ferocity.

“Yes, my love. But I’ll return to you soon. I’m certain this will be nothing much.”

“Then why are you dressed like a warrior, not a peacemaker?” I said as worry gripped my mind in its vice-like clutches.

“It’s symbolic, nothing more. Don’t worry. I promise I’ll return safely to you,” he said. “We have luck on our side...the moon is nearly full and will light our way. They won’t suspect we’re coming. Remember—I’m heading out to protect you and our baby.”

He stroked my abdomen through my thick fur robe.

“I just... I just...” I clamped my mouth shut. There was no need to send him out the door on a note of fear and anxiety.

“Be safe. Come back to me quickly.”

I forced a smile.

“I will,” he said. “Keep your knife with you at all times.”

I patted my thigh through the furs. “Always. My dagger and gun are always here.”

He gave me a quick kiss and pulled away as if to depart.

Some desperate longing welled up inside me, and I grabbed his arm, yanking him toward me.

He fell to his knees beside me.

“Don’t go. Not yet.” Tears moistened my eyes as I hooked my hand behind his neck and drew his face toward mine.

As our lips connected, I clung to him, a wretched sense of anguish flooding my veins. I didn’t want him to go. I wanted him to stay with me.

He thrust his tongue inside my mouth like a snake, flicking against my desire. The warmth of his body bathed my torso in bliss while my back felt cold, chilled by my fears of what was to come.

His tongue kept probing, relentlessly seeking something from me I didn’t know how to give.

We both knew the challenge of wars—we’d lived through far too many battles. How could I let Roman go with anything resembling confidence and certainty?

I shoved aside my fears and deepened the kiss, the stubble of his beard scraping and tearing against my skin.

I didn’t care. I welcomed the marks of our passion—I would savor the sting of pain until he returned to me.

As our kiss continued, fiery heat and compelling need roared between my legs. I longed to take him inside me where we both could hide.

His hands found my shoulders and pushed while his lips stayed glued to mine. We were engaged in our own personal war. Neither of us wanted to part from the other.

I let out a long moan, the sound vibrating against his lips.

Finally, breathless, Roman wrested away from me. Lips parted, he studied me with longing in his eyes. “I don’t want to go.”

“I don’t want you to, either. Please stay.”

He licked his lips. “I have to go, Olivia. You know that. I’m duty-bound to help protect the tribe. This war between the Sioux and the Kiowa has gone far too long.”

“I know,” I whimpered.

“Wait for me, Olivia. Wait for me. I will return to you as soon as I can.” After one final look passed between us, he brushed his lips against mine and departed.

I knew I wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep. Whether it was pregnancy hormones or the weeks of toil taking a toll on me, I couldn’t shake this feeling of dread. I lay there, shivering and fretting, listening to the raindrops patter against the walls of my teepee.

“Olivia!” Emily’s voice shook me out of a drowse.

“What is it?” I said through a fog of fatigue, peering through the dark.

A dark shape approached me, then Emily snuggled beneath the furs.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she whispered.

“I couldn’t either. I’m so worried. I have this persistent dread in the back of my mind,” I said, grateful for her warmth.

“That’s why I’m here. Marcellious made me promise I’d take good care of you while the men are away,” Emily said.

“Marcellious said that?”

Emily nodded. “He cares about you and Roman. I tell you, he’s a changed man.”

“I believe you,” I said. I wouldn’t tell her I couldn’t let go of what Roman had told me—Marcellious was born of the dark, as was Roman, but he seemed to carry more of it.

At least, that was what Balthazar had said, but he couldn't be trusted.

"So, who's left behind?" I said, brushing aside a few strands of Emily's blond hair that tickled my nose.

"Oh, you know—women, children, and youths." Emily wriggled her foot between mine. "Do you think the remaining tribal members could protect us if needed?"

"Doubtful," I said. I stroked her glossy hair. "I can certainly fight, but as we all know, I'm with child."

"Well, hopefully, it will be as Marcellious said—they'll form an alliance of peace and return before the day turns to night." Emily rolled on her back, untangling her legs from mine.

"I sure hope so." I rolled on my back, too, and we both stared up at the night sky through the small opening at the top of the teepee.

A drop of water landed on my cheek, startling me. Most of the water ran down the smooth poles erected to create the structure and slid down the lining. I made a mental note to check on the poles later, once I was up and moving around.

A wide smile spread across Emily's face.

"What are you so happy about?" I said, glancing at her.

"Marcellious, what do you think?" She pivoted to her side, facing me. "I'm so happy to find love, Olivia! I never imagined."

"Nor did I," I said, rolling to face her. "I'm happy for you, too."

"Maybe we'll both have babies together soon." She touched my belly. "How is your baby? Do you feel the baby kicking or moving?"

"Not really. Sometimes I feel *something*, but then I tell myself, I imagine it."

A strange squirming wriggled in my abdomen like baby Alexander was letting me know he was in there.

“Oh!” I exclaimed.

“What? What’s wrong?” Emily said in a high-pitched voice.

“Nothing’s wrong. Feel this.” I placed her palm over my abdomen where I’d felt the squirm.

Her eyes widened.

“Olivia! I feel it!” She lifted the fur and said, “Hello, baby! We can’t wait to meet you!”

She gave me an impulsive hug. “This is so exciting! Wait until Roman feels it. He’ll be overjoyed.”

“Yes, he will.” A wave of love for Roman, the baby, and even for Emily flooded my chest.

Emily and I lapsed into silence.

My eyelids grew sleepy from the warmth of lying next to my best friend and sister.

“Olivia,” Emily said, rousing me. Her voice contained an edge.

I opened my eyes. “What is it?”

“You know you’ve never told me about your time with Balthazar. Was it really awful?”

I frowned.

“You don’t have to tell me,” she rushed to add.

“No, I can share it. And, yes, it truly was awful. We found ourselves hanging in this dungeon. The floor was all cracked, and these horrible insects were down below. They were huge, the size of my hands. Some were as big as my face.”

Emily pressed her palm to her mouth.

“I don’t know if they were under Balthazar’s command, but they’d emerge and crawl all over us, and then he’d yell at them, and they’d skitter away.” I rubbed my arms, trying to rid myself of the memories trapped in my skin.

Emily’s face pulled back in disgust. “Oh, goodness, I can’t imagine.”

“Don’t even try. It will give you nightmares,” I said, squeezing her shoulder. I eyed her, hesitant if I should share my following thoughts. Finally, risking the topic, I said, “You know our mother wasn’t who she said she was.”

“What do you mean?” Emily said, cocking her head to the side.

“Balthazar had this wall of daggers. He said they’re from all the time travelers he’s killed.”

“Ugh! He’s such an evil man,” she said.

“He truly is. But, anyway, he had our mother’s weapon along with a vial of her blood. He poured a drop of Mom’s blood onto the blade, and the room began to glow with some of Mom’s memories.” I bit my lip, wondering how to share my thoughts.

“Go on,” Emily urged, her expression bright. “What did you see?”

“Well...” I recounted images of Mom screwing men worldwide, and I sneered. “Mom was a bit of a whore.”

“How can you say that, Olivia?”

“She showed me—or, her dagger did. Apparently, the time traveler’s blade retains fond memories of the time traveler. And our mother was apparently fond of having wild sex with men worldwide. I had to watch.” I shuddered. “And she tried to kill me twice, once when I was still in her womb, and the other time she poisoned my blade. When I ended up in Rome, I almost didn’t make it. I almost died.”

A deeply lined crease formed on Emily’s face. “How can you be certain it wasn’t Balthazar’s tricks you were viewing?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s all true, Em,” I said, wishing I could retract my words. “The dagger never lies. It collects one’s memories and actions while it’s on you. It’s as connected to me as my arm.”

My expression darkened as other memories surfaced. “I also got to watch him and our mother together. They were so passionate together. It was disgusting.”

“Ew,” Emily said, her nose wrinkling. “How could she love a man that evil?”

“It’s part of his magic—the darkness possesses a lot of charm which he can use to manipulate another’s mind.” I grew quiet. “Maybe he wasn’t always that bad, and she fell for him before he became sinister. I’d sure like to think that’s the case, and she wasn’t drawn to sociopathy.”

“Socio-what?” Emily said.

“It’s a mental disorder where a person shows no regard for right and wrong and ignores the rights and feelings of others.”

“That’s Balthazar,” Emily said.

“True enough. But it was so disturbing to see all these images. They didn’t match the mom I knew and loved as a child.”

Emily brushed my hair away from my face. “I still wonder if it was all a trick.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. It looked real and didn’t look like something Balthazar would be clever enough to make up. It disgusted me. You should be glad you never got a chance to meet her.”

“I hate to hear you talk that way about our mother,” Emily said. “Maybe you don’t have the whole picture?”

“I don’t know. But my mind is disturbed enough by what I saw. Mom never really loved me.” Tears pricked the back of my eyes. I could never treat my child the way Mom had treated me. I placed my hands back upon my belly.

“Oh, you can’t mean that! Surely she loved you. I don’t think she was heartless. Remember the love she shared with my papa.” Emily propped her head on her hand.

“She loved you, and she loved Philip. I believe that’s true. But as for me...” My stomach clenched around a knot of grief. “I *saw* her, Emily. I watched her poisoning my dagger and trying to kill me inside her womb.”

I pressed my lips together.

“She must have—” Emily began, but I cut her off.

“I’m done with this topic, Emily. I can’t speak of it anymore. It’s too painful.” I blinked away the tears stinging my eyes.

A long, loud scream sounded in the distance.

Emily and I both jerked upright.

“What’s that?” Emily said, her tone shaky.

“I don’t know.” I tugged my fur robe around me to keep away the chill as I peered out the door flap.

To my horror, we were surrounded by fierce-looking warriors bearing tomahawks and bows and arrows.

The Kiowa had tricked the Sioux men and had come to kill us all.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Olivia

Emily, who stood behind me in my teepee, screamed and gripped my shoulders. I clutched the edge of the doorway, staring out in horror.

Kiowa warriors were everywhere, slaughtering everyone in their sight. I tried to formulate a plan, but my brain kept shooting blanks.

I couldn't believe this gruesome scene. The Kiowa had outfoxed the Sioux tribe, striking our encampment as dawn slithered over the horizon.

Where were Roman and the others? Had they already been murdered, too? The thought was too awful to consider.

Before I became paralyzed in fright, I pried Emily's fingers from me and said, "Go! Go warn as many people as you can. Go to every teepee and help people get to safety."

Her eyes shone with fear as she stared at me. "What will you do?"

"I've got weapons. I will fight."

Emily looked like she was about to protest. We didn't have time to squabble.

"Do it!" I pointed toward the other dwellings. "Go, now!"

She raced from my dwelling, slogging through the rain.

I retrieved my weapons from my thigh, exited my teepee, and rushed toward a Kiowa.

With his eyes ringed in white and feathers in his hair, he gripped a woman by her hair in one hand and held a knife to her throat with the other hand.

The woman's eyes were wide with terror. She caught sight of me, and her pleading gaze cut me to the quick.

My legs powered toward her.

With a piercing war cry, the Kiowa slit her throat. When he spied me, an evil grin spread across his face. He took his knife and cut off her hair, scalp included. Waving it at me, he shouted words I didn't understand, but I got their meaning.

He was no doubt indicating that I'd be next.

Without hesitation, I took aim at his forehead, pointing my Glock at him.

A quizzical expression tugged his face as he stared at my weapon. I pulled the trigger of my Glock.

With blood and brains spraying from his skull, he flew backward and collapsed on the muddy earth. The puddle beneath him grew crimson, stained by the life essence draining from what was left of his head.

A white warhorse galloped toward me with a warrior on its back. The horse's eyes and nostrils had been ringed with red, and black handprints were all over its powerful chest.

The Kiowa on its back looked equally gruesome, painted similarly with his tomahawk held high over his head. He let out a guttural scream as he galloped toward me.

One bullet from my gun to his bare chest had him sailing off the back of the rearing horse. He collapsed in the mud. All his limbs lay akimbo while a gaping, ragged hole had been torn through his chest. His chest rose and fell, but it wouldn't be long until he rode the river of blood bubbling from his chest to the spirit land.

Twelve bullets left.

I whipped right and left, determining who to kill next.

I spun around at the sound of pounding footsteps to find a Kiowa sprinting toward me, his spear readied to skewer me.

I barely had time to react, so my aim was off. The bullet zinged through his shoulder, and the spear flew to the ground.

He slapped his palm to the wound to stop the bleeding while I raced toward his fallen weapon.

Snatching it from the ground, I cocked back my arm and hurled it toward him.

The tip of the spear landed in the hollow of his throat.

He gave a gurgling shout and dropped to the ground, tugging the spear free from his neck. Then, his arms fell limp, and his eyes stared at the overcast sky.

Thunder rumbled from directly overhead, drowning out the screams of the Sioux. A crack of sheet lightning followed. More thunder and lightning followed in quick succession. The skies opened, heaving a torrent of rain over our heads.

I could barely see as I slogged through the deluge, my hair pasted to my face, water running down my body as if I wore no clothes. I stepped over the women's bodies clutching their dead children to their chests as they lay in horrified silence, eyes staring at the beyond.

I cried out, enraged, as I lifted my gun and shot two more Kiowa.

When they collapsed, I snatched one of their knives from the earth and slit their throats for good measure.

"You bastards!" I screamed, waving the bloody pelts. "You fucking bastards! You're destroying people I love."

A Kiowa came up from behind and grabbed my shoulder.

I jammed my elbow in his face, then slammed a roundhouse kick to his gut.

He stumbled backward, then managed to find his balance. His face turned ugly as he sprinted toward me.

I shot him in the face without mercy, obliterating his hideous sneer. *Eight bullets left.* I didn't care if I used them all.

Thunder continued to assault the sky, but the sound came farther away, and the lightning didn't strike for several seconds. Yet the rain continued unabated, hammering the ground, the teepees, and the many bodies who had been struck down and lay dying or dead.

The fury of war flooded my bloodstream. I'd witnessed this same rage in Roman when he returned to the tent at night after participating in a blood bath at the emperor's orders.

With a shout, I raced toward a warrior on horseback who'd just split open a woman's head with his tomahawk. I wiped away the rain from my eyes, took aim, and shot him through the belly.

His horse reared and fell backward right on someone's teepee, crushing it and the man who had been riding atop his back. Once the animal scrambled to its feet, it galloped away, leaving the warrior mangled and screaming on the ground.

Should I waste another bullet on this man? I stood over him, my gun aimed at his forehead.

He sobbed and writhed, shouting something in his native tongue. His legs and arms were bent at strange angles.

I gazed at the gusher of blood pouring from his abdomen. No, I wouldn't waste more ammunition on this guy—he would be dead in seconds.

No more screams came from the villagers. Kiowa raced about on foot, tearing open the door flaps of the teepees, searching for more people to slaughter.

Emily, I hope you managed to get to safety.

I would die if I came upon her lifeless body.

I followed a warrior as he disappeared into a dwelling. I found him removing his breeches, about to violate the occupant of the teepee with her children huddled at the side of the wall.

I shot his brains out.

The children screamed.

Then, I turned to the shaking woman. “Take your children and run! Run as far as you can!”

She called to them in Sioux, taking two of them by the hand. They all raced outside and fled. If they lived, they’d never be able to erase the horror they’d just seen.

I kicked the warrior I had just killed.

“That’s for trying to rape a woman.” I kicked him several more times. “And that’s for trying to do it in front of her children!”

I was out of my mind with grief and rage.

When I emerged from the teepee, the only sound was the pounding rain, with occasional sobbing or despair. I turned in a circle, looking for more warriors or their victims.

Horse hooves clattered in the distance as the Kiowa retreated. They’d accomplished their madness, leaving most of the tribe dead.

I felt numb inside, horrified by the day’s events.

I crumpled to the ground, heartbroken. My mind flooded with images too horrible to unsee and too awful to dwell upon. I hung my head in my hands and wept. Then, I affixed my gun to its sheath on my thigh and pushed to stand with the weariness of a thousand-year-old woman.

“Please, God, Wakan Tanka, or whoever’s listening—please let Roman be all right.”

A chilling voice answered me, sucking the air from my lungs.

“Not if I have my way.”

I pivoted and came face to face with Balthazar. Fear paralyzed my limbs as the memory of being trapped in his cockroach-laden dungeon surfaced. Another more haunting thought of seeing Roman’s broken body made me tremble.

A victorious glint lit Balthazar’s eyes, and a grin spread across his evil face. “That’s right, my sweet. I’m back to finish what I started.”

My arms shook, and my knees wobbled. All the strength drained from me. This was the moment Balthazar would finish me off.

I made a weak, half-hearted attempt to grab him, but he only laughed.

“You’re pathetic, you know that?”

I did, in fact, know that. But I said nothing.

“If you think you’re going to destroy me, think again.” His thick hand wrapped around my neck and squeezed. “How dare you think you can do *anything* to me after you’ve betrayed me. We had a deal, and you and Alexander broke it. How did he get out? Did you somehow arrange it? How did you know where to find him?”

I could barely breathe as his fingers crushed my windpipe. I clawed at his hand, gasping, desperate for air.

“I’m done fucking around with you, Olivia, you wretched little bitch. You defied me. My enemies never live to see the light of day.” He shook my throat, and a whole light show swirled in my head.

This is it. This is where I die. Oh, Roman, we never stood a chance against evil, did we?

Balthazar flung me to the ground like a rag doll.

Before I could scramble to my feet, he straddled me, pinning my arms over my head. “Fuck you or kill you, hmmm? Or should I fuck you first, then kill you?”

I writhed, kneeling him in the back.

Balthazar laughed. “Oh, how you amuse me, Olivia. Don’t worry, I’m not ready to kill you yet—you’re too much fun.”

He released my arms and grabbed my jaw.

I struggled and tried to bite him, but his strength was too great.

He leaned down until his face was inches from mine. Then, in a low, wicked voice, he said, “I’m going to *break* you, Olivia, piece by piece. You’ll wish I’d killed you after

you feel my wrath. Your pain, heartbreak, and very existence will be too great to bear, mark my words.”

Oh, God. What's he going to do?

I shoved the heel of my hand into the base of his nose, hoping to break his bones and scramble his brains.

He let out a roar of laughter as blood spurted from his nose. “Think you can kill me with your antics? What a fool you are. Nothing can kill me.”

He wiped his face with his sleeve, then licked the remaining blood from his upper lip.

He could taunt me all he wanted, but I refused to give up. I clawed at his face and eyes, scratching his skin. Next, I spat at him and tried to headbutt him.

He pinned my hands to the ground. “That’s enough,” he yelled, sending a spray of spittle against my cheeks and lips. His hands grew hot, burning my flesh.

I cried out, but his eyes dilated in excitement at my misery.

“Oh, how I’m going to enjoy breaking you, my sweetheart. You’ll never recover from the torment I will exact on you and those you love.”

“Don’t hurt Roman!” I yelled. “Leave Emily and Marcellious alone!”

“Why should I? They’re important to you. I will take everything and everyone who means anything to you and destroy it.”

My skin blistered beneath his searing touch. The smell of scorched flesh assaulted my nose.

“You haven’t even seen my worst,” Balthazar said. “I’ve been kind to you until now. You’re going to feel my wrath. You’re never going to survive. Let me tell you what’s going to happen next. Roman and Marcellious will die in battle when the Kiowa return. They’re very clever, the Kiowa. And they’re angry. They despise the Sioux. They were easy to manipulate.”

“So you did this? This whole slaughter was designed by you?” I spat out the words.

“I played my part,” Balthazar said, easing up on my wrists. He sat up, suffocating me with the weight of his body against my diaphragm.

I let my hands lay limply, allowing the cold rain to soothe my blistered skin as I struggled to breathe beneath him.

“You had one mission, one task to accomplish—all you had to do was find Alina’s journal, and you failed. You betrayed me, and for that, you will pay a higher price and remember who is in power.”

“I tried to find it! Do you know how hard it is to find something that no one knows anything about? I don’t even think the journal exists,” I managed to say. “Get off of me! I can barely breathe.” *Is his weight hurting my baby? Oh, God, please let my child be all right.*

He calmly stood and held out his hand for me to get up.

Is this guy for real? First, he tries to kill me, then he tries to help me up?

“Fuck off, asshole.” I rolled to my side, pushed to my hands and knees, and stood on shaking legs with my back to this madman.

Balthazar seized a handful of my wet hair and torqued my head backward.

I shrieked from the pain.

“You listen to me,” he hissed in my ear. “I don’t give a fuck how hard you’ve looked or how much you’ve endured to find that journal. You *will* find it for me.”

I was so scared that I couldn’t think of anything. My mind was a black hole of nothingness, focused on a single thought—*let my baby be all right*. “I’ll find the journal. I promise I will. I’ll start again tomorrow. We’ve been snowed in for weeks, but I’ll start the journey anew first thing.”

I babbled in a torrent of words. A cascade of shivers seized my limbs from the cold, driving rain, or my terror, or maybe

both.

He wrapped my hair around his hand, sending sharp prickles of pain shooting through my scalp.

“Why do you even think begging for your life or the life of someone you love will help you? Don’t you know begging turns me on? I could listen to you plead with me all day.” A smile of pure evil stretched across his face. “Look.”

He inclined my face toward his crotch.

Sure enough, a prominent bulge poked from his trousers.

I whimpered from the pain in my scalp and from his threats.

“Keep it up, and soon I’ll show you how good it feels to have me inside you. You’ll never want for Alexander once you’ve experienced me.”

Using his free hand, he seized a knife from a sheath on his belt.

I tried to kick him, but he simply lifted me higher with inhuman strength until my legs dangled in the air.

I grabbed his wrists to try to lessen the pain. Still, I kept flailing and kicking as he ran the blade tip across the front of my fur robe. The hide split apart.

I couldn’t let him see the bulge in my belly. “No, no, *no*. Balthazar, *please*.”

“Which one of us is in power here, hmm?” His evil gaze bore right through me.

“You are, Balthazar. Is that what you want? You want me to be subservient to you? I’ll do it. I’ll worship you.” I was hysterical, sobbing, saying stupid things, and trying to reason with a sociopath.

Balthazar yanked the blade across my deerskin dress.

The hide parted, and beads of blood filled the shallow gash he’d carved in my skin.

“Don’t, Balthazar, please. Do you want sexual favors? I’ll do it. I swear I’ll find the journal. Please.” I could barely understand what I was saying. I was sobbing so hard.

The rain pelted me, washing away my blood, and I thought I might be okay.

Maybe once he sees my fear, he’ll feel satisfied and leave me alone again.

Balthazar’s nostrils flared. “You’ll never stop me, bitch. Once you find the journal and deliver it to me, I promise to *kill* you, Olivia. The longer it takes for you to find it, the greater the pain I shall exact upon you. I will never leave you until the journal is in my hands.”

I tried to pull away, but his grip was too strong.

“Remember something, my beloved,” he said, stroking my cheek with his index finger. “I will always hunt you. I will find and torment you until your last dying breath.”

He drew his face closer to mine and whispered against my skin. “I will take everything you love and weaken your soul until you *belong* to me.”

He released my jaw, and my hand flew up to rub away the feel of him.

He shoved me backward and kicked me hard.

I fell to the ground.

“No!” I screamed, wrapping my arms around my bulging belly. I had to keep my child safe, to protect it.

Balthazar disappeared, fading from my eyes as I crumpled to the ground.

This was it. This was my final moment on earth. Wretched, heaving sobs escaped my lungs as I hunched over my belly.

“Olivia! Olivia! Where are you?” Emily cried.

I didn’t answer her. I just continued to sob.

She rushed toward me and fell to the ground beside me. When she rolled me over, her eyes filled with tears as she

gazed at my upper abdomen, marked by a demon's blade. The shallow wound had sealed already but the sting of it lingered.

"Oh, God," she cried. "Who did this to you? Was it the Kiowa?"

"No," I screamed. "It was Balthazar!"

"You...you're bleeding!" Emily pointed to the blood trickling staining my inner thighs.

She wrapped her arms around me and held me in the pouring rain.

"Oh, God," I cried out. The only thing that kept me going was saving my child.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Roman

Dawn fought through the dark clouds as approximately one hundred of the best Sioux warriors, Marcellious, and I set out in pursuit of the Kiowa. Our spirits were high. Our day would be a fortunate one.

“The Kiowa are probably tired of the rampage, too, and peace will be welcome,” Earth Bear said, riding next to Marcellious and me on horseback.

As we continued, the Thunderbird spirit rumbled through the sky. Lightning split the sky, halting our progress. No warrior wanted to be struck down by electrical bolts when riding across the plains. This ominous weather said to be a “sign of power,” lanced me with a feeling of unease.

“I don’t like this,” I said to Marcellious, who sat on his horse next to me. “I have a bad feeling in my gut.”

“I do, too,” Marcellious said.

The rain pelted us unceasingly, making me wish I had a head covering. We were all dressed in our deer-hide breeches and tops. I was used to engaging in battle fully armored. While our attire lent itself to ease of movement, we were all sitting ducks, ready to be picked off by spears, arrows, or bullets.

But the Kiowa were in the same place—I doubted they wore armor of any kind.

My unease grew as the day wore on, and I didn’t know why. The storm had passed, leaving us to slog across the wet,

muddy plains. My hair hung plastered to my scalp and neck, and all our warpaint had streaked, giving us a terrifying ghost-like appearance.

The disquiet had spread through us, even our horses, by day's end. We paused beneath a copse of trees, considering our next moves.

The horses stood alert, shifting side to side, scanning the horizon for signs of danger.

Marcellious' horse let out a nervous whinny and stomped his foreleg, which sent a ripple of nervousness through the herd.

"Remember," Grey Feather said, "if they don't agree to peace, we attack. Stay strong. Our numbers today are great, and theirs are small. We can easily vanquish them should it come to that."

My horse shifted side to side, its head pivoting back and forth.

"Easy. We're all right," I said.

But I didn't believe that for a second. Perhaps I should have listened to Olivia—something felt terribly wrong.

We continued our journey across the drenched plains, following the scout who had discovered the whereabouts of the Kiowa. Only when we cantered over the rise, expecting to see their teepees on the other side, we saw nothing but grassland. No Kiowa, no dwellings, no horse herd, nothing. Only a trampled patch of grass remained.

"What do we do now?" I said to Marcellious.

"Let's confer with the chief."

We turned our steeds and trotted to the front of the group, where Grey Feather rode with Earth Bear.

"A-ho, Chief," Marcellious said. "It seems the Kiowa have outfoxed us. Perhaps they were expecting us."

The chief's face sagged with worry. "Or perhaps they simply moved. They can't be traveling that fast. I've sent our

best scout, Tashunka, ahead to investigate. Don't worry. We'll find them," he said, but it sounded as if he sought to reassure himself.

Marcellious and I both nodded, but my stomach became a hard stone.

Every head, both human and equine, turned at the sound of thundering hooves. My eyes met the sight of hundreds of Native Americans on horseback, galloping over the hill, backlit by an enormous full moon sliding over the horizon.

"They've allied with another tribe!" Marcellious yelled. "Everyone prepare for attack!"

I kicked my horse into action and took off at a mad gallop.

Several of our warriors raised their bows and sent the arrows flying, their deadly carved arrowheads meeting their marks in the chests of the enemy. Others hurled spears.

Marcellious and I raised the rifles we'd been given, took aim, and shot.

But we were severely outnumbered.

The war cries of the Kiowa rippled through my spine, spurring me to action. I galloped toward a spear-wielding warrior and shot him through the chest.

He fell like a giant stone, trampled by the hooves of hysterical horses.

Several Sioux warriors had been struck down, hanging from their steeds or already on the ground, dead or dying.

We could not survive this—not when surrounded by so many Native Americans intent on slaughter.

I reined my horse to the right and took off toward a group of Kiowa on the ground, bludgeoning my fellow tribesmen with tomahawks. Given the jostling terrain under the horse's hooves, I took aim as best as possible and shot twice quickly, injuring or killing two of them.

Behind me came a blood-curdling scream.

I wheeled the horse in a circle, coming face to face with a Kiowa racing toward me.

I didn't have time to shoot him as he leaned over and grabbed me. We both fell to the ground.

I landed hard, the air exploding from my lungs and the rifle falling from my hands.

Before I could catch my breath, he was on top of me, knife raised, ready to plunge its deadly blade into my heart. His face was streaked with white and black, giving him the same unearthly appearance as all of us. The look on his face was hideous, a mask of hatred and violence.

I grabbed him and struggled to get purchase on his sweaty forearms. My muscles shook and quivered as I held his knife-wielding hand inches from my chest. Finally, I managed to flip him until I was on top. I struck him in the face with my fisted hand, knocking him unconscious. Then, I took his blade and buried it in his heart.

Jack-knifing to my feet, I looked around for my horse.

He stood, anxious and panicked, amid all this chaos.

I ran toward him and leaped onto his back. We took off again, heading for another enemy warrior.

All around me, the Sioux lay on the ground, moaning and crying, or eyes vacant, staring at Wakan Tanka.

Ahead, Marcellious galloped through a group of Kiowa, shooting wildly.

Several fell from their horses to the ground.

The twang of an arrow leaving its bow vibrated in the air, followed by a swift stab of pain as the arrowhead pierced my shoulder. I screamed in anguish and tore the arrow from my skin.

Another Kiowa warrior sprinted toward me on foot, his knife held high. He plunged the blade into my calf before I could react.

I kicked the warrior in the face with a cry of pain, and he fell backward.

To my right, Earth Bear navigated his steed toward another group as he shouted war cries.

Another Native American Indian raced toward him from behind.

“Look out!” I yelled, kicking my horse into a mad gallop.

The warrior threw his spear straight through Earth Bear’s side. The blade’s tip sliced through his body, and Earth Bear toppled to the ground.

“No!” I yanked my horse to a halt. Rifle in hand, I leaped to the ground and ran toward Earth Bear, who lay face down with the spear skewering him.

After throwing my rifle down, I rolled him to his side as gently as possible.

Blood spurted from his wound in a pulsing stream.

The Kiowa had stabbed Earth Bear right through his belly, beneath his ribcage.

I pressed my hand to the wound, pushing the spear tip backward. “Don’t die, Earth Bear. You’re going to make it.”

“It’s my time, Swift Hawk,” he struggled to say. “Great Spirit is calling me.”

He lifted a shaking hand.

“Look out,” he gasped.

I turned as the same warrior who had thrown his spear at Earth Bear powered toward me on foot, knife blade raised.

I lunged to my feet but tripped on my rifle, falling backward.

The Kiowa screamed something and threw his knife at me.

The blade struck me squarely in the abdomen, the same place as the spear through Earth Bear’s belly. I ripped the knife from my belly and stared, horrified, at a similar fountain of blood pulsing from my open wound.

“Oh, God,” I breathed. “I’m going to die.”

“Brother!” Marcellious yelled. “I’m coming!”

He galloped toward me, leaped from his horse, and dropped to the ground by my side.

“I’m dying,” I told him, clutching his shirt. “I’m not going to make it.”

Marcellious bolted to his feet, grabbed my arms, and dragged me away from the battle through the fallen Sioux and Kiowa hordes. Once he’d hauled me safely away, he said, “The Kiowa banded with the Comanche. That’s why their numbers are so great. The bastards tricked us.” He lifted his head and then directed his attention back to me. “We only have about twenty warriors left. Grey Feather still lives.”

“Good.” It took so much effort to talk. “Earth Bear is gone.”

I groaned and closed my eyes.

“Stay with me, brother. Don’t die!” Marcellious slapped my face.

I heaved my eyelids open. “Go. Warn the women and children and get them to safety. Ride fast and hard. There’s nothing you can do here. Tell Olivia I love her.”

Marcellious hesitated. “No, don’t say those words. I’ll stay with you. We can get help. You can’t die.”

I barked out a humorless laugh. “My body says otherwise. Go back to the village and get everyone to safety!”

Marcellious paused, then said, “We’ll see each other again, brother.”

All I could manage was a slight nod.

Marcellious rose, leaped on his horse, and galloped away from all this madness.

As my spirit began to fade, seeking solace in other realms away from this physical form, thoughts drifted through my mind like clouds.

I fought entire wars and survived. Now I'm to die at the hands of the Kiowa? Life is so unjust.

I pictured Olivia's beautiful face. *My beloved Olivia. I'm dying, and I can't even say goodbye to you. I'm sorry for disappointing you and leaving you this way.*

I gulped a few lungfuls of air, then surrendered to my inevitable demise.

"No, no, no," a familiar voice said. "You're dying. I have to get you out of here before it's too late. I will not let you die."

I fought to open my eyes and stared into the emerald-green gaze of the man who had rescued me from Balthazar. "You again. How did you find me? Why are you helping me?"

He ignored my questions and began to pat me down. "Where's your dagger?"

"Strapped to my...to my..." I paused, gathering the strength to speak. "It's strapped to my thigh."

"I need it. I need to get you to a safer place and time. You can't stay here, or you will die. I won't let that happen—this is only the beginning of what's to come. See that moon?"

I stared at the bright orb shining overhead, illuminating the blood bath several yards away.

"The full moon," I said. "Yes, I see it."

Thoughts of Olivia and our baby drifted through my mind. I'd never get to see them again in this lifetime.

"I can't leave. I won't leave my wife behind!"

"We don't have time to discuss this. You *will* die if I leave you here. Give me your dagger. *Now!*"

I retrieved my blade and handed it over. My mind blurred as I surrendered to the fade.

"Don't you close your eyes," the man said, shaking my shoulders. "You're not going to die on me—you're going to time travel, *now!*"

Time travel. The words made no sense to my disappearing mind. “I won’t time travel. I can’t leave Olivia or my child behind. I’d rather die than be separated from her.”

“Listen to me, Roman. You will do as I say. I will protect her while you are gone.”

I seized his wrist. “Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter who I am. What matters is this—I will travel you to a place that will heal you and get you better. If you want to see Olivia again, you will do as I say.” The man gripped my dagger tightly.

“I’ll find her in another lifetime. I made that promise.” My heavy eyelids drifted closed.

My life experiences began to fade, my memories rolling away like tumbleweeds. I didn’t have the strength to lift my hand, let alone speak.

My hand was lifted, and pain sliced across my palm. Confused, I struggled to open my eyes.

What’s happening here? I gave up. I’m letting go into the abyss. So why this pain?

Beads of blood seeping from the gash in my hand gave me the answer.

The mysterious green-eyed man had used my time-traveling dagger to slice my palm. He directed a clear-eyed gaze at me.

“You’re going to safety. We will meet again, Roman, I promise. Take this.” He retrieved what looked like a folded-up piece of paper and pressed it into my bleeding palm. “Guard this with your life.”

My fingers curled around the paper obediently.

“I’m going to safety,” I repeated, not really understanding what the words meant in my fuzzed-out brain.

“*Ya hamiat alqamar fi allayl,*” the man intoned in a loud, clear voice. He continued the ancient chant.

“Wait! I don’t want to leave,” I protested as comprehension dawned. I was being sent to another land, another time and place, without my consent.

I gazed at my dagger, which glowed brightly, illuminated from within. My cells scrambled, all thoughts dissipated, and the world darkened. Thinking this was the death I’d sought, I surrendered to unconsciousness.

When I woke again, fighting through the drowse, nausea gripped my bowels. I was going to throw up. Without opening my eyes, I let out a moan.

“Son,” a man said. “Son. Can you hear me? Stay with me. You’ve got to stay with me. Can you hear me?”

The voice sounded caring and kind, but I couldn’t open my eyes. I was too weak. And so I faded into unconsciousness, leaving this world, Olivia, my unborn child, and all I held dear.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Olivia

I slipped into some dissociative fugue as arms lifted me and moved me through the hellish landscape of dead bodies following the slaughter of the Sioux tribe. I drifted outside my body as I was gently laid on furs inside one of the remaining teepees. Vaguely, I became aware of two voices—I was pretty sure they were Leaping Deer and Emily.

“She’s miscarried,” Leaping Deer whispered. “The trauma of the fight was too much for her.”

“Oh, God, no!” Emily cried. “Olivia will be devastated.”

“Olivia might be dead herself if we don’t stop the bleeding. Quick, make me up a poultice of those herbs I showed you which stop bleeding,” Leaping Deer said.

“The one with Black Cohosh?”

“Yes, that’s the one. Move quickly, child. She’s losing blood fast!”

I slipped into a thundercloud of mental confusion, dark and violent. I came to, screaming.

Emily seized my hand and murmured in my ear. “Shh. We had to give you something to stop the bleeding. I’m so sorry, but you’ve had a miscarriage. Stay with it, Olivia. Don’t fight the process.”

But how could I help but fight? I fought against everything that had happened to me. Balthazar. The slaughter of innocent tribal members. So much loss.

A howling sob erupted from my throat. I'd lost my baby. I blamed Balthazar. I hoped death was claiming me—I wanted to die more than anything.

As days went on, my world transformed into a pitch-dark reality. Nothing mattered to me anymore. I sobbed, falling into apathy.

At night, I was tortured with dreams that turned into nightmares. I would see Roman and me in a room full of children, happy and content. Then, we would be engulfed by fire, and my family would be consumed by the flames.

I would wake up sweating and sobbing, sure that this would be my fate.

Emily sat with me constantly. At times she joined me in weeping.

At other times I yelled and screamed at her. She would stare at me, her face a mask of torment and sorrow, wondering how to bring me back. Then she would scurry away.

She needn't have taxed her mind with such wonderings. I didn't want to return. The one thing I knew was this—Balthazar had accomplished his goal. He had broken me, heart, mind, and soul, and I'd lost my will to live.

Several days after I'd lost my child, Marcellious returned with a handful of Sioux warriors as I headed back to my teepee after relieving my bladder.

I didn't want to be seen, so I hurried toward my dwelling on bare feet as stones and sticks bit at my heels and toes, making me bleed. Once inside, I pulled the furs tightly around me, leaving only my eyes and ears uncovered.

Emily and Marcellious stood outside my hide-covered cave of isolation, talking in hushed tones. But their words blasted my eardrums like stampeding elephants.

“We can't find Roman,” Marcellious said. “No sign of him. There's no sign of a body, so they either disposed of it or captured Roman and took him with them.”

“Oh, dear,” Emily said. “We can’t tell Olivia. She’s too frail.”

I *knew* what had happened to Roman—Balthazar had stolen him away again and killed him. Roman was probably hanging from Balthazar’s dungeon in pieces. Cockroaches would drop from the ceiling and nibble at his bloody flesh with wicked, minuscule pincers.

“There are so many dead men lying on the plains. Not one lived save for the few who rode back with me,” Marcellious said. “The Kiowa, those lying, thieving dogs, tricked us all. Even Earth Bear is dead.”

“How is the chief taking the loss of his only son?”

“He’s not faring much better than Olivia is.”

“I can hear you!” I shrieked.

It grew quiet outside, and I thought Emily and Marcellious had left. I hoped they’d left. I didn’t have the energy or the desire to talk to anyone sane. But, no, the door flap opened, and Emily and Marcellious entered, creeping before me like two ghosts. Or maybe I was the ghost, witnessing them from the pit of hell.

“Marcellious will find Roman,” Emily said, the corners of her lips tugged down.

“We’ve got scouts scouring the plains searching for signs of him. We’ll find him,” Marcellious echoed.

“I don’t want to hear this!” I pressed my palms to my ears. “Balthazar has him. He’s chopped him to bits and feeding Roman to his pet insects!”

Emily and Marcellious exchanged a look dripping with sympathy.

“Stop looking at one another! You disgust me right now. Get out of here and leave me alone!” My voice rasped like I was unsure how to speak.

“We want to help you, Olivia,” Emily said, wringing her hands. Fat tears dripped from her cheeks.

I sat up, snarling like a badger poked with a fire iron. “You think you can help me? Do you think you can help me? No one can help me—I don’t want to be helped! I’ve lost everything. Everyone dear to me, everyone I cared about—they’re all dead.” I crawled toward Marcellious and crouched before him. “And you—you’re *evil*. Why did you live while a good man died? You were born of darkness, and it will consume you!”

Wracking sobs shook my lungs, and I dropped my head in my hands. “Oh, God, I wish I were dead. It hurts so much!”

“Olivia.” Marcellious squatted next to me, his face dripping with compassion better used on someone other than me. “I know what it feels like to lose someone you love. I lost my beloved Theadora and felt as much as you do.”

I clawed at Marcellious’ face. “You can’t know what I’m going through. I’ve lost *everything!*”

Marcellious seized my wrists. “I can, and I do know. Theadora was nine months pregnant with our child when my darkness destroyed her. I can help you. I can heal you if you let me.”

I simply stared at him through vacant, hollow eyes. He looked so far away. *How can he be so far away and yet so close?* Oh, God, I was losing my mind, losing touch with reality. I slipped into delusions, unable to tell the difference between what was real and what was the conjuring of my broken mind.

I gnawed at my fingers, biting my knuckles. “Where’s Roman? What did you do with him?”

“I don’t have him,” Marcellious said. “He was severely injured, bleeding to death. He begged me to ride back here and warn everyone, but I was too late when I got here.”

I drew my knees and hugged them. Then, I began to rock, rock, rock some more like a mad woman. “The wolves took Roman. They dragged his carcass away and ate it.”

“Olivia, no,” Emily said. She crouched next to me and pressed her knuckles to her mouth.

“Balthazar has him. He’s dead now. Balthazar sent the wolves to retrieve him and drag him to Balthazar’s dungeon.” I chewed on the tender webbing between my thumb and forefinger, relishing the blood that trickled into my mouth.

“I don’t think so, Olivia,” Emily said. “We don’t believe Balthazar has Roman. Nor were there any signs of wolves.”

I leveled my gaze at her. “The wolves are fat and happy. They ate the dead Sioux, and then they ate Roman.”

I kept up with the rocking, rocking, endlessly rocking while chewing on my hand.

“Honey, stop biting yourself,” Emily said.

“He’s dead because of me,” I said, ignoring her. “I didn’t want him to go. I sent him off with negative energy. I cursed him, and if there’s one thing Balthazar gets off on, it’s a curse. Balthazar loves treachery and deceit. My curse was like a beacon that drew right to Roman. The wolves, the wolves, the wolves... The wolves found him first, leading Balthazar right to my husband. It’s all my fault!”

I began a terrible keening, a banshee mourning the dead.

“Olivia, no, it wasn’t your fault,” Marcellious said, crouching beside me. “Roman fought valiantly. We were outnumbered. The Kiowa combined forces with the Comanche. We were completely outnumbered by the sea of warriors sweeping over the hills, descending on us like a plague of locusts.”

“Go!” I held up a shaking hand and pointed toward the door. “Leave me to my pain. Stop wasting your time on me. I don’t deserve it. I sent Roman to *die*.”

“Olivia, stop this raving! You’re scaring me!” Emily said, once more wringing her hands.

I began to rock again. “You should have seen Balthazar. When he came to me, he was so angry that I thought he’d kill me then and there. But, no, killing me would have been merciful, and Balthazar has no mercy. He promised to break and destroy me by taking away everything and everyone I love.” My body swayed forward and back and sometimes in

circles, round and round. “He promised me, and he’s a man of his word. He kept his promise. Oh, yes, he did. He left me a shell of the woman I used to be.”

I brought my hand to my mouth again and gnawed on my flesh.

I lifted my arm and mimicked his actions over and over.

Emily sobbed. “Olivia, stop!”

She tried to seize my hand, but I still had strength left in my body, enough, at least, to push her away.

Tears filled my eyes as I looked at her.

“We’re going to help you,” Emily said, crying hard. “Tell her, Marcellious. Tell Olivia that we’re going to help her get better.”

Marcellious knew better than to speak. Even he could tell I had crossed a ledge leading to nowhere, and recovery wasn’t possible.

“Tell her, Marcellious,” Emily pleaded. “I can’t lose you, Olivia.”

I threw myself onto the bison furs face down and wept uncontrollably.

Shuffling sounds drifted past, indicating Emily and Marcellious leaving.

I could barely hear Emily saying, “We’re losing her, Marcellious!”

Marcellious said, “No, I promise we won’t lose Olivia. You need care and comfort, too, Emily. Let me take care of you.”

Silence settled around me.

After a time, another voice interrupted my grieving sojourn—Grey Feather.

“We’re going to find Roman, Little Moon,” he said.

I rolled on my back and shook my head over and over.

“He’s gone,” I said, my throat raw. “Roman is dead.”

“You don’t know that, child,” he said, looking down at me with kind eyes. He looked awful—haggard and worn as if he’d aged ten thousand years since I last saw him. His wrinkled face hung heavy, the flesh dripping from the bones, swollen with grief and sorrow.

“I do,” I whispered. “It must be so.”

“What did Balthazar say to you to make you believe this?” Grey Feather said.

I grabbed my hair and pulled, writhing back and forth. “Balthazar does what he wants. He’s heedless to other people’s needs or desires. He takes, and he takes, and he takes. He told me he would break me, and he did.”

My weeping tirade began anew, and I covered my face.

Grey Feather leaned on his staff. “We’ve lost so many, Little Moon. We must move—relocate and get to a safer spot.”

I rolled over, pushed to my hands and knees, and crawled toward him. Lying prostrate at his feet, I said, “I can’t go with you. You’ve got to leave me here to die. I refuse to keep living—Balthazar will continue to hunt me and take whatever’s left. You’ve got to let me go.”

My body shook with sobs.

Somehow, Grey Feather pulled himself out of his grief and said in a strong, clear voice, “You’re going with us. We’ll find Roman. We leave tomorrow and will take care of you, Little Moon.”

“No!” I wailed. “I refuse to go with you.”

“And I refuse to listen to you. You’re going, and that’s final! We need to find a place where we can all heal—you’re not the only one who’s suffering. I lost my only son as well as my wife. I, too, am grieving.”

He turned and lumbered from the teepee, leaving me alone once more.

I rose to my knees and tore at my hair and face.

“I’m not leaving,” I said to no one. “I’m going to stay and kill myself.”

I lurched to my feet and paced unsteadily around my living quarters. As I walked, sweat poured down my face and neck. My stench wafted from my unwashed body, drifting toward my nose, making me want to gag. My legs began to give way. I was too weak to perform the simple act of pacing. So, I fell to the ground, buried my face in the furs, and cried myself to sleep.

My dreams were no better. I roamed through bleak landscapes, where thunder shook the skies, and the rain poured down in stinging sheets. I slogged through the mud. I swam through streams. Then, I sank beneath my liquid world of tears, watching Balthazar shove me backward and kicking me brutally against the ground.

I saw Roman, blood pouring from his body, rivers of crimson coloring the stream I swam through. The ruby-red liquid got in my eyes, nose, and mouth. I gulped Roman’s blood, drinking it as if it would keep me close to him. I choked and coughed on his life essence as if my body rejected it. And then I began violently heaving, and ropy strings of scarlet burst from my mouth, swirling around my face.

A man lifted me from the deep water and brought me to shore.

“Wake up, Olivia,” he said. “Wake up.”

Startled, I burst awake.

A faint glimmer of light came from the few glowing embers in my fire.

Is that a shadow moving around me? Wait. It looks like the outline of a man.

I squinted, trying to see something, anything. “Who’s there?”

The man said nothing.

But I thought I saw a glimmer of emerald green flashing from his eyes.

Not possible, Olivia. You're hallucinating. It's pretty dark in here. How can I possibly see the color green?

The door flap lifted, revealing a sliver of the moon. The outline of a man stood watching me before stooping to leave.

“Don’t go,” I said.

I tried to get up, but my legs wouldn’t carry me.

“Don’t try to come to me,” the man said in a British accent similar to Roman’s. “Save your strength. I will come to you.”

He crossed the teepee with supernatural speed and grace. His warm hands touched my face, and I wanted to weep joyfully at the soothing contact. His lips found my forehead, and he kissed my eyebrows, eyelids, and head.

“I want you to get better. I want you to get strong.”

I didn’t fight him. Instead, I melted into his touch.

His fingertips burrowed into my scalp, massaging and caressing. “Get strong, Olivia. Let me help you heal.”

His voice came from nowhere and everywhere, all at once, echoing around me. The deep baritone reached inside my soul and found a place inside me that still wanted to live, love, and find Roman again and make more babies.

But I wanted to see the man who stirred me this way, reaching past my grief and discovering a glimmer of something undamaged. His words and kisses served to fuel me back to life. I strained my eyes, peering hard into the blackness that permeated the teepee.

“Please tell me who you are. I think I’ve seen you watching me from a distance. I want to see you. I want to know who you are.”

“You will know soon enough. We will meet again, my beloved.” His hand swept across my forehead, the way my mother used to soothe me when I was ill.

Don’t think about her. She’s dead to me.

I pushed those thoughts away and focused on the warmth of this man’s touch. His fingers comforted me in a way no one

had since Balthazar had broken me. I clung to these feelings drowning me and discovered a string to follow to safety. But if I moved abruptly, too fast, or tugged the string too hard, it would snap, and I'd sink like a stone.

“Stay, Olivia. Get strong,” he said.

Then he rose, leaving a cold vacuum of air where his warmth had once been.

I shivered, drawing the bison hides around me. Had I imagined the man? Had my shattered mind conjured up something I could hold onto, some wisp of sanity to pull me out of the depths?

I brushed my fingertips across my face.

I think it was real—I think he was real. But who is he, and what does he want with me? Was this the same man who had rescued Roman from Balthazar? Might Roman and I have some strange benefactor?

Whoever the man was, or whatever he was, or whether or not I'd dreamed him, I felt a restorative measure of peace. I vowed not to die—at least not tonight, anyway. And in the morning, I could assess everything and make new choices.

Yet when I drifted into a night of sleep as dark and weighted as the space surrounding me, I became uncertain if I would ever wake up.

Had death mercifully claimed me after all?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Olivia

It had been two weeks of endless trekking across the unending plains. Two weeks of traveling with our small, haggard tribe. No songs were sung, no idle chatter was exchanged—it was like we were ghosts, having abandoned our spirits on the day of the Kiowa attack. Yet still, we moved as if to remind ourselves of our earthly existence.

Grey Feather could never settle for long in a place before he up and moved us again.

I didn't care one bit. With no will left, I simply did what I was told. You want me to go here? Done. You want me to travel for three days until I rest? Done. You want me to haul firewood from the foothills? All right.

Nothing mattered anymore.

Nothing, except for the memory of being caressed by the man who came to me that night. His presence in the dark of the night, in the smothering murkiness of my teepee two weeks ago, made no sense to me. He'd soothed me—speaking to me with tenderness.

How could the darkness be kind? Could demons still hold beating hearts, a sliver of light inside their shattered souls?

I refused to believe that. And yet...his touch had been so tender, speaking of care and comfort. His touch urged me to slowly come back to life. I wanted to be in his presence again.

I wanted him to come back to me. But he never returned, and I felt more lonely like I'd experienced a dream that faded away.

Had I made him up? He was here one minute and gone the next. Could he be a demon like Balthazar, or was he a fiction of my imagination?

I refused to believe that he possessed the same demonic soul as Balthazar. No, he gave me comfort and strength. The darkneses I'd encountered were all evil and ruthless, especially Balthazar, who had no kindness. Balthazar inflicted pain and sorrow. The man who came to me, whoever he was, comforted me. No darkness would ever do that. But the way he disappeared and his swift, graceful movements only made me question my encounter and consider that maybe he was the darkness.

I hoped I would get answers soon.

“Olivia!”

The sound of my name broke my memory-wandering. I looked up, squinting at the high grasses that surrounded me.

“Olivia!” The tone was sharper, more insistent.

I cocked my head and stared at the dull-purple spikes of the switchgrass.

“*Olivia!*” My name was uttered as a scream this time.

The grasses in my line of sight rippled, and a bobbing shape pushed through the tall plants.

I studied the shape until it took on form and meaning.

Why is Emily running toward me?

“Olivia,” she said breathlessly once she stood before me. “You can’t keep wandering off like that. I was so worried when I turned to speak to you, and you were gone.”

I regarded her through my insane mind, as one might consider the discovery of new animal species. It was as if I looked at my world through a lens from a distance—I was so removed from my body I was practically catatonic.

Emily shook my sleeve. “Olivia, quit looking at me like that. You’re scaring me! Now come with me.”

She tugged me as one might drag a naughty child.

I obediently followed after her, stumbling as if my legs were unused to walking, even though we did it every day.

Being with Emily, however, reminded me of loss and pain. Emily’s hand did not comfort me at night. Balthazar had marked me. And the trauma of that fight had made me lose my baby.

When we arrived at our resting spot, I lowered to the ground to drink from the small creek meandering through the alluvial plains like a garden snake. I stared at a gaunt-faced, hollow-eyed stranger with stringy hair hanging from her head like burnt embers.

Who was this person who stared back at me? Once, I’d had hair that was lustrous and fiery. I’d fought for the weak, moved like the wind, and carried myself proudly.

I shook my head, and the stranger mimicked me, her ugly face rippling in the cold water.

“Who are you?” I whispered. “Why can’t you provide any comfort to me? You look like hell, that’s why. You have nothing comforting to share.”

I sighed and rose, scanning my surroundings.

Our paltry group sat on the ground or horseback, consuming a midday meal.

Marcellious strode in my direction, carrying something that looked like jerky.

My stomach lurched.

He thrust the dried meat toward me. “Here. You need to eat.”

I grabbed it from his hands and gnawed it like a ravenous animal. I’d been doing that a lot lately. Any manners I once possessed had slipped away, left behind in a pool of Roman’s and my blood.

Marcellious looked askance at me and then directed his attention elsewhere. “We need a plan.”

“What could we possibly need a plan for?” I wiped my face with the back of my hand.

“Are we still looking for the journal? For the sun and the moon daggers? Or possibly finding John James? Which one do you want to focus on?” Marcellious said, grimacing as his eyes met mine. Quickly, he averted his gaze.

“Fuck John James and fuck you. There’s no point in searching for anything anymore. Balthazar has won. He can come for me at any time. I’m ready for my death. I want to join Roman and my child.” I gave another swipe across my lips with my hand. “Besides, I want nothing to do with the memories and musings of the bitch who bore me.”

Marcellious shook his head.

I finished the last of my jerky and scanned Marcellious like a sniffing dog, searching for the next treat.

“That’s all you get,” he said, reading my mind. “We have to ration food until we find something else to catch. The fucking Kiowa stole all our stores of food.”

He spat a thick wad of phlegm on the ground near his moccasin-covered feet and crossed his arms over his chest.

I stared at the slimy spit, then turned toward the meandering creek as it made its way from the foothills, wandering as aimlessly as me.

“We can’t give up, Olivia. Think of all the innocent people in danger from Balthazar.”

“You do it. I won’t step in your way,” I said with a dismissive wave.

“Fuck, Olivia! When are you going to snap out of this? I went through loss, and I survived.”

I spun to face him, enraged. “You became an *asshole*, Marcellious. You let the darkness of pain and loss consume you. You tried to destroy Roman and kill me, so don’t assume sainthood, understood?”

Not waiting for an answer, I ranted on. “I’ll *never* get over what I learned about my mother, the woman who raised me and cared for me. She tried to *kill* me, don’t you see? She *hated* me. She was too busy whoring through time to have any love left for me. And now, I plan on hating her for the rest of my days. I want *nothing* to do with her. Hell, maybe she even planned this whole thing.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Marcellious’ forehead furrowed.

I waved my arms over my head. “Maybe she and Balthazar had a personal commitment to one another. He knew she birthed me. Mom would disappear all the time on her expeditions to dig up ‘artifacts.’” I made quotation marks around the word artifacts, and my lip pulled back in a sneer. “She probably snuck away to be with him and *fuck* her main lover, Balthazar. And then they’d scheme.”

I rubbed my hands together. “Yes, I’ll bet they schemed on how to destroy me should I escape my mother’s wrath. I’ll bet Mom begged him to break me. This was probably all her doing.”

“Olivia, do you know how crazy and delusional you sound? You’ve become unhinged,” Marcellious said. He spun on his heel to go.

I glanced at the knife sheathed at his waistband. “Wait!”

“What for?” He glanced over his shoulder.

I struck like a snake and snatched the blade from its holder.

“Olivia, what are you doing?” He lunged for the knife, but I held it out of reach.

“What I should have done a long time ago. I flung my head forward and bent at the hips so my hair fell before me. Then, gripping it like a ponytail, I cut at least ten inches off in one swift move.

“Olivia!” Marcellious seized the blade from my hand. “Fuck. What have you done now?”

“I’m getting rid of the memory of my mother. She lived in the ends of my hair. I’ve never cut it. She’s dead to me, and now I’ve sliced her from my head.” I held up the thick locks of hair like I was holding the enemy’s scalp. “Here lies Mom, destroyer of lives, whore to the masses!”

I waved my hair like a flag before flinging it away.

A breeze caught my hair and scattered it along.

“Fly free!” I called to the floating wisps. “Begone from my life.”

I whirled to face Marcellious. “There. See? I have no mother any longer.” I slashed my hand across my neck. “She’s *dead* to me. *Dead!* Do you hear me?”

“Yeah, I hear you. You’re insane. That’s what you are. Let me know when you’re ready to devise a plan.” He yanked the knife from my hand, sheathed it, and continued.

“We don’t need a plan,” I called after him. “I’m done. We’re not going to find the damn journal.”

I turned and faced the foothills where a few sparse trees stood. Further past them were more trees. It wasn’t a dense forest, not by any means. But it was a welcome relief from the unceasing grasslands we usually trekked across, so I decided to explore.

I followed the edge of the winding creek. The sound of gurgling water tumbling over the rocks used to soothe me but no more. Now it sounded harsh, like drumbeats pounding out a rhythm for the end of life as I knew it.

As I entered the wooded area, I was reminded of Seattle. My life in Seattle was nothing more than a dream, the stuff of fiction. In fact, as I recalled it, I began to wonder if it was all some make-believe fantasy. Did I ever really live there? Was Moon Lee even real? Was Papa? Tristan? Anyone from my past?

Life as a time traveler wreaked havoc on the brain. When you’d lived in several historical periods, as I had now, the fabric of so-called “reality” seemed tenuous. And now that I’d

experienced so much devastating loss, my very hold on sanity was questionable, at best.

Exhausted from my short jaunt, I stopped to rest at the side of the stream, plunking my behind on a smooth rock. As was my norm, I began to cry. I'd become so weak I was literally a stranger to myself. That glimpse of myself in the creek earlier was a total shocker. I used to train long and hard. Hours were spent in the gym honing my skills and teaching people how to defend themselves. I'd been so proud of myself. I was a warrior, an unstoppable force.

Now I could barely climb a hill without having to stop to rest. How sad and tragic my life had become.

A rustling sounded in the woods up ahead, and I stiffened in alarm. I was too weak to ward off even an attack from a child. What if it was the Kiowa? I'd be dead in a matter of seconds.

I held my breath, afraid to move, to breathe, to do anything that might alert the intruder to my presence.

A figure picked his way through the woods, moving slowly.

I wondered if the same darkness had rescued Roman and stroked my head two weeks ago. But no, this approaching stranger walked slightly hunched over like an old man.

The weak winter sunlight pushed through the clouds overhead, sending streaks of light through the bare branches of the trees. The light beams landed on him, illuminating his features.

I stared in disbelief. Was this a trick of my eyes? Had Balthazar sent this conjured image to fuck with my mind even more?

With a cry, I lurched to my feet and raced toward my papa.

"Papa!" I shouted.

He looked up in surprise as I approached.

"Oh, Papa! I thought I'd never see you again," I cried, throwing my arms around his neck and hugging him hard. "I

thought you died! I watched Tristan shoot you. I saw with my own eyes how you crumpled to the ground.”

He patted my back.

“There, there,” he said in a voice as cracked as broken branches.

I paused. The voice didn’t sound like my papa. But it had to be him, it just had to. The resemblance was uncannily similar.

“I should have believed you.” I sobbed into his shoulder. “I shouldn’t have been so willful. You were right about everything, the time travel, everything. I was a fool to not have listened to you. And there’s this crazy demon stalking me now, and I lost my baby, and, oh! I married a wonderful man. Oh, Papa, you would love Roman! He’s everything Tristan was not. He’s noble and principled, strong and honest. He was a gladiator when I met him in ancient Rome.”

Papa kept on patting me over and over.

“Can you believe it? I traveled to ancient Rome. I lived with Roman and his housekeeper for a while and acted unkindly. You wouldn’t have liked the way I acted. You would have scolded me, and you would have been right. I misbehaved when Roman and Amara were only trying to help.”

I kept talking non-stop, telling him practically everything I’d endured over the past few years.

He said nothing and just kept on patting my back.

“I love you so much, Papa,” I choked out. “So much. If I had listened to you, none of this would have happened. It’s possible. I mean, who needs to go through this kind of hell to learn a life lesson? And what’s the lesson I needed to learn? To not attach to anything or anyone? Because that’s what I think. I think I’m destined to be alone, running from Balthazar until he finally kills me once and for all.”

I became aware that the awkward touching on my back had ceased. Papa stood stiffly, his arms by his sides.

“What’s the matter, Papa?” I said, pushing away to look at him. *Yep, same weathered, kindly face as always.* “Did I say the wrong thing? I couldn’t help it. I’ve gone through so much sorrow I really needed to talk to someone. And here you are in the flesh, standing before me!”

I beamed at him. It was the first smile to cross my face in weeks.

Papa chewed on his lower lip, a gesture I’d never seen him do.

I took a step back.

“I’m sorry, dear. I’m sorry you’ve experienced so much loss and tragedy,” he said, his expression a study of bewilderment.

That seems like the correct thing to say. So why do I feel so confused all of a sudden?

“Thank you, Papa. That means a lot to me.”

“Dear,” he began.

Did Papa ever call me dear? He called me many things like sweetheart; when I was little, he called me his little monkey. But dear?

My face creased in confusion.

“Papa, what is it?” My voice shook.

“I’m sorry, dear, but I’m not your father,” the man said.

“What do you mean?” I drew back. “You look just like him.”

“I’m not. I’m...”

Something crashed through the forest. We both whipped our heads to the side to see who it was.

Marcellious stormed toward me, a stupid smile on his face. “I’m so sorry, sir. This is my wife. She lost her mind when she lost our baby. Olivia, my love, please leave this kindly old man alone. You’ve mistaken him for someone he is not.”

He held out his hand.

“I’m not your wife, you idiot! I think you’re the one who’s insane if you think that.” I reeled away from Marcellious.

“Sweetheart,” he said, placing his arm around my shoulders, “let’s just head back to the others, shall we?”

I wriggled out from under his arm. “No! I’m not going anywhere with you. You’re not my husband!”

“I’m sorry, sir. This is how she’s been since we lost our baby.” Marcellious lifted his palms in the air.

I swung at Marcellious’s jaw, but it glanced off him ineffectually.

“*Sweetheart*,” Marcellious said in a warning tone.

“I’m not your sweetheart. I’m nothing to you,” I said, lowering my head to butt his chest.

He stepped quickly out of the way.

“Look, miss. I’m sorry you thought I was your father, and I’m truly sorry you’ve suffered. I know what it’s like to suffer,” the man said, interrupting my tirade.

I glanced over at him. I’d been so incensed at Marcellious that I’d nearly forgotten the man was here.

“Don’t apologize,” I said, peering at him. “You have my father’s face. I thought you were my father, but I was mistaken.”

“Perhaps I can explain,” the man said, spreading his arms wide. “There’s probably a reason I look like your father.”

“There is? What is it?”

“Well, I have a confession to make. I allowed you to speak longer than I should have. I probably should have stopped you when you began.” A sheepish, apologetic expression dragged at his features. “But I became fascinated by your story.”

“You did?” My eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“I’ve studied Timebornes for most of my life.”

My head drew back as if he had slapped me. “What? What do you mean?”

“Allow me to introduce myself.” He took a step forward and extended his hand. “My name is John James.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Olivia

Standing in the foothills above the tribal encampment, I stared unblinking at the man before me.

The creek continued to gurgle, and the birds kept chirping, but I stood, shocked. “You’re John James? But you look like my father. How is this possible?”

I glanced at Marcellious, who seemed as dumbfounded as me.

John flashed me a benign, friendly smile. “Believe me, I have answers and a few questions of my own. I spend so much time in isolation—nobody wants to hear what I say. Might you do me the honor of speaking with me at my place? It’s not far from here. It’s a comfortable dwelling to share my thoughts.”

He swept his arm to the right, keeping that pope-like smile on his face.

I continued to stand like a gaping moron.

Marcellious said, “I will go with you.”

“And you, miss?” John James said. “Will you join me also?”

I glared at Marcellious, then turned to John James and nodded. “My name’s Olivia. And this is Marcellious.”

“Perfect! It’s a pleasure!” John James said.

We strolled at a welcome meander, given my weakened state.

Marcellious walked behind us.

I dropped back to speak to Marcellious.

“Why did you call me your wife? I wouldn’t marry you even if a gun was to my head,” I hissed.

“I thought you were in trouble. I was only trying to help. Believe me, I don’t want to be wedded to you any more than you want to be wedded to me.” He left my side and quickened his steps to catch up with John James.

“Bastard,” I muttered.

As we made our way through the woods, I noticed birds chirping and the play of the sun through the bare-leaved branches. I hadn’t seen anything except my dark and vicious thoughts for weeks.

I stopped to marvel at my surroundings. Although still icy-cold and wintry, the forest appeared beautiful, with snow patches here and there. I blinked, almost bewildered to notice everything. It was like the fog clearing, and I embraced it for however long it lasted.

“Hey. Olivia! Keep up!” Marcellious demanded, walking toward me. He grabbed my arm and tugged me along.

I wrenched my arm away. “I don’t need your help to walk, asshole.”

“You sure seem to. Keep moving! I guess I must babysit you until we reach James’ place.” He glowered.

I simmered but said nothing, following along.

We arrived at a small cottage, barely big enough to accommodate one person, let alone three. We squeezed into the one-room dwelling.

John James retrieved a wooden box and a metal milk canister from the floor and placed them around his makeshift table made from a tree trunk and a piece of a door.

“Can I get you some water?” John James said.

“Yes, that would be lovely,” I said, having re-discovered my manners somewhere.

“Sure. Thanks.” Marcellious perched on the overturned milk canister.

I sat on the chair and studied my surroundings as John James poured water into three glass jars from a pitcher.

The cottage had been crafted from hewn logs and had one sash window. A metal frame bearing a stuffed mattress and a couple scratchy-looking wool blankets stood pushed against the wall. A squat potbelly stove held court in the corner, with one iron burner on top. A greasy cast iron pan rested on top of the burner.

My fingers itched to take the pan down to the creek and clean it. I supposed John James relied on heat over cleanliness to sanitize his food.

Herbs and native plants hung upside down from every rafter, giving the cottage a fragrant, earthy smell. Papers with strange diagrams on them lay scattered on the table before us.

I peered at one of the papers. Numbers, lines, and notes covered the page, but John James’ handwriting was too tiny to be legible.

John James scooped up the papers, tapped them into a tidy bundle, and set them on his bed. Then, he retrieved the water and placed the glasses before us.

“It’s from a nearby spring,” he said as he lifted his glass to his lips. “Best water you’ll ever taste.”

I took a small sip, then gulped several more swallows. It tasted divine.

“I can pour you some more,” he said, looking at me expectantly.

I was consumed with hunger and thirst.

“Yes, please, and thank you,” I said, thrusting the jar toward him.

“And you, sir?” John James said to Marcellious.

“I’m good. I haven’t been starving myself, of late, or depriving myself of water.” He skewered me with his gaze

before turning back to John James.

John James retrieved the pitcher, poured more water for me, then set the pitcher in the center of the table. “I’ve got some hardtack, too. Would you like some?”

My stomach growled at the thought of food. “Yes, please.”

“And for you, sir?”

Marcellious gave a grunt and a nod.

After the tin plate of hardtack had been set in the middle of the table, I reached for one.

A rock-hard cracker equivalent had never tasted so good. After consuming one, I reached for another.

Marcellious lifted his chin as if giving approval to my appetite. Then, he said to John James, “What were those drawings you had on the table? They made no sense to me.”

“Nor should they.” John James settled on the wooden crate. “I’m a scholar, you see. I study time travel. Those were diagrams of mathematical calculations and conjectures regarding time travel.”

Marcellious and I exchanged a glance.

“Are you a time traveler?” I asked, sneaking a glance at the hardtack.

Would it be impolite to eat another?

“Help yourself, dear. I have more,” John James said as if reading my hunger signals.

“Are you sure?” I said.

“Absolutely! I make these biscuits all the time.” John James beamed at me. “And, in answer to your question, no, I’m not a time traveler. But I study it. In fact, I’m rather obsessed with it. Generations before me have been studying Timebornes. We’ve been carrying the torch for centuries. That’s why I have no friends and live alone. I usually have to pick up and move a lot, but I’ve been in this place for several months. It’s a sweet little home, don’t you think?”

He smiled as he gazed at his surroundings.

“Yes, it’s lovely,” I said.

Marcellious said nothing.

“Anyway...” John James drummed his hands on the table. “Back to time travel. I’ve devoted my entire life to it. I have to say, it’s truly an honor to meet a time traveler.”

He fixed his gaze on me.

“Marcellious is a Timeborne, too. Marcellious and my husband, Roman,” I said, then slid down a river of sorrow at thoughts of my presumed-dead husband. “When Marcellious said he was my husband, he was only kidding.”

I stabbed Marcellious with my gaze.

“I understand,” John James said, lifting both palms before him. “You’re not the first woman whose husband or friend has tried to protect them. Most people think I’m insane with my constant babbling about time travel. But honestly, I was *so* pleased to find a time traveler. And you say there are three of you nearby? What good fortune my day has become!”

He puffed up his chest.

I studied his face, still perplexed about why he looked just like my father.

“Quit staring, Olivia. You’re probably making him uncomfortable,” Marcellious said.

“You don’t get it, Marcellious. John James looks *exactly* like my father. He doesn’t merely *resemble* him. He’s an exact copy.” I turned to John James and said, “I’m sorry for staring, but that’s why.”

“Huh,” Marcellious said.

“Don’t worry about it. Apology accepted,” John James said. “I’m just glad to be conversing with two people who aren’t threatening to put me in an asylum.”

“We’ve actually been looking for you. Perhaps both of us are having good fortune today,” I said.

John James pulled back his head and blinked. “You have? Why?”

“We’re in trouble. A demon named Balthazar is hunting me. He wants to destroy me, but he wants me to find the journal my mother kept during this period. Her name was Alina, and she wrote how she found you and that you could help her.”

My stomach tightened around the meager meal in my belly.

“You’re Alina’s daughter?” John James’ eyes widened.

“Yes,” I said, sneering.

“Oh, Alina.” John James closed his eyes and let out a huge sigh. When his eyes opened, he shook his head. “She was a good, *good* woman. She endured so much loss, sorrow, and pain. Her life was dangerous, and every day was a battle for her to survive.”

“No, she wasn’t,” I spat out. “She was a whore who loved a monster!”

Marcellious pressed his palm upon my wrist.

I shook him off and glared at him.

“She was in trouble, like you,” John James said, the skin around his eyes pinched and drawn. “She came to me saying she needed help. Same as you, this Balthazar demon was after her. Oh, she was so nervous, so anxious, so fearful when she came to me.”

He glanced out the window, deep in thought. “I told her I could help her. She needed to do two things to defeat Balthazar.”

He leaned forward conspiratorially as if to divulge the universe’s secrets.

I leaned forward, too, eager to share some secrets for a change. Finally, perhaps, we were on the cusp of answers.

“Go on,” I said, glancing at Marcellious before giving John James my undivided attention.

Marcellious, too, bore an eager, wide-eyed expression.

John James huffed out a sigh.

“Here’s what I told your mother.” He flattened his palms on the table. “I told her, ‘find another time traveler.’ I said, ‘there’s one in the tribe, a fellow by the name of Dancing Fire.’”

I let out a gasp. “You told her that?”

John James nodded. “I did indeed. I’d interacted with him over the years and knew he could help. Do you know him?”

“Yes! He was my friend and mentor in another lifetime. I’m from the twenty-first century.”

He grabbed a parchment piece and a quill pen from beneath his bed.

When he returned to the table, he dipped the pen into the glass container of ink. He scratched out what looked like a family tree. Instead of family members, he wrote dates connecting to the person.

“There.” He set the pen back down on the table. “Where were we? Oh, yes, two things. So, one...” He held up his index finger. “Find another time traveler. And two...” He lifted his middle finger. “Find the sun and moon daggers.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “That’s what we’re looking for, too. Supposedly my mother wrote down the whereabouts of the two knives. Still, no one seems to know where it is—believe me, I ask everyone I contact.”

John James nodded.

“You haven’t asked the right people.” A secretive smile played at the corners of his lips. “Your mother found one of the weapons and was supposed to give it to me. But I told her to hide it somewhere and leave the notes in her journal where she left it. The last time I saw Alina was right before Balthazar killed her. She did everything I told her, and then she was gone.”

“How could you possibly know that?” I asked, furrowing my brow.

John James' cheery expression fled behind dark clouds of emotion. "Because Alina visited me right before her death and told me she wouldn't make it—Balthazar was on her tail, and she wouldn't have enough time to find the last weapon. Olivia, you're not the only one Balthazar is hunting."

I let out a gasp. "Is he... Is Balthazar looking for you, as well?"

John James nodded slowly as if moving his head took too much effort.

"I'm afraid so. And now that I've met you, I'm worried he will find me faster and kill me since I have a lot of information about Alina and the daggers," he said, his voice growing thick. He rested one hand over the other.

"I'm so sorry." I felt a solid weight press against my chest. Wherever I landed, I seemed to bring misery to others.

"It's all right, child," John James said wearily, rubbing his brow. "Your mother felt the same way."

"So, do you have any knowledge as to where Mother's journal might be?" Even saying the word "Mother" soured my stomach.

"I do, indeed," John James said.

I sat up tall, eyes wide. I'd expected to hear another dead-end answer. "Seriously? Well, where is it?"

"Alina gave it to Eyan Malik," John James said, nodding vigorously.

Marcellious and I looked at one another.

"Who's Eyan Malik?" Marcellious said.

John James' eyes grew hooded. "Malik is a very dangerous, potent darkness. He is sin and power. He's a replica of Balthazar—he's just like him."

I gripped the edge of the table as if to steady myself. "Here we go again. First, I have to find this journal. I look everywhere. Then, the Kiowa attacked our tribe, followed by a meeting with Balthazar, where he told me he'd break me. I lost

my baby as a result of that fight. I lost my husband in the Kiowa attack, and now you're telling me I have to retrieve my mother's journal from a demon as dark as Balthazar?"

A fresh wave of tears threatened to cascade from my eyes.

John James reached across the table and patted my hand. "It's not as bad as you might think."

"Enlighten me," I said, sarcasm dripping from my tongue.

"Malik is indeed ruthless and dangerous. But he's on the hunt for Balthazar. And when he finds him, he'll *kill* him. He's been planning and scheming about destroying Balthazar for a long time."

The room spun.

"Malik can kill Balthazar? I thought Balthazar was invincible?"

"Not quite," John James said. "Balthazar has a weakness, and Eyan Malik is that weakness. If Balthazar finds out about Malik, he will stop at nothing to destroy him. Malik holds all his secrets. You must find him. He is the only one that can help you."

"What? Why would he help me?"

"Let me tell you a story of who Malik is and why he's so important," John James said, rubbing his jaw. "Malik was created as the darkness when he was five. The darkness is created when the Timeborne time travels for the first time. Malik's thirst for killing immediately manifested at the tender age of five.

"Balthazar witnessed this young little boy killing without mercy. That's when Balthazar realized that Malik was darkness like him. Balthazar was impressed by Malik's first kill."

My lip curled. "Sounds about right for Balthazar."

"After that," John James continued, "he killed often and freely. His thirst knew no boundaries. So, Balthazar took him in as his adopted child. He raised him, and together, as Malik matured, they shared in all sorts of debauchery. They killed

together, shared lovers—if Balthazar did it, Malik was always right there, sharing in the discovery. Together they were invincible—no one could stop them. Balthazar was proud to have a son like himself and to follow in his footsteps. Malik never disappointed him. He enjoyed having Balthazar as a father figure.”

I nearly vomited the contents of my stomach. “Balthazar didn’t...oh, God...”

“What is it?” Marcellious said, grabbing my wrist.

I shook off Marcellious and glowered at him. “Don’t touch me.”

“Balthazar and Malik didn’t share my mother, did they?” My lip pulled up in a sneer.

“Oh, goodness, no,” John James said.

“Are you certain? I don’t think I could take that.”

“No, no, no. Alina was completely off-limits to Malik. Balthazar made sure of that.”

“Thank God.” I wiped the perspiration from my brow.

“No, they shared women, but not Alina.” John James drifted off into thought. When his gaze re-focused, he said, “Malik is different than Balthazar. Even though he trained under Balthazar, Malik is smart—he’s far smarter than Balthazar. Malik sees everything in detail. He’s cunning and calculating, and knows how to manipulate emotions. Everything was going well with Balthazar until Malik fell in love with a Timeborne. Her name was Layla. She became his *everything*. He was *obsessed* with her.”

He tapped his lips. “Anyway, when she found out of his dark ways, she protested and put her foot down. She said, ‘I want a normal life!’ You can imagine that’s an impossible task for a demon to provide. Still, Malik tried to alter his behavior somewhat. Sadly, it didn’t work. He needed to kill to retain his power. So, Layla discovered that the sun and the moon daggers would help erase his darkness.”

“Really?” I said, lifting my palms to my cheeks.

“Yes. Someone told Layla this. She and Malik also learned that Balthazar also wanted to get his hands on the knives. Only he wanted them to increase his power.” John James shuddered. “Oh, goodness, it would be bad if Balthazar got his hands on the sun and the moon blades. Terrible indeed. The entire world would be in chaos.”

“How so?” Marcellious said.

“Balthazar could rule the world!” John James spread his arms wide. “He could make the world dark and kill everyone!”

I gasped. Even though I was weak, the impulse to find the daggers and keep them out of Balthazar’s hands grew enormous, filling me with resolve.

John James shook his head, and his eyes creased with worry. “Oh, it would be awful. He’d make people kill one another, then consume their souls. He’d become so powerful, nothing and no one could stop him!”

I turned to Marcellious. “We can’t let him get his hands on those weapons!”

“Finally, we have a plan,” Marcellious said, smirking.

I scoffed, dismissing him.

“So, Malik wanted to find the two blades to stop killing and be with Layla forever. He went to Balthazar and laid out his plan. This was a mistake, but he was in love.” John James let out a huge sigh. “He said, ‘if I find the sun and the moon daggers, I will stop killing and remain with Layla. You can stop killing and be with Alina.’ Apparently, he begged and pleaded with Balthazar. But the only thing Balthazar wants is power. He’s consumed by his drive to conquer the world. So, what did Balthazar do? He killed Layla. Then, he imprisoned Malik for growing weak with love.”

I touched my fingertips to my mouth. “Oh, God! What a bastard! Malik can’t be dead, right? If he has knowledge of my mother’s journal, he has to be alive.”

“I don’t know. Some say he’s dead. Some reported seeing Malik alive.” John James pressed his lips together.

“What do *you* think?” I asked.

“I think he’s alive somewhere. I believe he’s escaped.” John James fixed his blue-eyed gaze on me. “Balthazar thinks he’s dead. But I think...no, I *know* Malik is hiding in the shadows, biding his time, waiting for his time to strike. He’s plotting and scheming; I guarantee you that. Malik knows Balthazar’s secrets—his weaknesses. Hell, he knows everything about Balthazar. That’s why if you find him, he’ll help you. You can all help one another.”

I cast a glance at Marcellious. Was he thinking what I was thinking?

My attention was right back on John James. “What do you mean he hides in the shadows?”

“Just that. My sources tell me he lurks. He stalks. He hides in the shadows. And he waits, like the super predator he is.” John James’ expression closed down like he’d secured the premises, preparing for a storm. “If anyone can wait patiently, plotting his attack against Balthazar, it’s Malik. Time has only fueled his anger. You should not mess with Malik, but he will also help you.”

“I think I know who he is. I think I’ve seen him.”

I might as well have lit a bomb by the expressions on both Marcellious’ and John James’ faces.

“Tell me more,” John James said, leaning forward.

“Someone’s been watching me. He always lurks in the shadows. He even came into my teepee after I lost my baby. He told me to stay strong and not give up. But I couldn’t see him—it was too dark. And then—poof! He disappeared as if he was never there. I thought I made him up.” A whirlwind of excitement uncoiled in my belly.

John James bobbed his head up and down. “He lives in the night’s shadows like a whisper in the wind. Together, you can take Balthazar down! You must find him.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Olivia

Marcellious and I stared at one another, our eyes as wide as silver moons. Eyan Malik, the mysterious, shadowy figure who had saved Roman from his prison and comforted me after losing my baby, held the key to destroying Balthazar. At last, after all these fruitless months of searching, I had hope. I'd finally found Balthazar's weakness. Balthazar had raised Malik as his own son. Taught him everything. Malik knew Balthazar's flaws and foibles as intimately as he knew his own breath. Yet, Balthazar had made one fatal move—he'd killed Malik's true love.

Malik hated Balthazar and sought revenge, watching, waiting, and biding his time like a predator.

Yet, as jubilant as I was to have found an answer, fear trembled through my veins. Both Balthazar and Malik were powerful demons. What made me consider that Malik would help me and not destroy me? Just because he'd shown kindness, he was still darkness, and the darkness could not be trusted.

Outside of John James' tiny cottage, the gurgling creek drew my attention back to the present. We sat around John James' makeshift table inside his cozy, cluttered environment. A breeze blew through the open sash window, lifting some of John James' papers he'd left on the bed and sending them spinning.

“Oh, dear,” John James said, scurrying across the room to gather the parchment now strewn across the floor. He picked them up, placed them back on the bed, and closed the window before returning to his seat across from me.

“Any idea where I can find Malik? If he has the journal and the ability to kill Balthazar, you *must* tell me where to find him,” I said, pressing my knuckles into the worn wood of the table.

John James stroked his jaw. “My sources tell me he’s in the Catskills of New York.”

“The Catskills? That’s an awfully long way from here,” I said, despondency nibbling at the edges of my hope. “That will take us weeks.”

My shoulders drooped, weighed down by the thought of such arduous travel.

“If you ride on horseback, the journey won’t be so long,” John James said, optimism brightening his face.

Easy for you to say, I thought but said nothing.

“What are your sources, if you don’t mind my asking?” Marcellious drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “How do we know we can trust them? Even if we got to the Catskills in a *week*, which seems unlikely, it would be a total waste of time if we only traveled on a hunch.”

“Oh, I’m part of a secret network. You see, my family has been studying time travel since the beginning of time.” John James wiped his hand through the air, disturbing the flight path of two flies that buzzed in lazy circles over our heads. “My father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and so on all carried the burden of this particular study through the generations. My father is Jeremiah Jackson James.”

I let out a gasp. “My father’s name was Jack James!”

John James nodded. “I know. I was the one who sent Alina to find your father.”

I reeled back. “That’s impossible.”

“I’m afraid not. I knew the lineage works in both future and past directions.” John James pressed his fingertip against a few hardtack crumbs lingering on the table. “When your mother sought me out, telling me she couldn’t find the sun and moon knives, I told her to travel to the future. She had to find one of my family afterbears. The individual she needed to seek out would be as obsessed with time travel as I am.”

I dug my fingernails into the worn wood next to the empty plate. “Are you telling me my mother met my father on purpose? He was the one she sought, and it wasn’t true love?”

“Yes.” John James’ bobbed his chin up and down. “Your mother traveled back and forth between this time and your time. We’d confer over possible matches until she told me of a student completing his dissertation in time travel at McMont College in a province in Canada. She described him to me, and I said, ‘That’s the one! He’s one of my afterbears.’”

He slumped slightly, giving his spine a soft C-curve. “The last time I saw your mom, she seemed nervous and sad. But you, Olivia, gave her strength and hope. Oh, how her eyes lit up when she spoke of you.”

He clasped his hands beneath his chin.

“I find that hard to believe,” I said, my diaphragm tightening at the thought of my mom zipping back and forth between centuries.

John James reached across the table and patted my hand.

I cringed, wanting to yank my hand out from beneath his patronizing touch yet bound to niceties by the strangeness of his resemblance to my father.

“Don’t hate your mother,” John James said, withdrawing his hand. “You and she are quite similar.”

“There’s *nothing* similar about my whoring mother and me,” I shot back, teeth bared.

John James blinked. “I beg to differ. You and Alina have parallel lives. You may have lost your husband and child, but your mother had it equally as bad, if not worse. You owe it to

yourself to learn her story. I hope you will get answers to your questions.”

Before I could ask him more, he rose and bustled around the small space, searching for something.

My betraying heart grew hopeful. Was he looking for some kind of keepsake Mom had given him? Something of hers that might soften my hatred of her?

I perched at the edge of my chair, eager to see what he sought.

Finally, he picked up a piece of parchment and waved it. “A-ha! I knew I had this somewhere. Your mother gave it to me.”

My leg pumped up and down with excitement. “What is it?”

“It’s a map!” He lay the parchment on the table with a flourish and stabbed a finger at a spot. “And there’s the Catskills! Now you can find your way.”

The air left my lungs like a deflating balloon. Even still, I clung to the splinter of hope that *maybe*, just maybe, Mom had loved me and left me something to prove it. But it was only a map.

Still, a map leading to the Catskills was better than no map. We didn’t exactly have GPS. And finding Malik to determine if he would help us kill Balthazar was tantamount.

So, forcing as much cheer as I could, I thanked John James for his time, promised to return and visit him, and said goodbye. Marcellious and I departed.

A lightness in my heart gave me a much-needed spring to my steps. We had a direction to follow! Finally, we might be able to end this terrible existence.

An idea struck me, and when we returned to our small encampment, I made a beeline to Grey Feather’s teepee.

“Chief, may I enter?” I asked respectfully when I stood outside his dwelling.

“Yes, yes,” he answered, and I ducked beneath the door flap to enter.

I sat across from him. He’d aged a lifetime since I saw him last, which wasn’t that long ago—perhaps a few hours. But maybe I had, too. We both carried burdens of grief and sorrow upon our backs. Mine had only lessened when sitting with John James, but the toll my grief had taken remained etched on my face.

“What can I do for you today?” Grey Feather asked.

Dark clouds of emotion shrouded him, and I felt uncomfortable in his presence. “When you pronounced Roman and me as husband and wife, you told me we could use our sacred weapons to learn of the other’s whereabouts.”

The barest glimmer of light shone in his eyes. “That’s right. I’d completely forgotten.”

“I’d like to use my dagger to see where he is. If he’s alive, I want to know about it. As you know, I’ve been in the darkest places these last few weeks—had I remembered the dagger connection, I might have been comforted by finding Roman, dead or alive. If he’s dead, I can grieve and move on. But if he’s alive....” Tears pricked the backs of my eyes, and I couldn’t complete my sentence.

“Of course, of course! We could all use some comfort at this time.” Grey Feather gestured as if the spark of life in his eyes had spread through his limbs. “Do you have your knife?”

“I always carry it with me.” I pivoted away from him and discretely removed it from my thigh. Then, I turned back around and held it in my palm. “What do we do?”

“Sit right here.” He patted the fur by his side.

I crawled and settled next to him.

He held out his palm, and I placed my knife into his hand.

Firmly gripping one of my fingers, he held my dagger before him. “Repeat the sacred scripture.”

I exhaled, squared my shoulders, and began reciting the words.

He sliced my finger in one quick move. “Again. Repeat it.”

He positioned my weapon beneath my hand and squeezed my finger.

I repeated the chant again.

Three drops of crimson fell on the gleaming blade, sizzling as they landed.

“Show us where Roman has gone,” Grey Feather said solemnly. “Reveal his journey to us.”

The transparent visage of Roman stood before me, looking outward as a wall of enemy warriors descended over the hill toward him and the Sioux.

As if we were one body and one mind, I felt the fear and defeat he experienced and the resolve to fight valiantly and courageously.

Roman never gave up.

My body was flooded with love and longing.

“Oh, my love,” I said, reaching out to touch him. My hand slid right through the image.

The next scene showed him galloping across the plains, his rifle locked and loaded. He took aim and pulled the trigger, and warrior after warrior fell to his death. I looked through Roman’s eyes, witnessing the Kiowa and the Comanche bludgeoning Sioux warriors with tomahawks.

Tears streamed down my face as I watched Roman and a Kiowa falling to the ground from their horses. I silently cheered Roman on as he struggled to gain purchase over the Kiowa, finally defeating him by stabbing him through the heart.

An arrow struck Roman, then a knife sliced his calf. Other grisly scenes followed, then I watched in horror as Earth Bear was slain.

I glanced at Grey Feather, but he sat with his eyes closed, holding space for my journey of witnessing my husband fight.

Roman fell to the ground, and a deadly blade plunged into his belly.

A gasp left my throat. “No! No, no, *no!*”

I covered my mouth with my palm.

Roman lay dying on the battlefield. Slain Sioux warriors were all around him.

I swayed where I sat, feeling Roman’s life force draining as if it were my own. Now I was living each moment as if I were Roman. My breathing grew labored, and I was no longer aware of my body. Instead, I felt my soul drifting from my skull like smoke.

Someone dragged my body away from the battlefield when I thought I’d be dead.

Is it Marcellious? Yes, I think it is.

After that, as Roman, I was alone, heading toward the fade once more.

A voice yanked Roman’s spirit back into his body. *Who is it? I recognize that voice.* Roman managed to open his eyes and saw the visage of the mysterious male who had rescued him from Balthazar’s dungeon.

Another gasp left my lips as I zipped back into my own body. I peered at the two images before me.

That’s got to be Eyan Malik. It’s got to be!

Malik held something in his hands, but I couldn’t make it out. Maybe Roman was too weak to comprehend what was happening to him.

The images disappeared like a bubble popping.

“Wait!” I cried out. “I didn’t get to see what happened!”

The chief startled, and his eyes flew open. “Did you see? Where is he?”

I reached for the chief’s shoulder, needing to steady myself. “There was someone with him. Roman was dying, but

someone appeared to be helping him. Have you ever heard of Eyan Malik?"

Grey Feather frowned. "Eyan Malik? He's a myth. No one has seen him. We've only heard stories."

"He's alive, chief, and I have to find him! He's got Roman!" I took my dagger from the chief's hand, hugged him, and thanked him for sitting with me, then I rushed from the teepee.

Marcellious and I had to leave at once. We just had to!

I found Marcellious watching the horse herd graze.

All the horses stood with their heads down, contentedly munching stalks of Big Bluestem. Huge puffy clouds meandered across the horizon behind them.

Marcellious turned to look over his shoulder at me.

"Olivia," he said once I stood near him. He'd stuck a blade of grass between his teeth, and it bobbed up and down as he spoke. "Why the smile?"

I hadn't realized I'd been smiling. "We need to head for the Catskills at once. Eyan Malik has Roman."

Marcellious pulled back his head. "And you know this, how?"

"I saw it! Remember Grey Feather declaring that Roman and I could witness one another through our daggers?"

"Sort of," Marcellious said.

"Well, it works! I don't know why I didn't think of it before. I watched the battle through Roman's eyes and witnessed him dying. Then, Malik appeared." My words tumbled from my tongue like a rushing river. "He's got Roman, and we have to find him!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Marcellious said, holding out his palms. "I've been thinking about it. This Malik fellow could be anywhere. You know that. Just because he lives in the Catskills doesn't mean he's there right now. It's a long journey to find that he left for Mississippi, Virginia, or some such."

“We have to take a chance!” I said, seizing his soft deerskin sleeve.

Marcellious shook his head. “I don’t think so. You’re barely healed. We need to give you more time to get better.”

“I don’t want more time! I want to go find Malik! And, if you don’t accompany me, I’ll go alone!” I said, balling up my fists by my side.

“Don’t be stupid. A woman traveling alone in these times would be a disaster. You’d never survive!” He flicked his fingers at me.

“Come on. You know I’m strong. I survived ancient Rome, didn’t I?”

“Yes, and Roman kept watch on you at all times,” Marcellious said, the blood vessels in his neck throbbing.

“Except when he didn’t, like when you kidnapped me.” I leaned forward, crowding Marcellious.

Marcellious lifted his palms again. “That was a mistake. One I’ve apologized for.”

“Never mind that. I’m only saying you know how capable I am. I’m going with or without you.”

We just stood there, glaring at one another while a breeze blew across the plains, rippling the grasses.

Finally, Marcellious said, “It’s going to be a long journey.”

“But we’ll pursue a plan like you wanted,” I countered.

His jaw worked back and forth as he studied me. “All right. We’ll go. But Emily is coming with us.”

I was practically giddy, on the verge of hugging Marcellious. “Of course! I wouldn’t want to just leave her here. We’re family.”

“And I’ve got to marry her first,” Marcellious said. “I promised I would marry her after the battle.”

“Oh, come on. You don’t want to rush your wedding,” I said.

“Like hell, I don’t! We all know how quickly lives can be lost. Anything can happen to us at any time. I said I’ll go with you, but I have terms, too. And being married to Emily is one of them.” His jaw set into a block of iron. “I’ll only go on this journey if my wife is by my side.”

“Then, let’s go tell her that. She needs to weigh in on the decision.” I turned and headed toward her teepee, assuming Marcellious would follow.

We found her inside the teepee she shared with Leaping Deer.

She sat on the floor, plucking leaves from some herbs and placing them in a basket. Her face brightened when she saw us. “Olivia! You look better! What’s happened to put a smile on your face?”

I lowered to my knees before her. “We need to go on a journey together. It might be dangerous.”

I filled her in on the Malik story, and she listened intently, studying my face the entire time.

“And there’s one more thing,” Marcellious said, standing stiffly beside us. “I want us to get married, Emily, before we go.”

He fell to one knee and said, “Will you honor me by becoming my wife?”

Emily leaped to her feet. “Oh, Marcellious! I would be most honored to marry you right away. When shall we do it?”

“As soon as the chief is available,” Marcellious said, his cheeks red.

“Oh, I’m so happy!” Emily said in her usual enthusiastic manner. She turned to me. “Isn’t this wonderful? We’ll travel to find this Malik fellow as two married women. We’re going to find Roman. I know we are!”

She held out her hand to me, and I took it, rising to my feet. Then, she reached for her necklace.

“Oh!” I said. “We forgot to ask John James about your necklace!”

Emily's expression fell, but she said, "That's okay. You have other things to worry about."

"No, no, it's important," I said. "Tell you what. When we leave, he'll be our first stop. We'll get the answers we need and head out on our trip to the Catskills."

A shudder, like a foreboding, twisted my spine. I shoved the feeling aside, telling myself it was nothing. I was just paranoid. But I had every right to be afraid with a demon on my tail.

At any time, anything could happen.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



Olivia

A light rain spattered across the plains, tap-dancing upon the hides of my teepee as I slept.

Emily burst into my dwelling before dawn. “Sister, get up! Today is the day I am to marry Marcellious!”

I yawned and gestured for her to sit next to me, so I could take my time in awakening.

But Emily wouldn’t hear of it.

“Olivia! Remember how nervous and excited you were to wed Roman? That’s how I am today!” She twirled in a circle like Cinderella might have done.

I pictured birds chirping overhead and forest animals helping her dress as I threw back my bison furs and prepared to greet the day.

A stone of wistfulness weighed down my heart. Of course, I was excited about Emily getting married. But the day’s significance drove home the knowledge that Roman was not by my side. I wanted nothing more than to head out and find Eyan Malik and, hopefully, my husband.

But, as Emily had said, today was her wedding day.

As the day proceeded, I first summoned as much good cheer as possible, with the blessing ceremony in the creek, followed by the dancing and feasting. Ours was a sad little group, and only Leaping Deer, myself, and four other women performed the water prayer and the dancing. All the others had

been slaughtered by the Kiowa. Still, I could see in the eyes of those who survived that all welcomed the celebration of love.

Once the marriage had been ordained, I escorted Emily to her and Marcellious' sleeping quarters. There was no need to declare the teepee as "theirs" as we would all depart at sunrise tomorrow.

We walked silently as the remnants of a beautiful sunset faded into the gloaming.

When we were halfway there, Emily grabbed my sleeve. "Olivia!"

Her voice held such alarm I jerked.

"What is it?"

"I'm scared. I've never been with a man in that way...you know what I mean." She blinked, eyes fixed on the horizon.

I stopped and placed my hands on her shoulders. "Don't be scared. Let me talk to Marcellious, so he knows to be gentle with you."

"Oh, would you?" The lines in her face eased somewhat. "He's been so good to me. He hasn't pushed me or pressured me to...."

She redirected her gaze toward the ground.

"You know..." Her pale blue eyes lifted to face me. "I want to please him. I want him to be happy."

"It's a two-way street, sweetheart." I brushed a few errant curls away from her face. "*He* has to be good to *you*. I know he's changed—we've all seen the shift in his demeanor. But don't forget—he's been dark before and can be dark again. You'll need to stay mindful of his moods."

I closed my mouth, realizing I wasn't helping things much with my talk of doom and gloom. Yet, even the hope of finding Eyan Malik didn't quash my paranoia.

Emily's eyes pinched at the corners, and she blinked rapidly. "He's changed, Olivia. He's put those awful ways behind him."

“Of course he has,” I said, forcing a smile. “I’m sorry I said anything. Please don’t listen to me.”

I drew her to me in a hug so she couldn’t see my lying eyes. “You’ll be fine tonight. I promise. Tonight should be about love and connection. Just let me talk to him, and then I’ll immediately escort you to his side.”

I pulled away and smiled at her. “I’m so happy you found love, Emily. Truly I am.”

“Thank you, Olivia,” she said, her eyelids fluttering to keep the tears at bay.

“Wait here.” I pointed to a huge boulder where she might sit and then approached the teepee.

Once I stood at his door, I called inside, “Marcellious. It’s me, Olivia. Can I speak with you for a moment?”

“You’re hardly the one I’m expecting, but if you must,” he said.

I lifted the door flap and entered.

Everything looked perfect for Emily. The bison furs had been arranged just so, and a fire burned brightly. Even Marcellious appeared eager-eyed and boyish—something I’d never seen on his face.

“What do you want, Olivia? Make it quick,” he said, sliding into his usual snarky demeanor with me.

“Emily’s scared. She’s never been with a man before.”

“Now, why did you think I wouldn’t assume that was so?” He glared at me. “Of course, I’ll be gentle with her. Coming from a different century, I suppose you had already experienced being with a man on your wedding night to Roman.”

“Times are different in the twenty-first century. People are free to explore with one another. And, yes, I had the misfortune of experiencing sex with a complete idiot—a lying, betraying asshole.” My cheeks reddened. “But this isn’t about me—it’s about you. I know the kind of depravity you’re capable of.”

“I’ve changed,” he said, his features wooden. “I vow to be good to my new wife. Do you think I don’t realize the gift I’ve been given at having a second chance at love? I’m not going to throw it away.”

“Good. Make sure of it. Because if you don’t, I’ll kill you with my own two hands,” I said, finding a glimmer of the old, fierce Olivia.

Instead of being offended, Marcellious threw back his head and laughed. “Always a pleasure, Olivia. Now please go fetch my wife so I can show her what I’m capable of as a kind and loving husband.”

A wicked twinkle danced in his eyes, hinting at primal pleasures.

“You’ve been warned,” I said, blushing.

“I have. But there was no need. Now, go!” He pointed at the door.

Outside the teepee, night had descended, and I had to pause to let my eyes adjust to the gloom. I found Emily hunched over her knees, nibbling her nails.

“He’s ready for you,” I said, extending my hand to her.

She grabbed it and rose to stand. “Is he?”

The eagerness in her eyes almost cast its own light.

“Absolutely. Marcellious promises to be gentle and kind and so much more,” I said, remembering the wicked twinkle in his eyes. I shook the image of Marcellious’ grin from my head and led her to her wedding chamber. Before she slipped inside, I hugged her tightly. “Have a wonderful night, and I’ll see you at dawn.”

We kissed one another’s cheeks, and then I headed toward my teepee.

Once inside, I lit a fire and meandered around the space, gathering all my belongings for tomorrow’s journey. It didn’t take much time to pack as I owned so little. Unlike in the twenty-first century, I understood the need to only possess essential items and nothing more.

When that was done, I lay down, gathering the bison furs around me and burying my face beneath the thick hides. The grief and fear in my body smothered me as I lay there, clotting my brain with dark thoughts. So much tragedy had occurred over these past two years. Since being thrust into the past, I have ridden an endless roller coaster of extreme highs and lows. It was markedly changed from life in Seattle, where I drove a cool car, had nice clothes, and trained people to defend themselves.

Now, every day was a fight for survival peppered with unexpected joy and heart-wrenching tragedy.

As fatigue captured my brain, I recalled straddling Roman, his thick cock buried inside me as we made love, creating new life and hope for the future. Then, I drifted to sleep, riding a waterfall of blood. My baby bobbed next to me, disappearing beneath the crimson when I tried to reach for it.

Amara surfaced, her face streaked with red.

“Oh, Amara,” I cried out in my dream. “How I wish you were here to comfort me. You were the only real mother I ever had.”

I tried to pull her toward me, but she disappeared into a scarlet whirlpool.

My tragic dreams continued throughout the night. Then, in the early pre-dawn, I dreamt of Roman and I in a different time, a home filled with children running about. My hair was black and long, unlike the flame-colored hair I now possessed. My clothing was unlike anything I’d seen before. And Roman and I were happy.

I lingered in this dream until the flute-like morning song of a bird announcing his territory called me back to life on Earth.

Groggy and muzzy-headed, I rose and prepared to depart.

Outside the teepee, the barest sliver of dawn spread a soft wash of rose-colored ink across the dusky sky. Ahead, Marcellious and Emily stood in a clearing, kissing one another passionately. Seeing them sent splintered shards of grief through my heart. Oh, where was my husband? Would I really

ever see him again, or would I be a lonely widow, taking comfort only in memories?

I turned away from them and headed to Grey Feather's domicile.

"Chief Grey Feather," I whispered outside his door.

"Little Moon."

The voice came from behind me, and I was startled, whirling around.

There stood the chief, his hair dripping wet. He'd probably been performing his morning ablutions in the creek.

"I came to say goodbye," I said, as spider-web filaments of respect stretched toward this great man.

Grey Feather looked at me for a long time, his expression revealing nothing. At last, he extended his gnarled hands to me.

I clasped them in mine, sparking a sudden onslaught of tears.

"Don't be sad, Little Moon. Your time here with us has passed." He reached up one of his weathered fingers and wiped the tears from my cheeks.

His touch felt kind and comforting, as I imagined being caressed by a beloved grandparent.

"How can you know that?"

"I have consulted our Great Spirit. Wakan Tanka has told me that our journey is complete but that you will find the answers you seek. Only good things...."

I brightened, sniffing back my sorrow. "That would be welcome for a change."

The chief nodded. "There are still twists and turns on your way, but you will find what you seek. Little Moon, remember one thing. Your dagger is the strongest weapon you have. It has the power to show you your past, your present, and your future. It can help you speak to the dead and will help you heal your soul. Use it wisely. Employ its good uses."

A shiver cascaded through me, and I felt I was granted a benediction of enormous importance. “Thank you, Grey Feather. That means a lot to me.”

I blinked back a few errant tears and then impulsively threw my arms around him.

Clad in his furry bison robes the way he was, I felt like I was embracing a gigantic shaggy beast, the kind that still roamed these great plains in vast numbers. Maybe our souls touched at that moment.

When I released him, he said, “Give my blessing to Emily and Hunting Wolf. You will always reside in my heart and prayers.”

“Thank you, chief. And you reside here also.” I pressed my palm to my chest. Then, before I dissolved into a blubbing mess, I spun on my heel and hurried toward Marcellious and Emily, eager to get on our way.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



Olivia

I reined in my horse, hanging back on the journey to John James' cottage.

Marcellious and Emily flirted and laughed like Roman and I used to. Marcellious kept leaning far to the right side of his steed for a kiss, which Emily obliged him. I fell back as far as I could get away with and did not lose sight of my companions. They were so distracted with one another that I was afraid I'd lose them if I were to pull into the lead. I was too frail to be out on my own.

I had to battle against my negative emotions and dark thoughts. If I lived in the twenty-first century, I'd be on some sort of anti-depressant prescription by now. Here I had nothing to remove the onslaught of words and thoughts vomiting from my mind, telling me I was a failure, I was weak, and I'd become a sub-life form who didn't deserve to live.

The only thing that helped me escape this sad mental state was remembering times with Roman. The smell of him...the taste of him... His touch... The way he kissed me... How he drove his cock into me with furious passion...

I'd get lost in fantasies of the good times with Roman.

I felt joy over Marcellious and Emily's union at those times. It seemed true love really had prevailed, and that love had transformed Marcellious' demeanor. But would it last in the long run, or would he slide back into his despicable self?

“Jesus, Olivia,” I muttered. “Since when did you become the eternal reminder that life could be pathetic and miserable? You used to be the one to inspire and bring hope. Now, it’s like you have nothing good to say about anything.”

I shook the pessimism from my shoulders and urged my horse to a trot to catch up to the two lovebirds ahead.

As we headed up the hill to the cottage, with the friendly little creek to my left, a sense of unease mantled me. I tried to shrug off the feeling, but it grew with each clop of my horse’s hooves.

“Hey,” I called Marcellious and Emily, who were still engaged in their rabid flirt fest.

“What is it?” Emily called over her shoulder, a lilt to her voice.

The sunlight danced through the bare branches in front of her, giving her a magical fairy tale appearance.

I couldn’t spout more misery to her, so I said, “Oh, never mind. It’s nothing.”

“Silly girl,” Emily said, turning her attention back to Marcellious.

Up ahead lay the cottage. Gooseflesh broke out on my arms as we approached, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was very, very wrong. When I spied the door ajar, I was catapulted into my past.

That was how Papa’s door had looked on the day Tristan captured him. That was the day life as I knew it ended, and I was thrust into the past after witnessing Tristan kill my father.

A gasp left my throat.

Marcellious must have finally sensed something out of sorts as he pulled his head out of LaLa Land. “Hold up there, Em. I’m going to go check on the cabin. Something looks out of place.”

“Not without me, you’re not,” I said.

Thankfully I hadn't lost *all* my nerves. I reined in my horse and slid from its back, then hurried through the debris covering the forest floor to catch up with Marcellious. I pushed past him and threw open the door.

I shrieked.

John James lay in a crumpled heap on the floor with his head on the other side of the room.

"Oh, good God!" I said, pressing my knuckles to my mouth to keep from vomiting. "Not again. Not another person I care about..."

Marcellious drew up behind me, looking over my shoulder.

"Fucking hell. Emily!" he snapped, glancing over his shoulder. "You stay put, there, you hear?"

"What is it?" she called back.

"Nothing you need to see," Marcellious said before turning his attention back on John James. "What do you think happened?"

"You don't honestly need to ask, do you?" I said as bitterness drew my stomach into a tight knot. "It's got to be..."

Emily let out a horrified scream.

Marcellious and I whirled around.

Balthazar held Emily pressed to his torso, a deadly blade poised over her throat.

Marcellious pulled the pistol from his holster and aimed it at the demon's head.

"I'd think carefully about pulling that trigger if I were you," Balthazar said. "You know I move faster than you. I could have your head sliced from your neck before the bullet reaches my skull."

I'd never seen Balthazar look uglier. All the fake charm he usually oozed had been replaced by a rough outline of a demon.

"Stop!" I said. "Don't hurt Emily. Take me, instead!"

Balthazar let out a mirthless laugh. “You? You’re too weak. What would I want with you? She might be useful for a little fun before I kill her now that her virginity has been lost.”

He wagged his tongue in a lewd gesture.

Marcellious let out a roar but didn’t move in the demon’s direction.

How does Balthazar know Emily and Marcellious wed and what they did last night?

I stood, terrified, no shreds of my former bluster and guts to be found. Balthazar was a demon, a monster without mercy. There was nothing to stop him from slaughtering Emily.

“Please,” I stammered. “Spare her. She means the world to me. Please don’t kill her.”

“Give me one good reason why not? Wait—you’ve already given a *great* reason for me to snap her head from her neck.” He stared at me with his soulless eyes.

“Why did you kill John James?” I countered, trying to draw his thoughts away from Emily. “He means nothing to you.”

“No, but he must have meant something to you because I saw you trekking down from his cabin, a stupid smile on your face.” Balthazar ran his tongue across his teeth and then spit on the ground. “What did he tell you that made you so happy?”

I squirmed where I stood. There was no way I would tell him about Eyan Malik. “You know I’m looking for the journal. I heard John James had knowledge of its whereabouts.”

His eyelids turned to slits, and he pressed the knife into Emily’s throat. “You’re lying, bitch.”

Emily yelped.

Marcellious jerked, the pistol still gripped in his hand. He was no doubt as desperate as me to save Emily’s life.

“Why don’t you put that puny gun back where it belongs, hmm?” Balthazar said to Marcellious.

Marcellious stood still, clutching the gun.

“I said, put the gun away,” Balthazar bellowed, his voice making the air tremble and vibrate.

Slowly, Marcellious lowered the gun, holstering it. He rested his hand on the handle of his hunting knife.

Oh, don't do anything stupid, Marcellious. Balthazar can destroy us all with a flick of his fingers.

“The journal...it's in the mountains,” I told Balthazar. “We're going to find it and give it to you. Then, you'll have what you want, and you can leave us alone.”

A glimmer of greedy lust shone in his eyes. But the spark of light quickly extinguished. “You know more than you're letting on.”

He started to draw the knife edge across Emily's skin.

She whimpered as a few drops of blood rolled down her neck.

“Stop!” I cried. “Let her go! I'm telling you the truth. That's all John James said to me. He told me where to look to find the journal. That's what you want, isn't it? Why don't you just let us go so we can find it and return it to you?”

For a long, tense moment, Balthazar stared at me, pinning me with his despicable gaze. Then, his nostrils flared, and the arm gripping Emily's collarbones began to tremble.

Smoke coiled from Emily's deerskin dress, and she screamed.

“If you don't tell me everything James told you, I will *burn* Emily alive.” Balthazar bared his teeth like an angry hyena.

“I told you everything,” I said, wringing my hands around and around. “*Everything!* You've got to believe me!”

“You've only told me—” Balthazar started.

Marcellious cut him off, flinging his hunting knife at the demon's belly. It lodged in his gut and vibrated.

Balthazar bellowed in rage, sending a shock wave of sound through the air.

I covered my ears as Balthazar flung Emily to the ground.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” he said with a snarl at Marcellious. He blurred from sight and reappeared behind Marcellious with the hunting knife in his hand.

Marcellious released a strangled exclamation of surprise as Balthazar grabbed his neck, searing the skin beneath his palm. The acrid smell of burning flesh filled my nose as Marcellious yelled in pain.

In one cobra-like move, Balthazar rammed the blade into Marcellious’ gut.

Marcellious sagged to the ground, appearing lifeless. Blood seeped from the wound in his abdomen, covering the earth with crimson.

Oh, God! Balthazar killed Marcellious.

“You’d better run, Olivia, as fast as you can,” Balthazar hissed. “Run for your lives, ladies, before I kill Emily and end your precious life, Olivia.”

I yanked Emily to her feet, and we did the only thing we could do: *run like hell.*

CHAPTER FORTY



Roman

I didn't know where I was, but I found myself running through a field in my dreams, many children by my side, Olivia laughing behind us. Her hair was as dark as a raven's. She was the same Olivia but different.

It was a beautiful image, the warmest kind of dream, the kind I'd like to hang onto forever. Gold and blue flowers spread across the horizon as we ran. Unfettered happiness filled my soul as I raced toward home with my family.

But when we came over the crest of the hill, we were met with the thunder of galloping horses and war cries from enemy lungs. As the horses and warriors galloped toward us, a sea of blood cascaded over the hills, powering toward us like a gigantic tidal wave. Balthazar rode the waves, his fist raised high, victorious over so much carnage and loss. Each act of violence increased his power and his dominion over us all.

With Balthazar howling with glee, the crimson sea slammed into me, Olivia, and our children, tearing us apart.

Flailing in the viscous liquid, I saw the faces of so many of my loved ones. My beloved mother... Amara... Marcus... Emily... Olivia and our unborn child.

My heart shattered into fragments, detonated by grief too horrible to bear. I woke up sobbing, my face buried in the bedding.

I felt something strange and I stilled.

The pillow beneath my head was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It was soft, cushioning my skull like a cloud, and the cloth covering smelled like lavender. My mouth tasted strange, almost like I'd been chewing on bullets all night. I lifted my hand and felt a stab of pain. Yet, my body was swathed in white bandages, and my skin was clean.

I jerked to sit and stared at my surroundings. A jolt of fright shot through my limbs at this room's various strange items.

What is this place? Where am I?

Swinging my legs from the too-soft bed, I got to my feet. I picked up something small, black, and slender resting on the wooden stand beside the bed. It felt smooth and shone as if polished, but it was too lightweight to be any material I'd ever known. In fact, it seemed to be so flimsy I could crush it with my bare hand.

Colorful raised circles with odd symbols covered the surface. I ran my thumb over the small, hard orbs, pressing them.

A large rectangular item hanging on the wall burst into a display of colorful images—rolling green hills leading to an ocean.

Next, images of a man and a woman appeared, walking hand in hand.

“Oh, Vanessa,” the man said. “I can't live without you. You must leave Antoine at once!”

The man turned to the scantily clad woman and kissed her.

“Who are you?” I demanded, but the couple appeared not to have heard me. “I insist on knowing who you are!”

Ignoring me, the man fell to his knees, taking the woman with him, and they both collapsed onto the sand. Waves rushed along the shore, splashing over their bodies. They were barely dressed, and it looked like they would soon be engaged in an inappropriate act of copulation.

Still clutching the smooth device, I scrambled backward, wincing at the pain from my many wounds.

How was this couple trapped inside a large rectangle, and the waves didn't rush into this room?

"I demand that you tell me your names! And put some clothes on. I don't know you, yet you're engaging in a private act before me."

The couple focused on each other, kissing and fondling one another shamelessly.

My cheeks reddened, and yet I was strangely aroused by their intimate display. Thoughts of longing tugged at my heart. Where, oh, where was my beautiful wife?

I pressed one of the colorful buttons on the device in my hand, and the scene changed before me.

Lions, much like the ones I'd fought in the Coliseum in Rome, padded across a grassland. They let out chuffing roars and loud bellows.

My hair prickled in alarm—I had nothing to defend myself from them should they escape the rectangle on the wall.

In the distance, female lions raced alongside an antelope. One leaped and sank her teeth into the bleating animal's hind legs.

The male lions growled and roared.

"What is this strangeness?" I pressed more buttons, and the images disappeared.

In bewilderment, I threw the shiny thing across the room, where it smacked against the wall with a sharp crack. "What kind of sorcery is this? Have I been imprisoned by Balthazar?"

I whirled where I stood in this small, tidy room.

A tall metal rod stood in the corner, with an opaque glass globe atop it. A black knob rested beneath the circle of glass. Cautiously, I approached it and fingered the knob.

The glass orb emanated blinding light.

I stumbled backward, shielding my eyes. I backed into a dresser, and several items fell to the floor. I picked up one of the small squares and stared at a still likeness of a beautiful little girl, her hair the color of fire. I stooped to retrieve the next rectangle and came face to face with the likeness of Olivia standing next to an older man and woman. It looked much like a painting but was perfect, with no visible brush strokes.

“Oh, my beautiful wife!”

Tears stung my eyes as I gazed at Olivia. How could her likeness be found inside the slick, shiny paper? What manner of time was I in? And why was I being taunted with an image of my gorgeous wife?

My head swam with all the strange items in this room. Pictures that moved but didn't respond to me... Glass globes that shone like the sun... A remarkable likeness of Olivia...

Footsteps sounded outside my closed door.

I tensed, not having any weapons at my disposal. My gaze darted around the room, and I slid open a door, revealing clothing hanging from a rod. I ducked inside the small room and slid the door shut with a slit through which to peer.

The door opened, and a man shuffled into the room. With his stooped shoulders and wire-framed spectacles, he hardly seemed a threat, but I couldn't afford to let my guard down.

He pulled up short when he saw the empty bed.

“Sir! Sir! Where did you go?” He wandered around the room, muttering to himself. “Sir! Where are you?”

Stooping, he peered under the bed. He crossed the room and flung open the curtains. He tugged on the sash and mumbled, “No, still locked.”

He whirled and crossed to where I hid. My heart jolted as he reached for the door and slid it open.

I lunged out at him.

He screamed and scrambled backward.

Then, composing himself, he smiled at me, blinking at my naked flesh. “My goodness, you’re quite a large man. I’ve been so worried about you! You’ve been unconscious for weeks!”

Studying him, I realized he looked like the man standing next to Olivia in the likeness of her.

“I have no car, so I couldn’t take you to the hospital. I patched you up as best I could. I’ve had to treat many wounds when my wife and I were on an expedition,” he said.

“Why do you have an image of my wife? It’s like a painting, but it looks so real. What are you doing with it?”

The man frowned. “Who is your wife?”

I pointed at the framed square. “There. That’s my Olivia.”

The man burst into tears, blubbering like a fool. “Oh, my God. It can’t be! Oh, how I’ve prayed for a sign to let me know my Olivia is still alive. You are a miracle, sir. A miracle!”

I stood staring at the man, unable to believe my ears. “Who are you?”

The man thrust out his hand. “I’m her father. My name is Jack James. Olivia is my daughter.”

The room began to swim. I was standing next to Olivia’s father? My mind couldn’t possibly take it all in. The last thing I remembered was dying on a battlefield in the 1800s.

I did what anyone would have done in the same circumstances. I crumpled to the floor.

Somehow, somehow, I had been transported to Olivia’s time, the twenty-first century.

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The journey continues for our lovely characters. Timebound coming soon 2024!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SARA SAMUELS is the author of the *Blade of Shadow series*. When Sara isn't daydreaming about her stories and time travel, she spends her day reading romance, cooking and baking, spending time with family, and enjoying life. Sara loves to connect with readers on all social media platforms or by email. Follow her and message her on Instagram @storytellersarasamuels for related updates and posts.

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