

THE WICKEDLY GRIM SERIES



THE
THORN'S
KISSES

A DARK FAIRYTALE RETELLING

C A R M E N B L A C K

The Thorn's Kiss

A Dark Beauty & the Beast Retelling

Carmen Black



Scarlet Lantern Publishing

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This book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language.

Contents

Trigger Warnings

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter Forty

Epilogue

Other Titles by Carmen Black

About Carmen Black

Trigger Warnings



The Thorn's Kiss is a dark retelling of Beauty and the Beast.

It contains dark themes such as violence/murder, Stockholm syndrome, sexual/physical abuse, and dubious/non consent.

Please consider these triggers before reading.

Prologue



Adam

“**W**here on earth is Alfred?” I wonder aloud. My manservant is absent on the most important day of my life, as though I should bear the burden of dressing myself.

Today, I marry Agatha, with hair like the morning sun and skin like the winter’s snow. She’s the only woman who quickens my heart and heats my bones. Just a kiss from her lips is the greatest treasure. And tonight, on our wedding night, I will be allowed to sample something even sweeter.

She has always been meant to be my wife. It’s something we’ve always dreamed about, even when we were children, glued to our mothers’ skirts, on their promenades through the town’s gardens. To fill the time, we would speak about what it would be like if we were to marry and as we grew older, what was only childish musings made way for something more mature. As soon as we became of age, I’ve been urging the time along.

This morning, I can hardly contain myself but now, my mood is ruined by my manservant’s absence. He’ll make me

late for my wedding if he doesn't appear immediately. Though, I suppose, this moment of solitude might not be a complete waste. It allows me a stolen moment with my bride-to-be, to share a kiss before the wedding. My mood has chosen to bloom again.

It is said that the groom may not lay eyes upon his bride until they're being pronounced man and wife. But a man with my luck can afford to take these chances. That luck has awarded me access to many of life's pleasures: Fortune, land, properties, servants, livestock and when I became of age, women who dedicated their time to a man's pleasure. But Agatha, her lips alone are sweeter than any berries I've ever tasted. I can only imagine that the rest of her must be even sweeter than all the other pleasures I've ever held dear, combined. For her, I'm willing to trade everything if it's ever asked of me.

We've had a long engagement. We're both in our twenties, and I've bore the long stretches of time before now. But she has been worth the wait.

Nevertheless, I cannot be faulted for the urging and hunger in my loins as I'm aware that tonight, if heaven allows... even this afternoon, as soon as we've exchanged our vows, and the rings are upon our fingers, I shall claim her and her, me.

That very yearning has me hurrying into some clothing, racing through the long hallways, past the drawing room, and up the staircase, cursing it for being too far away from our bedroom door. Our bedroom. We're soon to share one bed, and

the thought thrills me. She's been sleeping in that room for the past week and soon, I'll join her.

There is no loud chatter of excited servants seeping out from the cracks in the door. I imagine they must have been preparing her for the day ahead, but I'm wrong. Is she still asleep? I must have woken too early. The sun is only just beginning to light the windows.

My enthusiasm gets the better of me. I'm not ashamed. I'm filled with the flutters of a heart in love and seek to make haste to make her Mrs. Molotov.

With my hand on the knob, I ready myself to greet her with soft morning kisses, to restrain myself in the process, though a mere few hours would separate us from her ruin. I'm quiet, taking my time to open the door. The image of her face lighted when she wakes up to my lips burns through me.

But like an arrow whizzing through the air and striking me in the heart, I'm shot dead. The grin that sweeps my face falls quickly away as soon as I enter. A dream so wondrous becomes a monstrous nightmare in only a few seconds.

The thick red and yellow curtains surrounding our large bed shakes. The legs creak and moan beneath the weight of her treachery. My heart crumbles, and the crash of it startles me, lighting a spark that demands release. They don't see me watching them. Agatha and the numb scull who has stained my silk sheets with his soiled behind.

Her hair sweeps across her back and reddens, strong fingers sully her skin, pulling on her rolling waist. Shock stiffens me

in the doorway, and I don't move for quite some time. The longer I stand here, watching her betrayal, and hearing sounds I'd not been allowed to hear flowing from her lungs, the more awakened I become. A woman is nothing more than a whore. Like all the other women before.

She dresses in modern clothing to trick men who are foolish enough to love her. She lies of virtue to maintain her false honour. She is deeply evil, a jilter.

A whistling tea kettle compares naught to the heat seeping out of my pores as I keep my eyes on the ignorant fools. Like a hairy beast, I stalk toward them, silent but deadly. My bones force their way from my tightening skin when I catch a glance of the traitor beneath the woman I was soon to marry. The woman who has made a mockery of my affections, of my steadfast devotions. There is no other woman I'd ever think to marry before her and now; there will be no other woman after. They're all unrighteous, worth nothing more than a quick lay. Fiends, all of them.

A lightning bolt strikes through me, and my hand is upon her hair. Ripping her from his body, I watch as his pink prick quivers when he catches sight of me.

"Sir!" he yells. He darts his eyes between me and Agatha who I've just tossed across the room, naked and folded up in a corner, holding her burning scalp.

"Sir!" Alfred backs up toward the head of the bed, but there's nowhere else to run. "My apologies..." he starts, and I scowl at him, spitting my disgust.

“How dare you defile my bed and my betrothed,” I roar.

“Adam! Please! Forgive me,” Agatha screams from the floor. “It’s not what it looks like. We can fix this. Please, Adam...”

But through the blur of burning tears, I dare not allow to fall, else she’ll only succeed in ridiculing me more, I see nothing.

“Shut up, wench!” I yell, reaching for the naked man whose head I throw into the wooden supports.

There’s a crack, and his head swings from his shoulders.

“Adam?!” Agatha gasps. She creeps upon me silently before grabbing me around the shoulders. “Please stop!”

“You beg for him?” I ask, turning around to look at her.

His stink is all over her, the marks of him still on her skin. Her nipples are red, no doubt from the defilement of his mouth. She looks at me and becomes a stranger before me. She’s dirty, loose, and deceitful. A filthy whore. A dirty rag.

“You think me a fool, do you?” I ask, as I consider the disgrace this marriage would have brought upon me. “You seek to ridicule me? Make me a mockery to my servants?” My face burns and hardens as I close in on her. She backs up against the door until there’s no more space between us. The bones in my face knock against my teeth. My heart has been murdered, and I have nothing else to lose. She was my everything and with this, she has slain me.

The blood, thrashing about in my body, pounds through me like waves in a thunderstorm. My hand is upon her neck before I can think to stop it. I don't want to stop it. She turns a shade of violet. Her eyes bulge with horror as her legs leave the floor. My body shakes from the sobs I fail to restrain, that fall from my body as she fights my tensing fingers.

Yet, I can't bring myself to watch the life drain from her eyes; the fool I am still loves her.

She falls from my grasp, wheezing and coughing, looking at me as if I'm the monster in her nightmares. Gathering her clothes, I throw them at her. She peeks over my shoulder at Alfred, and I burst. "Leave! Now! Don't let me see you again. If I do, I won't be so merciful the next time." My voice is like a hearth stuffed with blackened smoke, puffed and sputtering.

She cries for him, and I press my lips together to keep from blowing up.

"You wicked beast!" she yells. "May karma find you and destroy you!"

"And what of you, you whore?! May it do with you what I couldn't and snuff the life out of you," I yell, watching her as she leaves my life without an ounce of regret.

The smoke grows large and all consuming. It needs to be set free, onto something or someone.

Alfred, my disloyal manservant, lies unconscious on the floor. The thief who robbed the only thing I ever cared to lose. The fires go out. There's nothing but the blood pounding my

eardrums. I become a servant to the darkness that blinds me.
When my sight returns, I'm puffing next to his lifeless body
with his blood on my hands.

Chapter One



Olivia | Ten Years Later

Horseshoes clobber the solid ground as they pull carriages large enough to fit an entire family. The wheels are painted black, and they glisten as if they've been polished, unlike the rusted wheels I'm used to. Colourful umbrellas twirl above the heads of colourful ladies as they walk through the paved street.

It's clear that I don't belong here. One look at my dull, printed blue cotton dress, dirtied at the hem, is enough to give away that secret. Even the coachmen dress better than I in their white curly wigs and fancy red vests. My father's sudden fortune has allowed us to move to Colderidge, where women parade about in fancy dresses to show off their wealth and are only recognized for their ability to bear children, please their husbands if they can manage, with their dowries, to convince someone to marry them, and run the household. Here, homes are as wide as an entire street and as tall as the sky itself.

Our home isn't as grand, although it's larger than any home I've ever lived in. Hats off to my father. He has had a stroke of

good luck. We haven't always been as fortunate.

I'm heading to the shops to familiarize myself with the town and, find myself some entertainment. Even a friend or two. As nice as it is to live in a larger home, it gets so lonely without company. The servants are polite enough, but they treat me like I'm above them, which is crazy. And they refuse to engage further than is necessary of them. Papa is good company, but he disappears for days at times without a word.

If I'm left to bear silence any longer, I'm going to lose my head. I *need* to exchange more than a few words with someone *normal*. We've been here for more than a month, and I still don't know anyone. They look at us as if we're the odd ones out. Whenever I pass people in the streets, or even when I look out my stained-glass windows, I see the neighbours tipping their hats in greeting and chatting with each other. They all appear friendly enough around their own. Yet, as I step inside the coffeehouse, no one seems the least bit interested in treating me like I matter at all.

Usually, wherever one goes in this country, the coffeehouses are the best places to catch up on the latest gossip, meet new people, and socialize. But not the one in Colderidge. Because I'm not one of them. When the whispers begin, I know I've made a terrible mistake in coming out today, thinking I'll find one decent person in this town.

"Look at her hair. It's frightful," says one woman with a silly feathered hat, perched on the side of her blond hair, which is pulled back so tightly in a bun, I'm afraid she might

not have any hair left on her head by the end of the day. She's speaking to another woman with her hair done similarly. And they think my hair is frightful? At least my scalp doesn't burn, even if my long, curly, brown hair swings across my face and back when I walk, whipping up in the wind.

Around me, silk dresses like flora abound. Polished hair, jewelled with pins, pearls, barrettes, large hats, and flowers decorate the heads of women who now have their umbrellas folded at their feet. They all look at me, turning up their noses.

"I hear she comes from Glenindelle," a voice whispers over the tinkling of spoons against teacups.

"Oh, how horrible. That fishing town? Do you think she smells like fish?" A snicker erupts.

"I was wondering what that smell was when she stepped through the door." I catch the eye of the young maiden who made that remark. Her skin is as white as snow, except for the false redness on her cheeks and lips. She's beautiful. She knows it too by the way she sticks her neck upward to reveal a strong collarbone and jewels. When she sees me looking at her, she displays no shame, and only snickers some more. If only the inner parts of her were as beautiful as her outward countenance.

"Hello, Miss. Would you like me to buy you a coffee? I don't mind."

I jump from the voice that creeps up behind me.

“Sir,” I stutter, before looking up into the most handsome face I’ve ever seen. Dark hair, perfectly coiffed and a smile that would send any maiden’s heart dashing. His night blue coat is soft to the touch, made of the finest material, though sturdy. It sits on his waist, over a dark grey vest, buttoned up to conceal his white long-sleeved undershirt. His trousers fit his arse nicely, and his boots glisten. There isn’t one spot of dirt on them.

He shouldn’t be speaking to me. I look as if I’ve been put through the washing several times too many. He appears to have been freshly tailored. Yet, he’s speaking to me. He looks at me as if I’m the only one who matters. And a part of me delights in the attention. I’ve been starved of much of any attention lately.

My cheeks burn at his striking countenance, and I’m instantly reminded of my father’s encouragement for me to take a husband before his sudden fortune runs out. At twenty-two, I’m an old mare, and my father just wants to make sure I’m taken care of.

For his sake, there isn’t much I wouldn’t do. Even if that means getting married, though I, myself, am not in a rush. But my mind can be changed. Marriage to a man as pleasing to look at as this one, should be nice enough.

“Please. Call me Heath,” he says, extending his hand.

Gasps echo from behind me, and when I turn to look around, the women have impressively upped their snobbery.

Their noses flare, and they fan themselves vigorously. I almost want to flirt with him just to see if they would go up in flames.

“You know, they’re all jealous because you’re talking to me. I am quite the catch.” Heath smiles. It is dashing.

I laugh. But he’s serious. And just like that, my interest dies. What a pompous, boring man. I can tell from that action alone that he’s not much different from the people in this town. The only difference is he has chosen to speak to me. A gesture I appreciate less with each second that passes.

“Thank you, sir. But I’m quite all right. I possess enough coins to purchase my own coffee,” I say, before walking away.

“Do tell, what is your name?” he asks, stepping in front of me.

He is as slow at reading the room as he is pompous. Swallowing, I fashion another smile before bowing. “Olivia, sir.” My attempt to make a turn around him is yet again obstructed.

“Olivia, I will forgive your apparent disinterest as it’s clear that you do not know who I am. I am Heath, otherwise known as Lord Everton. I have quite the hefty estate. One that all these women would love to get their hands on,” he starts.

“Well, congratulations, My Lord. You must be so proud,” I respond, though my feet face outward, toward the door.

“Indeed. But I’m looking for someone to be lady of that estate and until now, I’ve never seen a finer prospect. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, however lacking in

jewels and silks you may be. You do not seem to twitter as much as the other ninnies that gawk at me,” he whispers. “I must have you, and I’m sure that someone like me could be the answer to your every prayer...” He looks at me from head to toe as if he pities me.

“Lord Everton, please. You don’t know me, and I don’t know you. I can’t be lady of your estate. I’m sure if you reconsider, you’ll find that other prospects are more suitable,” I respond, gasping at his boldness and arrogance.

“But dear Olivia, there’s plenty of time to get to know each other after marriage, wouldn’t you say?” he asks, reaching out to touch me but restraining himself when I look down at his hand.

Marriage? That’s it. This man is positively insane. “Sir, I’m not property. You can’t just look at me, decide you’ll have me, and then attempt to purchase me with whatever riches you may have. I appreciate your proposal, but I’m not interested.”

Coffee no longer seems satisfying to me, and I spin, making my way toward the exit. I can hear him at the heel of my slippers. “Sir, please. Don’t follow me. You’re frightening me,” I gasp.

With that, he stops in front of me, holding his hands up. “I’m sorry. I’m sure I must appear quite eager, but I mean you no harm. Your countenance is just so pleasing. It complements my own so perfectly, I think we’re a match handpicked by angels,” he says.

Inhaling deeply, I gulp. “Lord Everton, matches are founded on more than just one’s agreeable good looks or riches. We may not even like each other...” I say too quickly, before needing to amend my words, before he’s made aware of my truth. Heaven knows how he would react to that insult. “...if we were to get to know each other better.”

“Then let us get to know each other. Promise me you will,” he says while I’m at the door. My escape is near, and I say what I must to reach it.

“Perhaps, one day, Lord Everton.” Curtseying, I pick up my skirts and hurry away, almost running into a carriage coming down the street. The wheels screech against the pavement, and the horses neigh in complete fright.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I say to both horse and carriage driver before hurrying away and ducking into the first shop I find. A smile brushes across my face when I see that it’s a book shop. My venture today hasn’t yielded many friends. And if Heath is to be my only friend, I can think of no greater misfortune. Books will provide me with the company I need.

“Are you lost, young lady?”

The grey-haired shopkeeper, balding in the middle, with large and unflattering sideburns, looks up at me over his spectacles. “Lost? Why would I be lost?” I ask, catching my breath and fanning myself to cope with the building heat beneath my layers. Towering shelves of hard-bound books surround me, quickening my heart.

“Well, very few young ladies show much interest in reading. And you appear to have been running from something.” He gestures toward the door.

“Right.” I sigh. “Well, I guess I’m one of the lucky few interested in feeding my mind. I was a governess back in Glenindelle,” I confess. That’s one thing the gossip ladies got right. Except for the part where I smell like fish. I don’t... at least, I don’t think I do. I cut myself off before revealing that when my father and I decided to move to Colderidge, we did so in such a rush that I couldn’t bring my books.

My father still hasn’t made me aware of the reason for our rush. He’s claimed to be too excited to wait.

“I love a great story. Especially those published by female authors.” I smile.

“In any case, you don’t appear to be able to afford the books in my store. Try the traders down by the market,” he says with a look at me from head to muddied hem.

“On the contrary, sir, I can afford to purchase several of these fine books,” I respond, shaking my reticule. “I’ll pay the market a visit another time as I’m sure their books are just as fine. But, as night is swiftly approaching, I’d like to purchase a book before making my journey back home,” I respond.

He looks at his pocket watch, sceptically. The truth is that there’s still some time left before nightfall, but as I walk here, it’ll take me much longer to return home. Supposing I spend some of my pin money on a carriage, I’ll arrive home much sooner, but I need not spend money on such frivolities.

“Very well,” the shopkeeper responds with a turn of his nose. I almost want to remove myself from the shop without fattening his pocket. Why do they all look at me the same way? With a deep breath, I reach for one of the first books I see, a poetry book, and I pay for it swiftly before making my way out the glass door.

At least something good has come from my journey out today, even if much of it has been miserable. But I’m looking forward to reading these poems under candlelight tonight.

As I approach our brick-and-mortar home, on a decently sized estate, I notice the glowering lantern light flickering through all the windows. Uh oh. I gasp. Chance neighs from the stable, and my heart plummets. Taking a deep breath, I consider my words as I venture up the steps and approach the door slowly.

The front door hasn’t even opened all the way before my father’s feet stomp along the wooden floors toward me.

“Where on earth have you been?” he asks, raising his voice slightly. His anger is temporary, however, when his brown eyes soften.

“Papa, you’re back!” I rejoice, flashing him a grin, hoping to distract him from his frustrations with me.

“And you’ve used my absence to disobey my orders. Where have you been?” he asks again, this time with his tone lowered.

“Papa, it’s been so boring, and I needed to stimulate my mind. I went for a walk in the town. Picked up some company,” I say, waving the book at him.

“Town?” He raises his voice again. “What have I told you about staying out of sight? It’s dangerous out there!”

“More dangerous than the places we’ve lived in? The most danger the people in this town have experienced is being overly obnoxious and arrogant,” I say, removing the rusting barrette, given to me by my mother before her death, from my hair. My curls tumble over my back, and I sigh in relief. “Do you know I received a proposal today from a positively insane man?” I grin. “Trust me, Papa, I was safe.”

He groans, and I turn to see him rubbing his forehead. “You can’t be sure that you were. Are you sure you weren’t followed?” he asks, opening the door and peering into the dusk.

“Oh, I hope that irritating man didn’t follow me home,” I say with wide eyes, shaking my head.

“Which man?” My father spins around, and his hand seems to shake on the door.

“Heath,” I say, looking at him curiously. “The unbearable man who asked me to marry him.”

“A man asked you to marry him?” he says, closing the door and gesturing down the hall for us to walk together.

“Yes, Papa. That’s what I just said. Is everything all right? You’ve never told me why you insist that I lock myself away

behind these walls.” I study him.

“Yes. Yes, dear,” he groans, running his hand through his full, slightly grey, brown hair. “So, you’ve been proposed to? I’ll have to meet my future son-in-law.” His panic fades away as a smile grows.

“Son-in-law? Sir Braggadocio? No, thank you,” I respond, hurrying my feet down the hall, toward the drawing room.

“I suppose if he isn’t to your liking... Does he appear to be affluent?” my father asks.

“Papa...” I start.

“Olivia,” he seconds.

“Yes. He’s affluent. He couldn’t stop talking about it.” I roll my eyes. “But I don’t know him, and I don’t wish to know him,” I respond.

“Did he do something to compromise you in any way?” my father whispers, lowering his brows at my passionate response.

“Oh, heavens no. But he was overly direct. I was certainly uncomfortable by the end of the conversation,” I say.

My father takes a long pause before he speaks again. “Nevertheless, I’d like to meet this man,” he says.

I groan.

“What did you say his name was?” he asks.

“Lord Pompous,” I respond but as my father clears his throat, I sigh. “Heath Everton. But please, Papa, he’s humourless and conceited. You know I love you and would do

anything for you but please, don't entertain the idea of me marrying this man," I ask.

He nods, and I nod, before flipping my book open, inhaling the scent of its leather and fresh ink, and indulging into the words of anguish splattered upon the page.

Chapter Two



Adam

The night chill coming from my opened windows is a welcome respite from the unforgiving heat of the day. The wind tickles the leaves that litter the ground, night birds and crickets chirp, wolves howl, and distant dogs bark. My eyes burn from staring at ledgers all day, and from the lanterns that light this dark room. A cramp seizes the side of my head and my chest, while the scent of a woman's quim permeates the room.

The only thing I require to relieve me as these ledgers pain me, is the light skirt between my knees. Her cursed vessel moves over me, tugging on my manhood as her hand helps to guide her. For a moment, I can stop twiddling my quill. For a single, fleeting moment, the books in my library blur. And in the next second, there's nothing. Absolutely nothing. Her bobbing head pounds against the desk before me. And I groan, but I'm left wanting.

Grabbing her raven hair, I force myself deeper into her tunnel, and her moans become a sort of retching, though

nothing is dislodged from her body. Closing my eyes and biting down on my lip, I thrust my hips as far as I can manage.

I'm trying. I'm giving it everything I have, plunging myself into her until her eyes bulge, pounding her head against me, cramming her mouth. Still nothing. Cursing, I pull, and she's off me. Her head crashes against the lowered part of my thick mahogany desk.

"My Lord, what's the matter?" she gasps. Her bulging eyes have returned to normal, but still, they widen at me as she chases her breath.

"Get out of my sight. You bore me," I say, flicking my hand and turning my attention back to the books and the dreary process of counting numbers.

"But My Lord, haven't I done as you asked?" She looks up at me before settling on her knees. "I can do better," she says with a smile.

She's done as I asked. She has pulled on my pipe, hard and fast, just the way I like it. And yet, she bores me. Her raven hair, covering rounded bosoms and perfectly pert nipples, like ripe berries, her slender waist and delicate curves, her quim—none of it satisfies me anymore.

As she leans forward for another disgraceful attempt, I place my hands upon her face, growling like the beast they call me, and I shove her away. "Leave! Now. I'm done with you."

"But My Lord, I have nowhere else to go," she pleads.

Looking up at her, bare with her petticoat and corset in hand, her eyes leak, but I'm not stirred. "And why, pray tell, do you think that concerns me?" She still looks upon me pitifully. "Answer me!" There's silence. "Do you wish for me to repeat myself?" I ask.

"No, My Lord. I only ask that you consider. I've served you well, and the wolves will make a meal out of me. I'll be dead within the hour," she responds.

"Yes. You will. If you question me again." I look up at her now, no smile on my hard face.

"My L-Lord," she stutters.

Sighing, I reach for my pistol, waving it at her. "Harlot, which would you prefer? Death by my hands or a chance at survival? I think you've gravely misunderstood our arrangement. You're nothing but a whore. The greatest mercy I can extend to you, is letting you leave with your life. If, however, I must repeat myself, you risk me changing my mind." My jaw tightens as I count to ten, fighting the urge to withdraw my kind offer.

Luck must be on her side; she leaves before I reach the end of my count.

Sighing and groaning, I lean back against the wooden chair, tossing my head against the shelf behind me and throwing my quill aside. The pounding in my head swells, and my eyes grow heavier. My blood quickens from the constant perusing of my unbalanced accounts.

I study my breath as the door swings open.

“Who dares to disturb me in the library?” I grumble, slowly opening my eyes.

“Sir, we’ve found him,” Lucian announces.

“Ah, Lucian,” I respond, sitting up.

The light from the lantern and candles around the room illuminates his face. A scar runs down his left cheek from when he came to my rescue, the only night I was caught slacking, some years ago. He’s from the rougher parts, where the roads and buildings, made of stone or wood are grey from smoke and dirt. Where stagnant water settles and vermin promenade to attract their mates as if they too are citizens. Where geese run about the land, gossiping, and honking in the most unbecoming manner, and the thwacking of axe against wood is constant.

On that night, he is sleeping in the woods, no doubt to avoid the noise of his stifling town, when he hears a scuffle. I’m outnumbered as fools attempt to rob me of my fine hooded cloak, pistol, and the bag of gold hanging from my horse. Together, we take them down. With blood pouring from the slit in his face, he assists in taking them back to my mansion, hidden deep in the forest, where I kill them. A discreet surgeon is called to fix his face and from then on, he’s been a trusted ally.

He stands before me now with his waistcoat unbuttoned and flying open like a cloak over his trousers and vest. His boots are muddied. So are his pants, to be fair. Only he would dare

to come upon me without warning, and only he is allowed to. “You’ve found who?” I ask.

“Townes Primrose.” He grins.

With those two words, I’m wide awake. “Well, that’s brilliant news, indeed. It’s worthy of a celebration.” I grin, clapping my hands together. “Say, do you care for a spot of brandy?” I ask, standing to retrieve the vessel of spirits from the special cupboard beneath the wide glass window behind me.

“Come. Sit. You’ve done well. And where did you find the old fool?” I ask, grateful for the joyous distraction. Lucian doesn’t move from the door or accept the glass extended to him. With muddled brows, I lower the glass on offer and take a sip from my own.

“In Colderidge. We followed him through the woods, but he’s a clever bastard. We lost him...”

“Lost him?!” My fist and my glass crash upon my desk at once. “How could you lose him, you idiot?!”

“There’s no need to worry, sir,” he says, raising his voice over mine. “There’s an inventor’s convention coming to Lhyrenia, only a three-hour ride from Colderidge, by carriage. I have no doubt he’s going to be there,” Lucian says.

“You have no doubt? Let’s hope your guesses are right; if they aren’t...” I’ve moved from the desk to stand over him, towering over his shorter frame.

“You know you don’t frighten me as much as you frighten everyone else, don’t you?” he says, looking up at my face, unflinching as he waves his hand toward me.

“I don’t frighten you? Is that right?” I ask, lowering my head so that my nose touches his, and he can’t see anything past my face or my eyes digging into him. “Well, you better hope you find him. You may be my only friend, Lucian, but I find being friendless has its charms.”

“Yes, My Lord.” He grimaces, forcing a nod before making a turn out the door. He doesn’t remind me of him coming to my rescue, because in some ways, I also came to his. Because of me, he no longer bears the night’s beating and the day’s torture. Thanks to my kindness, he can sleep in a bed and feed his desires. My debt to him has been paid. I owe him nothing, including the promise of sparing his life, should he cross or fail me. He’s as dispensable to me as anyone else.

My nails bore holes into my callous palms as I watch him leave, and I slap the ledgers, ink, and books from my desk. Papers fly across the room; ink stains the carpet.

They let him get away. How could a man dupe those twice their age? Townes Primrose owes me a large sum of money, and he’s been running for a long time.

Some years ago, he came to me, asking for a loan, claiming to have some great, world-changing invention that would reap profits. And like a fool, I gave him that money. He convinced me to invest in that idea when his funding dwindled. I did. He promised that with his profits, he’d pay me back. Doubled too.

I gave him one year to fulfil that promise, to no avail. The old clamp has remained hidden for five years.

I took pity on the man and bought his falsehood because he was the last living member of the Primrose family, one immediately beneath mine in title, which meant that at one point, they were almost as wealthy as mine. Our families were frequently together, and I had become accustomed to them. But they came upon great misfortune and soon, turned to me and my family for loans. When I was a simpleton and before I learned the realities of the world. Things, however, have changed.

My type of loans isn't the favourable kind. It comes with consequences and with the death of the rest of the Primrose family, their debt accumulated. As the lone survivor, the duty remains his, to right those debts. And I intend for him to pay me back, one way or another.

Groaning, I throw on my waistcoat over my undershirt. I don't need to be suffocated by a vest tonight as I head out into the dark and whistle for my horse. He's dark as midnight, hard for anyone to see coming beneath dull streetlamps, which means people hardly see me coming. I like being mysterious, then again, certain times, I may enjoy putting on a performance of my own. Mounting Midnight, we gallop into town where I hope to find much better entertainment. Newer distractions.

I approach a club. This is no gentleman's club. But I'm no gentleman. A knock is required before entry is allowed.

“Sir.” The doorman bows upon seeing me. He doesn’t make eye contact with me again as he steps aside to allow me in. A room filled with moans and vulgar discourse is silenced once people catch sight of me. But unless Townes Primrose is present in this club tonight, no one needs to worry about any chaos.

Their activities don’t resume until I remove my high hat and make my way over to an empty seat. As soon as I sit, and there is a glass of spirits next to me on the table, a woman joins me, dancing. I smile at her. She’s new and thankfully, not blond, or else I would have lost my head.

Since she’s new, I may charm her. Smiling, I run my hand through my dark-blond hair sitting upon my neck.

“My Lord, you have a beautiful smile,” she says, pulling the strings of her corset.

“Oh, do I?” I ask, taking a sip of my drink.

Before me, harlots bare themselves to men, encouraging them out of their clothes. Wet mouths smack as they pull at each other, and men conceal their sticks between the whores’ legs: against the wall, on a single wooden chair, on tabletops, or if they can afford it, in special rooms. The only music in the room consists of the grunts and moans of unmarried people engaging in the marital act. The aroma of spirits, tobacco, and sex is heady.

The woman before me has successfully rid herself of her corset, and her large breasts move toward my face. I put my hand out, creating some distance between us.

“For now, dancing is enough,” I respond.

“Will you dance with me, My Lord?” she asks, extending her hand.

A soft laugh escapes me. She extends it with such honour and virtue, and the irony is quite amusing. “Aren’t you the jester,” I respond. “I’m afraid I do not dance.”

She clicks her tongue. “Oh, well, that’s a shame,” she says, before walking away. No one walks away from me, but tonight, I don’t feel particularly up to setting her straight. My mood is soured, and nothing appears capable of fixing it.

I’m nothing more than a spectator, and a drunk, because I do not leave the club until I am absolutely foxed. This part of town is no place for a man of fortune. There are people lying in wait to inflict terrible danger on an unsuspecting fool. Yet, I prefer this part of town to the hypocrisy of life as a member of the upper echelon.

Here, people know who and what they are. They know struggle, betrayal, and heartbreak. I may not belong here with my fortune, but as they wallow in their pain, I don’t feel so alone, losing myself in mine. It’s selfish, I suppose, and in some ways, cruel. For with my fortune, I may control them if I wish. But I don’t wish to do so. I prefer to be on my own, feeding off their struggles for strength before retiring to my hidden-away luxury lodging.

Finally, when Midnight takes me home, and I rest my head on my pillow, the longstanding wound in my heart is drowned into the ocean of spirits.

Chapter Three



Olivia

“Papa, are you sure you must leave right away? I’m sure your latest invention is great, but surely, it can wait until the next exhibition. I’ll miss you badly if you go. It’ll be too lonely. Besides, your previous invention is doing quite well, financially.” I hug my father tightly, wrapping my arms around his paternal body.

He strokes my hair. “Yes, it is. But darling, if I put off what I can achieve today for tomorrow, I fear they may become bored with my previous invention. And unless you marry someone wealthy...”

My head swings up at him. Our finances can’t be so terrible, can they? At the furrow of my brow and the opening of my mouth to ask of our situation, he pats my back.

“There, there, my darling. You don’t have to be frightened. But, well, I will have to keep my inventions fresh. If we want to be taken care of, financially, for the future, then I will have to keep coming up with new ideas that the rich want. We can’t

think only of our present; we also need to set our sights on our future.” He smiles.

Fighting back a snuffle, I release myself from his hold. “Very well. Then you’ll have to make haste before the darkness,” I say, retrieving his high hat and riding coat.

“Darling, it’s only early afternoon. I’ll be in Lhyrenia within a few hours after my departure. The sun won’t go down on me before then,” he says, softening his brown eyes at me.

His eyes are like mine. He’s told me that I bear a similar likeness to my mother, and I suppose I do. My nose is much smaller than his and my lips, fuller. Still, I find him to be quite a handsome man and am quite pleased to have his eyes and his smile.

“I have time yet,” he says.

“But what of unforeseen circumstances? In which case, we can’t delay.” I spin about the room.

“Oh, but now it seems you hasten me away,” Papa says.

With a quick turn of my head, I see his grin. “Oh, no. Not in the least. I’d prefer it if you stayed. But if you must leave, I only wish that you’re safe on your travels. Say you’ll be back soon? And you won’t stay away long. You’ve only just returned a fortnight ago.”

He steadies me, saving me from my pacing and the quickening blood that pounds through me. “Darling, relax,”

“It’s so lonely when you’re not here,” I plead.

“You have your book to keep you company, and I won’t be gone long. Only a night spent in Lhyrenia, and I’ll be back by the morn.” He holds my cheek in his hand and smiles. “I’ll bring you back more books from my trip.”

A smile lights my face. “That would be wonderful. The books, too, but even more, your quick return.”

He dons his hat and grabs his riding cloak. “I suppose I’ll take your advice and leave earlier in case of unsuspecting delays. It’s solid advice. Look at you, wise one.” He smiles.

With a final squeeze, I watch him leave. “I love you. Please be safe,” I shout to him.

“I will. I love you too. And you, be safe also. Remember what I told you. Do not go off on your own when I’m not here. Otherwise, how can I protect you?” he says. His jaw tightens.

“Yes, Father. I’ll hide away in my castle like a trapped princess,” I say, feigning a half swoon with my hand on my head.

But my jesting fails to bring him relief and as I see his face tighten even more, and his eyes fill with earnest concern, I straighten myself. “I’ll be careful.”

“Please. You’re the only family I have left, and I don’t want to have to worry about you,” he says.

“You don’t have to,” I respond.

He tips his hat with a smile and sets off.

With his leave, I turn toward my room to retrieve my trusted friend. Removing my slippers, I seat myself on the window shelving before the evening sun, the blue sky, and lush green landscape, to read my book. I've already read all the poems. But there's no loss in reading the same book again. In fact, the poems may become even richer.

The sky is coloured with orange by the time I look up from my book. The view is so pleasant, I want to capture it for myself. So, I hurry toward my painting tools and set out to recreate the changing scene. But as soon as my brush is pressed against the canvas, there's a knock on my door. "Yes?" I call out, not wanting to remove myself from the imagery before me.

"Ma'am, Lord Everton awaits you, in the drawing room," the male servant, Mario, responds behind the muffle of my door.

Groaning, I hesitantly put down my paintbrush. He has been by twice a week for the past two because my father has sought him out and has taken quite a liking to him. I haven't.

I'd prefer to send him away, but it would be improper. So, I straighten my skirts and head out of my bedroom. The door is opened for me and when I step into the drawing room, Lord Everton's holding the largest bouquet I've ever seen. His visits are always accompanied by a gift, whether it's a poem he's written or a basket with a dead bird for dinner. Once, he even performed a poem he thought I'd like. One of love that he'd failed at memorizing, stumbling over his words, and taking

long pauses as he tried to remember them for at least a quarter of an hour.

“My darling, Olivia,” he says, handing me the large bouquet that thankfully covers my face and hence, my facial response.

“Lord Everton,” I say, peering past the flowers to search for a spot across the room to put them.

“I’ve come to see if your mind has yet been changed. I long for you. This wait is quite cruel, don’t you think?” he says.

“Lord Everton...”

“Please, call me Heath.” He smiles.

“Lord Everton,” I repeat, making my flowerless way toward the chair seated before him. “My lack of affection toward you remains unchanged. Thank you for the... gifts... but I don’t return your feelings,” I respond.

“That’s hard to believe. Don’t you see that we’re destined to be? How can I persuade you,” he says, getting up to stalk across the room.

I bite back a groan. “Affections, sir, can’t be persuaded. They can’t be forced. They’re either there, or they’re not.”

He stops before me, with his mouth fallen open. “On the contrary, Olivia. Affection can grow.” He starts to walk at me, and I turn my face away.

“Well put, sir. Grow. Things take time to grow, don’t they? You can’t force a flower to grow out of the ground.” I gesture

toward the roses on the small table with curved legs in the back.

He bends before me. “So, you’re saying I should give you time?” he asks with a smile, and I jump up from my seat, creating distance between us. My palms have grown damp and my nerves, unsettled.

“I never said that, Lord Everton. Affection must also have a foundation. You must at least like the person,” I say too quickly before I can stop myself.

His mouth falls open even wider before he shuts it so hard, his teeth smash together. If he ever broke those teeth, his whole world would shatter. What would he do if every reflective surface didn’t mirror his perceived perfection back at him?

“Are you saying you don’t like me, Miss Primrose?” he asks.

“Lord Everton...” I start, trying to deny my words, but I can’t.

“What is it about me that you don’t like, Miss Primrose? Is it my dashing handsome face or my hefty pocket? Need I remind you that every woman in town, young or old, ugly or handsome, swoons over me,” he says.

“Well, perhaps one of them will be happy to be called your wife,” I remind him.

“But it’s you I want, Miss Primrose,” he says with great conviction.

“Why would you want affection from someone who doesn’t want to give it?” I ask.

“Perhaps it’s the challenge I like. The promise of success and satiated pl...” he starts.

“Lord Everton!” I admonish.

“My apologies, Miss Primrose. It’s just, I want you to know how strongly I feel for you,” he says.

A look toward the window informs me that dusk is settling in. Pretending to stifle a yawn, I make my way toward the door. “I’m afraid I must get ready for bed. It’s getting late,” I say, ushering him out.

“Ah,” he says. “I suppose the night has come upon us swiftly, indeed and around these parts might be dangerous at night,” he says with a turn of his nose.

These parts? My home isn’t too far away from town, just a turn down off from the streets of the grand mansions. How much more unsafe are these streets than his own? Still, I find satisfaction in his attempted insult.

“Ah.” I nod. “Then you’ll need to hurry,” I say with a smile.

“Yes. But be promised, Miss Primrose, I’ll return here twice a week, every week for as long as is necessary to secure your hand,” he says before leaving.

My insides turn as I swallow. Heaven forbid.

Secure my hand.

He's still not done away with the idea of marrying me. It's not entirely his fault, I suppose, although he's obnoxious. But my father's entertained his charms, inviting him over for tea, telling him he's welcome to stop by anytime. Papa has laid it on thick with me, saying he's seen far worse matches.

Ugh! That intolerable man. Lord Everton, I mean. Not my father. My father's just trying to ensure our future.

It's never been my intention to marry, except when I was a child and dreamed of fairy tales. To be fair, when I was a child, I might have dreamed of a man who had as striking a face as Lord Everton. I don't deny that he is dashing, and he's impressively built. Shamefully, that's the only thing he has going for him. That and his ability to ensure that we would never go broke again. The reality never often lives up to dreams. And as we get older, and wiser, we dream of other things.

But if I were to marry, I suppose I'd like to have a connection with someone. Someone kind and not so pompous. It would be nice if he had an agreeable face, but if not, an agreeable heart would be perfect. Perhaps I'd like to feel what is felt through the poems of love. Though poetry sometimes makes love appear to be disastrous and filled with anguish. In that case, love doesn't seem so tempting.

I could be content with an agreeable match, pleasant. But locked away in here, only allowed out when necessary, and when I can be accompanied by my father, the only suitor I've managed to attract is that buffoon. A buffoon is certainly what

he is. I grin to myself. A young lady would never be allowed to call a gentleman a buffoon in public, but I would give all the coins in my reticule to see the look on his face if I could. His mouth would hang open, just as it did today, as if he were catching flies, and his lordship's eyes would quite possibly dislodge themselves from his body.

Oh, but for my father, I would. I would marry that irritating man and force myself to not give into the dismal life promised. I'd do my best to be as happy or as content as I am capable. Papa will need to be tended to when he's older than he is now. He is only fifty-two, but soon, he'll be much older. And though I'd give up my life to take care of him in his older years, there's not much I can do if we're drowning in poverty.

Unfortunately, for a woman, there are few opportunities to build wealth on her own, the type of wealth that can support two people. And so, if my father's inventions don't provide sustainable income, then it will leave me no choice but to marry to secure our future. To allow him the luxury of servants to care for him when he can no longer care for himself. To afford for himself, doctors, the best medicines, and the healthiest food.

Needing a moment, I pause at the bottom of the stairs before retiring to my bedroom. I need to catch my breath as behind my ribs, there's a wave building. Selfishly, I wish for my father's inventions to be profitable enough to sustain us both. But, at the ripe old age of twenty-two, I might consider growing up and taking responsibility. It's time I become less selfish.

I may not be able to tolerate the man now, but maybe there'll be an opportunity to grow to appreciate him with time. I'll at least be able to show him gratitude for rescuing our family from financial misfortune. If there were another option, I'd take it. If only there were a sign to light a different path forward.

Groaning, I start up the stairs.

"Ma'am, are you ready for your bath?" my maidservant asks, causing my heart to leap as she appears behind me. "Oh, I'm sorry, ma'am..." she starts.

"It's all right, Tabitha. Please, call me Olivia," I respond.

"Right. Pardon me. I keep forgetting, ma... Olivia. If you don't mind me asking, are you all right, Miss Olivia?" Tabitha inquires. "You appear a bit faint."

Now that she mentions it, Lord Everton's presence did overwhelm me. With a press of my fingers to my head, I detect a cold dampness. "Oh, I suppose I'm feeling unwell."

"Is it a cold, ma'am?" she asks.

I shake my head and smile. "I just need to lie down. Don't worry yourself about my bath. I can fix it myself."

She lowers her head, and her face drags in uncertainty. "I must insist, ma'am. That's my job."

Gulping, I'm not sure how to respond. I'm not sure if I've embarrassed her by suggesting that I do it myself. So, I just nod, smile, and head up to the room of the baths. The large

basin of water and lavender helps to relax me and eases my thoughts of marrying Heath.

Chapter Four



Townes

Rolling hills, trees of grandeur, tall grass being trampled by Chance's hooves, and heaven help us, a blizzard that will soon turn the evergreen landscape ghostly white. It's curious how a land, only three hours away, such as Lhyrenia from Colderidge, can be so vastly different in weather.

"Hyuh," I command Chance, hoping to inspire him to move faster. He does, but I'm not helped by the speed. In my efforts to make it back to Colderidge in a hurry and avoid being trapped in the barbarous storm, I'm being whipped in the eyes by the stinging snowflakes. They come at me strikingly fast and surround my face like a swarm of bees.

With closed eyes, my balance is altered, and my body sways with every move forward. Grabbing for the reins is like reaching for air. Spluttering snow from my mouth, I narrow my eyes, forcing them open to see which way I need to steer my horse. I hadn't brought my winter clothes with me, and my body shakes vigorously.

“Chance, my boy, let us make haste.” I lean forward so my words travel with ease to his ear, but the action shifts me. I risk crashing to the ground if I don’t get a proper grip on the reins. The bag of goods, including the books I have for Olivia, is dislodged in the chaos and plummets in the soft layer of snow gathered on the ground. With a groan, I consider whether to retrieve them but think against it as my lids grow heavy and frosted.

The wind howls, and it bears a likeness to a wolf. Or it’s a wolf. Soon, more howls join the one, and Chance screeches to a halt, cocking up his two front legs, screaming in fear. Of course, I’m thrust backward with a thud into the thin layer of snow, howling in pain from the impact. My hat has fallen upon my face and as I pull it away, hoping to steady myself and mount my horse once more, I bear witness to his departure.

“Chance! You silly boy, get back here at once!” I call, but my weight seems his biggest obstruction in the way of speed as he dashes even faster, disappearing through the trees.

“Chance! You can’t leave me here!” I cup my hand over my mouth, projecting my voice farther. There’s movement through the trees, and I sigh. The silly horse has come back for me. My riding cloak serves me well in removing the snow from my eyes though they shake, twitching uncontrollably. Following the tracks in the snow, I seek the bag of goods.

“Ah ha! There you are. Olivia will be happy after all.” I grin to myself, hoisting the bag over my shoulders before spinning around in hopes of seeing Chance.

Instead, I'm greeted with a sight that makes my legs tremble far harder than the cold snow. A pack of wolves surrounding me. The bag falls from my body when my shoulder slumps.

"Hello there," I whisper, holding my hands out before me and slowly backing away. I even smile at them. A foolish move on my part. Baring my teeth seems to be what incites their teeth baring and well, they display the least pleasing smiles I've ever seen in my life.

Oh, dear. They won't hesitate to consume me, and I'll be dead within the hour. "There, there," I whisper to the brown, black, white, and grey beasts, but the mere utterance of my voice provokes them, and they advance toward me.

Falling to my knees, I'm struck by an idea and scramble through the bag for the newspaper I purchased earlier. In my pocket is my tinderbox. This is my only hope. Hopefully, the fire will frighten the beasts. That's as far as my plan goes. I don't know what I'll do after that. My fingers shake as I open the box, and the wind threatens to rob me of my tinder, but I grab hold of it. The flint is stubborn upon the steel, and I swear, muttering to myself as the wolves grow near.

Oh, blast. My breath is still, and the sharp edges of the stone digs into my palm as I strike and strike and strike, until my head may very well explode. And alas, there's light. Light so sweet, I may cry from the sight of it.

The wolves growl, and the wind seeks to make an enemy of me. A gentle breeze might have helped the flames along but a wet, barking wind threatens to put it out. Oh, please, I beg for

some mercy, shielding the lit tinder so I can fold the newspaper and set fire to it. An even larger flame is birthed, and I don't waste time. Waving it at the wolves, their growls become whimpers.

“Ha ha!” I grin in a fit of madness and desperation.

Joy is quickly snuffed by the death of the flame. The wind's persistence is successful, and I'm back where I was a few moments ago.

Being eaten to death must surely be the worst way to die. There isn't anything so unfavourably barbarous as being ripped into and torn apart by several animals at once. My pulse quickens, and my breaths shorten. I'm soon overcome by a wave of dizziness. A merciful failure of the heart has taken the place of what could've been an awful death. My limbs grow numb, my sight wavers and soon, there's nothing but absolute darkness.



Adam

The bang from my pistol is enough to send the mutts running for their lives.

“Throw him over your horse.” I wave my finger toward an unconscious Townes Primrose. Snow turns my dark-blond hair white, and my eyes sting from the cold, relentless flakes.

Lucian grabs one of Townes’ arms and throws it over his shoulder. The new gawky young thug, about eighteen years of age, though he’s not too sure, himself, throws the other arm over his shoulders. When they pause before Lucian’s horse, they exchange glances with one another. Their waistcoats flap about in the brutal wind, and the frail youth shivers. He’s wearing a cloth hat that is frozen now, and he’s barely keeping it together.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” I ask, looking around. Not out of fear of being caught, but rather from the need to be as efficient as possible without any collateral damage. It would be too much of a hassle if anyone else were to come upon us and witness this. Although, I suppose, we’d just have to pretend to be good old bastards helping a poor old simpleton who got trapped in a blizzard.

“Boss...” Lucian sighs but as I cock my head at him, raising my brows, he doesn’t waste any more of his breath. He grumbles before muttering something to the youth who grabs Townes by his legs.

Lucian goes for the old man's waist and together, they hoist him over until his upper body is pushing up against the horse. The animal neighs in frustration.

"Look at him. Pathetic. Pity I couldn't let the wolves have him. I reckon he'd fill their bellies up for a few days." I scoff, circling them on Midnight.

Lucian pants. "Say, mate, I reckon he would." He chuckles, patting the stallion's side before leaning up against it for support. He runs his hand across his long, dark-brown hair and grimaces when he finds it almost frozen.

Townes is out cold on his belly, bent over sideways on the horse's back. He could slide off on the ride back, but I hope he doesn't. He's worth more to me alive than he is dead. How else would I recover the money he stole from me?

"What man doesn't know how to care for themselves in the woods?" I scoff. "It's ridiculous." Rolling my eyes, I gently press my calves into Midnight's ribcage. "Now let's get the hell out of this bloody blizzard."

We head toward my house in the mountains. It's about seven hours outside of Colderidge and five hours outside of Lhyrenia. Except for our lanterns, it's pitch black by the time we pull up to my home. The stars and the moon can't twinkle through the towering trees that provide housing to creatures and birds, all of which can be heard skittering, squeaking, and calling in the bushes.

We've opened my large metal gates that creak when they're being pulled. We've trotted along the paved path toward the

front door, not to mention the hour's long ride of galloping over hills and through rocky paths just to make it here to begin with, and still, it surprises me that this fat bastard hasn't roused.

"He's so peaceful. Be a shame to wake him." Lucian dismounts his horse before standing with his hands on his hips, grinning at me.

With my mouth open, I shake my head. "Fascinating. Poor fool must have thought he died and decided to stick to the role," I say with a slight smirk before dismounting Midnight and quickening my feet toward the door. We escape the worst of the elements with that blizzard once we leave Lhyrenia, but the night is swiftly upon us which leaves our clothes damp and cold. I'm anxious to get inside and sit before the fire. Shivering, I watch as Lucian and the youth struggle to pull Townes off the horse, dropping him on his head in the process.

"Oop!" the youth gasps. "Now he's definitely not waking up." His cheeks grow red though he tries to keep his expression rigid. I can tell he's scared out of his wits, and he should be if he... they... managed to kill him before he can pay me back.

Lucian nudges Townes with his boot before reaching down to check his pulse. "Aye. He's still alive."

"Good. Now, will you two hurry up?" I groan, waving into the house before calling for Carlson. But as I turn to do so, he's already behind me with a candle. He looks between all of

us and an unmoving Townes before settling calm and unbothered eyes upon me.

“Carlson, would you mind lighting the fires in my chambers and setting out some fresh clothes. I’m a bloody mess,” I say.

“Yes, sir.” He nods before walking away but not before sighing at the sight of Lucian and the youth being morons.

“You could help us and not just stand there,” Lucian grumbles before catching a breath.

“Then what would be the purpose of you guys?” I ask. “Come on, hurry up.”

Lucian mutters an insult beneath his breath, and I bite back a smile. The truth is that my day has been made, finding Townes. It’s not even about the money. It’s about teaching him a lesson. Whether he has my money or spent it all, I’ll have a lot of fun with him.

We’ve been trailing him from Lhyrenia, and we didn’t strike right away because it felt good to be in the shadows, spying on him, knowing that he was none the wiser. I might have even let him ride all the way back to Colderidge, keep eyes on him there, taunt him a bit with written notes to make him know we’re watching him, mess with his brain. But he lacks one of those. The fool tried to frighten wolves away with a piece of newspaper on fire. He’s ridiculous. He doesn’t deserve to call himself a man.

“Put him in the cellar. I’ll be with him in a moment,” I say once they’ve finally brought him inside.

“Will that be all, boss? I think we’d like to get out of these damp, heavy clothes as much as you would,” Lucian snarls.

Slapping him on the arm, I grin. “You know what, I’ll handle it from here. Now hurry off before you catch cold and get some food in you. Can’t have you dying on me,” I say.

“Oh really? I thought it didn’t matter to you whether we lived or died,” Lucian says with a wave of his brow.

“It depends on the hour, mate.” I click my tongue against my teeth, smiling before taking the stairs two at a time and shedding my clothes as soon as I’m outside my bedroom. Closing the door behind me, I sigh as the warmth of the crackling fire envelops my naked body. Leftover shivers cause short spurts of violent shakes before I’m settled and drying my hair with the towel laid out next to my nightshirt, trousers, silk drawers, and undershirt. Good on Carlson for giving me options, but I won’t need my nightshirt for now.

Dressed, I make my way down to the dining room for dinner. Lucian isn’t sitting with me. He’s probably having dinner with Gloria in their quarters. Gloria is one of my housekeepers, and she’s Lucian’s woman. They claim to be in love.

Grabbing my glass of wine, I sigh, shaking my head. Fools. They’ll find out soon enough that the whole thing—love, trust, commitment—it’s all a sham. I’ve tried to warn him, but he won’t take telling. He’ll just have to learn the hard way, just as I did. I down my wine and pour myself another. There’s no

one sitting with me in the dining room. It's quiet. A bit lonely, but it's safe.

Biting into some pork, I sigh and close my eyes. A tightness swells in my chest and tugs at me. I shudder from the impact, clearing my throat, straightening my shoulders, and finishing my meal before heading down to the cellar to see if my guest has yet awakened. If not, the pitcher of cold water in my hand should do the trick.

In the overarched cellar, lanterns light the stone walls and ceiling, providing me with a clear path toward Townes' cell.

"Oh. This is ridiculous," I groan upon seeing him passed out still. Flinging open the metal gate that keeps him locked inside, I approach him, kicking his legs to wake him.

"Well, this is your doing, old man. Rise and shine." I grin to myself, pouring the pitcher of cold water in his face.

He gasps and shrieks, sputtering while slapping his face and blinking against the water in his eyes. He stops hollering for a moment before slapping his hands against the rest of his body as the last of the water drips from my pitcher. He gasps again and laughs but aw, that doesn't suit me.

"I'm ali..." he starts.

"Cock-er-derdle-doo!" My overly exaggerated impression of a crowing rooster silences him. Arms akimbo, I flap my elbows around, sticking my head out and walking around his cell.

He goes silent, rubbing at his eyes, red now as he forces them open. “A-a-adam Molotov,” he mutters, scooting away from me as if there is any room to hide in this tiny cell. “Adam Molotov.” He blinks, speaking louder before rising to his feet.

“Look who’s awake!” I grin. “I have to say, Primrose, you’ve fattened up like a pig getting ready for a roast,” I say, looking him over. “Been eating good, have you?”

“Fat?” he says, smoothing his hand over his belly. “I wouldn’t say I’m fat,” he starts.

“I’d say so.” I wave him off.

“Age might have put a few more pounds on me, but I’d hardly say I’m fat,” he says.

“Well, I beg to differ. That’s beside the point,” I bite out, and he shuts his mouth. Propping my leg up on the stone wall behind me, I smile. “Seems as if you’ve been doing better for yourself. Pray tell, it wouldn’t be my money you’ve been spending, would it?”

He chuckles, shaking his head before stuttering, “N-n-no.”

“Well, that’s great news, Townes. That means you have my three thousand pounds, then?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

His eyes widen. “Thre-three th-tho-thousand? Wrong person. I only borrowed one thousand pounds.”

I nod. “Yes, you did. But it’s been five years, Townes. Interest,” I say, walking toward him. “As well as that return on my investment you promised me. Or do you forget?”

His sideburns quiver. “Yes. No, I don’t forget.”

“And that’s not even the whole of it. But we’ll get into the money your family still owes me, after you pay me my three thousand pounds.” I move to stand before him, towering over him, as I do most people, at two inches over six feet in height. I look down at his flushed face. “So, where is it?”

He trembles. “Well... um... about that...”

Before he can even think about trying to dupe me with some silly old story, his jaw cracks beneath the blow of my fist.

Crouching before him, I grab him by the collar of his shirt and pull him toward me so he can smell my breath. “Your time’s up, Townes Primrose. You either have my money, or you pay me back with your life.”

Chapter Five



Olivia

It's midnight, and I should be asleep but with nothing to do at all, my body isn't tired. The single candle in my room casts shadows against the pale-blue paint of my walls. I twist and turn in my single-sized bed, pushing aside the canopy which blocks the air from the windows across the room. My skin itches against the heat, and I rub at it, flipping over on my back and staring at the ceiling. My boredom and the heat aren't the only reasons for my discomfort.

It's Heath's last visit. Ever since he left, I've been trying to force my contempt for him down into the barrel of my stomach. Putting a cap on it to keep it trapped while imagining what a future with him would be like if I had to marry him. I've imagined a trail of insults hurled at each other, whether overtly or cunningly. My word, I've imagined the torture of endless chatter, from his end alone, about himself and how much of a catch he is. I've imagined shutting my eyes and biting the bullet to engage in the marital act with him. And throughout all my imaginings, I've been left disgusted. It's as

if I'm trapped in a barrel with a tiny hole and pushed off into the sea to face either drowning or trying to break out before it's too late.

Breaking out of that barrel seems like the most logical option. Why would I willingly trap myself in a barrel with a hole and ask to be rolled out to sea unless I despised myself terribly? So, the answer is clear to me. Papa and I will find a way without Lord Pompous. We'll have to; he's not an option, and I'm sure if I explain this all to my father, he'll understand. Surely, he wouldn't want to roll me toward my demise.

As I exhale from the relief of that decision, I hear a horse's neigh into the night. My ears twitch to listen more closely.

A neigh again.

"Chance?" I jump upward in bed with a smile on my face. Donning my slippers, I hurry to the window. "Papa?!"

Oh, thank goodness. This is fate. Just as I've made my decision, itching to tell Papa of it, he's arrived. I can't waste any more time.

I can't see Chance or my father in the darkness outside my window. But that's all right, I'll meet him at the front door. Hurrying out in my nightdress, I grab a lantern from the shelf above the fireplace in the drawing room and head outside.

"Papa?" I call out, but he doesn't respond. Instead, Chance flips up on his back legs, baring his large teeth, and hollers as if he's in distress. My heart sinks, and I shine the light behind

Chance, running into the night to locate my father. Chance follows me, still shouting at me, and I spin around at him.

“Where’s Papa?” The lantern shakes in my hand. Daddy was constantly warning me about how unsafe it is to leave the house, though he always leaves. I felt as if he was overreacting. But now that Chance is here without him, my mind sings a mournful song of doom. Chance would never return without Papa unless there was something wrong.

I wish Chance and I could communicate in a language that we could both understand so that he could tell me where he is. Tears burn my eyes, and I look back toward the house. I can’t go back in there, not without knowing whether he is dead or alive. Waiting days, weeks, perhaps even months to hear news. My heartbeat pounds my body, pushing me forward, and I grab onto Chance’s reins.

“Steady,” I say, stroking his mane. “I know you’re freaking out. I am too. But you’re going to have to take me to where you left Papa.”

Chance shakes his head, huffing through his nose and mouth.

“What do you mean, no?” I ask, lowering my brows at him and he lowers his head.

Chance backs up.

“What’re you... Don’t you run away. It’s my father, Chance. Your best friend. We can’t leave him out there. Who knows what will...” The violent shaking of my lips interrupts

my words, and my breathing grows laboured. I can hardly stand straight when I feel Chance's big nuzzle bumping against my head. With a puddle in my eyes, I look up into the stallion's, with an understanding exchanged between us.

He stays still, letting me mount him, and I set out into the darkness with only the lantern and the stars in the sky to light my path. We're riding for heaven knows how long; the saddle hammers my thighs, and I regret not throwing a mantle on over my nightdress when we stop on top of a snow-filled mountain. Chance won't go any further when I nudge him, but there's no sign of Papa anywhere, until I spot a large lump in the snow.

Throwing myself off the horse, I bear the cold wetness seeping through my slippers, soaking my nightdress and shocking my knees as I fall to the ground. My breath swirls around in front of me as I try to catch it. With my bare hands and tears solidifying on my cheeks, I pull at the snow covering the lump. My chest rattles, and my heart constricts as I wait to see my father's dead body. My fingers, numb and frost nipped as they may be, stumbles across fabric, frozen stiff.

Grabbing for my lantern, I prepare myself. Just the thought of his cold, dead face is traumatizing enough. My brain knocks around in my head as if it's come loose and fragile, and I take a deep, trembled breath before shining the light over hi... his bag? His bag! Not him. Oh, thank goodness! Not him. Although, I'm not sure if that's a good thing. He could've been pulled off into the woods by a wild animal, though there are no obvious blood stains in the snow. I hope that his blood isn't

just buried beneath layers of the white powder and that he's simply wandered off for shelter. Any helpful footprints have already been covered up, so we can't use that to track him.

The snow explodes like dust off the bag as I grab it, bringing it to Chance's nose. He already knows what Papa smells like, but I'm not taking any chances. He might need a refresher.

"Good job, Chance. This is where you left him. Now you must take me to where he is," I say, hooking the bag on the backside of the saddle and gripping the reins with tingling fingers, before throwing myself over Chance's back. I'm trying to grip on tightly to the reins with one hand and the lantern with the other, but I can't feel anything, so I don't know if my hold is effective. My nerves are on fire, and my skin is ghostly white, a far cry from my usually olive-toned skin.

Chance moves forward, and my lantern slips from my fingers. Shaking my head, I leave it behind. We need to leave here before I freeze to death. Chance's nose will lead the way. My body won't stop shaking. My fingers are useless at this point. They won't be useful until they're warmed, so I hook my hand into the rope, wrapping it around my wrists as I lose consciousness. Not completely. I can feel my body jerking up and down as Chance gallops. I can feel my brain shaking about in my head. But my mind seems detached from my body, asleep. I think I've entered survival mode, and I'm hoping that some good samaritans rescued Papa. That they have an active fire with which I can warm my body and collect

him, so we can be off in the morning. But the further and further we ride away, my slight consciousness grows less hopeful.

We're far from Colderidge. I don't have any idea where we are. We've been riding from midnight, till dawn, and now the glorious sun warms my body. My fingers have regained feeling, but I'm worried that we might be lost when Chance stops outside of a mansion with gates so tall, I wonder how they manage to open it. My eyes are heavy, and they hurt from the brightness of the sun shining into them.

I'm about to knock and call out to someone to ask if by some strange stroke of luck, they'd seen my father, when Chance neighs. As I turn to look at a distressed Chance running back into the woods and away from me, my teeth smash against each other; there's an echo against my skull and then darkness.

When my eyes open again, I must strain them. Clutching the side of my head and blinking, I reach down to feel a soft blanket around my body. And when I gain clarity of sight, I scream at the man sitting before me in a chair. It's a red-padded chair with gold legs and framing around the back of it.

The man has a long scar going down the left side of his face, and his green eyes are cold.

"Wh-h-ho are you? And wh-wh-why..." I start, but the words won't leave my mouth fast enough.

"Who am *I*? Who are *you*? What are you doing here?" he asks, leaning forward.

“I-I-I-...” Bloody hell. I can’t speak.

“Are you a spy?” he asks.

The question pauses me. “A what?”

“You heard me. Are you a spy? What’re you doing hanging round here?” he asks. I only just notice that there’s a pistol on his lap.

My words become even more hurried as my exhausted brain struggles to move my tongue and lips, so I can set him straight. “No... no. I’m not a spy. I’m just looking for my father.”

“Your father?” he asks, wrinkling his forehead and brows before leaning back into his seat.

“Yes. Yes! I promise you. I’m not a spy. Please don’t hurt me,” I sob.

He waves me off. “I believe you. Although, I’m not the one you’ll need to convince,” he mutters.

“Who do I have to convince?” I ask, still shaking.

“He’s not here right now,” he says.

I nod, gulping. The man seems to be less anxious even though he’s not stopped watching me. Unsure whether I’m able to leave or if moving will inspire him to shoot at me, I turn my eyes about the room instead, avoiding his burning, uncomfortable stare.

Everything in this house is grand. Gold lion heads hang from walls, along with other ornate pieces. The sofa I’m

sitting on matches with the other seats in the room. Above the fires is a picture of a man.

Okay, I retract what I thought about Heath when I first saw him. This man is the most handsome man I've ever laid eyes on. The painting captures a side profile of him. He has a rugged look about him. He's not as clean cut as the men in Colderidge, not as pretty as Heath with perfectly coiffed hair, always sporting a clean-shaven face. This stranger has dirty-blond hair that seems to be styled only with his hands. It's messy and falls around his white collar, turned up at his neck. Streaks of blonde play upon his hair like sunlight.

His brows drop low and brooding. His blue eyes seem to twinkle with menace. His beard is short but long enough for any gentleman to require an immediate shave. But something about him gives me the sense that he's a darker kind of gentleman. Or perhaps not a gentleman at all. In some ways, he reminds me of the men I grew up around, and heaven knows I never grew up around gentlemen. But the way he holds himself reminds me of the men in Colderidge. He's a mystery, this one. A sizzling intrigue.

"Who's that?" I ask the man whose eyes I can still feel upon me.

"That's the boss. He's the one you'll have to answer to. If he decides you can leave, you'll leave," he says.

My head whips around. "If he decides? But I haven't done anything that would cause him to hold me. Please. I'm just trying to find my father. Maybe you can even help me. I doubt

he made his way this far, but this is where my horse's nose led to. Please, sir. Have you seen him? Brown hair with some streaks of grey? He's healthy looking, normally, but I suppose he'd look rather ragged after being left in the snow, especially if he had to walk all this way on foot..."

The man's eyes widen, and his mouth falls open for a bit. I nod toward him, a smile turning my lips up. "You've seen him, haven't you?" I ask. "You look as if you have. Please, if you could just tell me which way he went, then I could be out your hair." I sigh in relief. "You can just explain to your boss that you helped me locate my father."

The man clears his throat. "Come with me," he says, rising to his feet.

I'm hesitant, looking at his outstretched hand. This man is a stranger, and I don't know if I can trust him. "Sir, if it's quite all right. I'd prefer if you just told me which way he went, and I'll get on my horse and track him," I say.

"Your horse is long gone," he says.

"Wh-what? What did you do to him?" I whisper, bringing a hand to my mouth.

"Nothing. He just ran off," he says, impatiently, walking toward me and grabbing hold of my hand.

"No! No! Where are you taking me?" I pull against him.

"I'm taking you to your father," he barks.

"No, you're not." I cry. "Please, sir. Let me go."

He carries me through a long hallway that blurs through my fear. At the end of the hall, he opens a door to a dark room. “No!” I scream. “No!”

“Look, lady. Don’t you want to see your father?” He pulls on my hand, sternly communicating that I should shut my trap.

Tears pool down my face. Of course, it’s a silly idea to wander around on my own. Papa has warned me, and I didn’t listen. Now this man is going to trap me here, to do heaven knows what before killing me. And I’ll never see my father again.

The man lights a lantern, and I see dusty wooden stairs leading down into a cellar. And when we turn the corner, only a few steps further, my internal organs collapse.

“P-P-Papa.” My lips shake. I can hardly believe he’s the same man who left me just a little over a day ago. He’s bloody and crusted. His skin has multiple shades: blue, green, purple, and smudges of black.

When he sees me, he tries to rush forward but howls in pain. “Olivia!” Papa cries.

“I guess I’ll leave you two to catch up,” the man with the scar says before stalking back up the stairs and locking me in the room with my father behind metal bars. As soon as the man leaves us, I check the lock for a way to let him out.

Papa pulls his tired and painful body toward the cell. “There’s no use,” he says, grabbing my hands. “Olivia,” he whispers, squeezing them tightly. “Run, baby. As soon as you

get the chance, you've got to run. If you stay here, they'll kill you." One of his eyes widens and tears brim over. "Please, Olivia. Don't let them hurt you."

Chapter Six



Adam

My blood bubbles hotter than a thermal spring as I pull at the ties of my riding cloak and throw my hat to the side. The wretched old man has tried to outsmart me again. It's stupid, really. After beating him for hours last night, he has finally disclosed where he 'had the money.' In a bank in Colderidge, he had said. So, this morning, I've met with an associate of mine who has connections at the bank. I've sent him to look about getting my money withdrawn. This associate meets me in town because I don't disclose where I live to just anyone.

He has come back empty handed. Now, he knows not to mess with my money and has seen my wrath before. So, when he tells me that Townes Primrose doesn't have an account at the bank, I know he isn't lying. I also know he isn't lying after holding my empty pistol to his head and pulling the trigger. So, I let him go and ride a half hour back to my home, wondering what to do with the silly old fool.

He must know he's enraged me, and there's no way for him to escape, so what exactly is his plan? I don't know whether I should kill him or send him back out there to get me my money. He'll probably only disappear on me again for another five years. Because I doubt he has any of it left at all.

"Adam..." Lucian steps out of his chambers as I walk past.

"Not now," I growl, stomping toward the cellar.

"You have a visitor," he says. "A woman. The prettiest woman I've ever seen in my life," he whispers.

At the word 'visitor,' I spin around. We don't get visitors unless they're the men I've vetted or the women I bring here in the dark of the night, so they can't locate the house in the daytime. "I didn't see anyone in the drawing room," I say. "She isn't in my chambers, is she? If she's someone I've sexed before, you can throw her out."

"No, Adam. I promise you, she's unlike any woman any of us have ever seen," he whispers, looking about the hallways. "And you've had some gorgeous women here, I'll confess. Not like her though. Her lips are naturally pink. A bright pale pink. Her eyes are a deep brown. So striking..."

"Get a hold of yourself, will you?" I stop him, grunting. "Where is she?"

"She's in the cellar." He clears his throat.

"What's she doing in the cellar?" I narrow my eyes at him. If she's in the cellar, she's with my prisoner. If she's with my

prisoner, she's a witness, which means, she'll have to be killed.

"She's with her father," he says, and speech leaves me for a moment.

"Townes?" I ask when the words find me again.

He nods.

"But I thought he was the last remaining member of the Primrose family," I say.

"Apparently not." Lucian shrugs.

"You're sure she's his daughter?" I ask, wondering if this is a part of Townes' plan. My feet hurry up toward the cellar. "Have you checked if he's still in there?"

"Well, where else would he be?" Lucian asks before chuckling. "Hold on, you don't think she broke him out of there, do you? She's about half your size and skinnier than a twig. There are no windows down there, and the door is heavily padlocked. Unless she stashed some lock-breaking tools in her cunt, I'd say the lass is still down there with the old man." He grins, slapping me on the back and handing me the keys. "Be careful down there, or she'll get ye," he whispers, jerking me from behind as I swear.

He laughs, disappearing down the hallways.

I take my time opening the door, and I can hear her voice immediately.

"Papa, I'm not leaving here without you," she whispers.

“Don’t you get it, Olivia. He’ll kill me and if he finds you down here, he’ll kill you too,” he says.

I notice my shadow bouncing off from the lantern light onto the wall, and I pull myself back. They don’t seem to have noticed.

“Well, I won’t live without you, Papa. We either leave here together or die here together,” she says, sniffing.

“You don’t mean that, Olivia. This is my mess. I caused this. Please. When Lucian opens the door again, make a run for it.”

“No,” she says. “I’ll stay here with you.”

“Bloody hell, you stubborn girl. Leave, I tell you! Run. Save yourself,” Townes barks desperately.

She hisses, and I hear metal dragging along the stone floors. “There must be a way to get you out of here,” she says. Then there’s a bang, a grunt, and a gasp before the bang occurs again.

“Stop it! They’ll hear you!” Townes’ voice shakes.

“Look at you, Papa. You’re scared to the bones. Tell me what I can do. I’ll do anything to get you out of here. I’ll risk my own life...”

I’ve heard enough. “What’s going on down here?” I call out, slowly making my way down the stairs as I hear the daughter gasp.

“Hide. Hide!” Townes whispers.

“Where?” Her voice shakes.

My shadow grows larger on the wall, and I hear Townes’ swearing. When I turn the corner, I see this Olivia in her dirtied, white nightdress, holding a heavy enough piece of iron in one hand. She has both arms spread out beside her as she guards her father’s cell. Lucian is right. Even if only lit by the flames of a lantern, I can see that her lips are naturally pink. Such a pretty shade. She pants and looks at me as if she’s both scared and ready to fight. But she must have reconsidered because she’s yet to swing the iron at me. Good of her not to. It would be too heavy for her to handle quickly enough, and I’d only end up taking it from her.

“You’re out of your depths here,” I say to her, smirking.

She gulps but says nothing. Townes yells out, “Please, let her go. She has nothing to do with this. This is my debt. I’m the one who owes you. Please don’t hurt her.”

My breath tremors as I inhale deeply. My mind is reminding me that she’s a Primrose, which means that she also has her family’s debt on her head. But something else tells me to give her a chance. It would bring hassle to my door if she spoke of this to someone, but I could fight whoever I needed to. She looks so pure, and her genuine love for her father renders me to a moment of weakness.

“He’s right,” I say, lowering my head. “This is between me and your father. Now, leave before I change my mind.”

She shakes. “Sir,” she says. Her throat scratches. “If this is about a debt my father owes, I’ll pay it back.”

I laugh. “And how do you intend to do that? Do you have money of your own?” I ask.

“No, b-b-but... what are you going to do him? Whatever you plan to do to him, do it to me, instead,” she says.

“No! Olivia, what the hell are you saying? Keep your mouth shut,” Townes mutters beneath his breath. “Mr. Molotov, my daughter doesn’t know what she’s talking about...”

“Shut up! Both of you,” I yell.

“Now listen here, on the count of three, I expect you to leave this cell. If not, I’m throwing you in there with him,” I bark.

“Look what you’ve gone and done!” Townes whispers to her.

“I don’t care...” Her voice breaks. She drops the iron she’s holding, breathing heavily and gripping her belly and her chest. “If I can’t save you, I’ll die with you,” she cries, and it’s so loud, I must grit my teeth.

“Well,” I say. “Isn’t this something? Love. It makes you do stupid things, doesn’t it?” I ask, recalling how I almost got married to that wench, Agatha. And how it drove me to kill Alfred before pushing me out of the life I had imagined for myself. Thank goodness I’m no longer a fool. But well, they are. “It seems there might be a solution after all.”

Her loud cries turn into hiccupped sobs as she raises her head. Brown eyes wide with hope. “What is it?” she asks, stepping forward. “I’ll do anything.”

I back up, swallowing as she says that. My mind goes somewhere it shouldn't.

"It's clear your daughter would do anything for you," I say. "Would you do the same for her?"

He nods. "I'll do anything for her. She's my world." His voice cracks.

"Oh, please. Turn off the waterworks." I grimace. "Here's the deal."

They both look at me with their mouths agape, hanging onto my words as they leave my mouth.

"I'll let you out," I say to Townes. His lips flap together, and nonsensical mutters fall from his mouth.

"You will?" Olivia's brows lift as she looks up at me. I can see her chest pulsing with the beat of her heart.

Swallowing, I nod, moving toward the cell and unlocking it. Townes can hardly believe he's free. He just stares at the open cell and doesn't make a move toward it.

"Well?" I say.

It's like he's frozen.

"Don't you want to be free?" I ask.

He finally blinks and looks at me. "I don't understand," he says.

That's when I grab Olivia by her nightdress, rumpling the back of it into my fist. "You're free to go, Townes. But if

you're not back in thirty days with my money, your precious little world will cease to exist," I say.

Townes grabs hold of the metal door and pulls it shut. "That's okay. I'll stay here."

Frustrated, I fling the metal gate open until it bangs a deafening echo. "Get out of the cell and don't make me come in there. It's either this, or you're both dead."

"Papa, please. Do as he says. Please, let me do this for you. You've done so much for me, all my life. Let me repay you," Olivia says.

"You don't owe me anything." His voice rumbles with emotion.

"Yes. Well, you owe me, Townes. Now get out of there. I'll keep your daughter as collateral. If you love your daughter as much as she foolishly loves you, you'll return here in thirty days or less with my money, won't you?" I say as he limps toward me. As soon as he's close enough, I grab him by his torn shirt and throw him to the side.

"You. Go inside," I say, releasing Olivia. She hurries in, holding eye contact with her father as I lock the cell.

"I'm so sorry, my darling. I'm sorry you got into this. I'll get you out, I promise." He hurries toward the metal bars and holds her hands. She's shaking like a leaf, but she takes a deep breath, tears no longer streaming down her face. It's as if she's satisfied with the outcome, and I stand there, as if I'm

spellbound. Breaking the effects of whatever spell has been cast, I turn toward Townes.

“Very well. That’s what I love to hear. Go on. Get going,” I say, jingling my keys and whistling behind him as I follow him out of the cellar.

As I close the doors behind me, Townes can’t pull his eyes away from it. “Don’t worry.” I slap him on his whipped back. “If you do well, she’ll be okay. I promise.” I smile.

“Don’t hurt her.” His face reddens, and bulging lines appear across his veins.

“Settle down. You’re going to pop something. The only way you can ensure that she doesn’t get hurt is by making sure you don’t try to outsmart me again. Not only will I kill her, but I’ll also come after you too,” I say, shoving him forward.

Hissing under my breath while watching him walk, I pull him to a stop. “You can’t ride a horse with that leg.”

I knock on Lucian’s door, and he comes out looking between me and Townes.

“Where you taking him?” he asks, putting on his vest.

“I’m setting him free so he can bring me back my money,” I say.

“What?” Lucian looks at me like I’m thinking silly. “But he’ll talk...”

“No, you won’t. Will you?” I grip Townes’ cheeks.

He shakes his head, and I pat his cheeks with my palm.
“That’s what I like to hear.”

“And the girl?” Lucian asks.

“She stays.” I smile, and Townes looks as if he’s about to be sick. “In the meantime, I need you to call Dr. Richard over here to fix his leg. I don’t want it slowing down the return of my money. When he’s patched up, give him one of the horses.”

Lucian nods. Dr. Richard is our discreet physician. He’s discreet because he too has a lot of secrets. Secrets that could bring scandal upon his family and his career. I know all these secrets and in exchange for me keeping them, he treats us for free.

“I expect you to return my horse to me in perfect health,” I say to Townes, and Lucian grins.

“Trust me. He once broke three of my fingers because the horse he loaned me injured his leg on our journey. And I’m what he calls a friend, so I can’t imagine what he’d do to you,” Lucian says, sweeping his eyes over the already battered Townes.

“Water under the bridge though, right?” I grin.

“Do I have a choice?” Lucian asks.

“No.” I shake my head.

“There you go.” He shakes his head before showing Townes to the drawing room and setting out for the doctor. As I make

my way toward the stairs, leading up to my room, I can't help pausing and turning to face the door of the cellar.

Chapter Seven



Olivia

Knowing my father is no longer in this hell brings me relief, but I'd be lying if I said it's enough to ward off regret. Alone in this cell, unable to tell whether it's night or day, feeling furry squeaking things move over my feet or through my hair as my eyes inevitably close due to fatigue, it's left me with some thoughts. Thoughts about whether it would've been a better fate to marry Heath after all. Guilt over choosing to be too selfish to do what I needed to do to get us out of this financial mess. Even if I had no idea it was this bad.

Blaming myself for being the reason my father and I have been cast into this pit. Feeling as if taking his place was the least I could offer to do to help him when all I've done is take from him. Wishing I could close my tear-filled eyes and go back to a couple of days ago, before Papa left. I could tell him he wouldn't have to go to the inventor's exhibit because I'd marry Heath. For us. Having logic intervene, telling me that it would've been too late anyway since there's no way to know how long our engagement would've been. And at least, instead

of a lifetime of misery with Heath, here, my fate would be decided in thirty days.

Oh, how I complained of boredom in that big house I know now is being rented with stolen money. Still, I think about how much I would trade for that boredom, rather than this dismal nothingness. How selfish and spoiled I've been.

I jolt as the door to the cellar creaks open. The lantern light comes on, illuminating the charcoal darkness that blinds me when I'm alone. I shiver. Since the man they call the beast, boss, or Mr. Molotov locked me in here earlier, I've seen no one else and know not what to expect from his return. I don't know if he's a man of his word and that I will remain unharmed until my father decides my fate at the end of the thirty days, or whether his beastly nature will seek to destroy me before then. Gulping, I try to ready myself. The memory of what he did to my father chills me. It angers me, as well as terrifies me. I doubt I'll be able to withstand such brutality.

Footsteps hammer the wooden stairs, and a large shadow consumes the cold, damp cellar. I can hear my breath. It rattles along with the hammering of my pulse. Backing up into the small cell, I try to hide within the shadows, but it's useless. My cheeks shake with the building tears. My body rocks from the sheer force of my blood. Everything goes silent, and I release a breath when I see a lanky youth, about eighteen or twenty. He's smiling at me, and I don't know if that's a good sign. But it's a hell of a lot of relief to see it's not the beast.

The closer the youth comes, I can see he's holding a plate. The smell of cooked red meat wets my lips.

"Boss says you should eat something," he says.

Eyeing the cut of beef and potatoes and the chunk of bread on the plate, I swallow before shaking my head. "It might be poisoned. I don't want it." My voice doesn't sound like mine. It's dry from the suffocation of this unventilated cell.

The youth shakes his head. "I assure you, miss, 'tis not poisoned. The boss took it off his own plate," he says.

I look up at him, my lips turned down in disbelief. Why would he give me some of his food? He doesn't care whether I live or die.

The youth grins. "All right," he says, sitting on the floor before my cell. "I'll show ye." He breaks off a piece of the bread and the meat with his fingers before popping one of the potatoes in his mouth. "Now you can see for yeself if I die," he says.

My stomach rumbles as I watch him munching. The food looks so delicious, I can't help myself. Death would be a blessing in disguise. The youth grins as he sees me watching his mouth, biting my lips. "Ye want it?" he asks, pushing it through the slot wide enough for the plate.

I grab it with both hands and dig in. He hands me the glass he's been sipping on and when I put it to my lips, I taste wine. Wine? The beast must have given me the wrong glass. Still, I

gulp some of it down in a rush, grateful as it breaks apart the dryness in my throat.

“Aye. Slow down. Ye might end up tossing up the contents if you eat too fast,” he says.

My stuffed mouth stops forcing the food down for a moment as I look at him. He looks back at me and shakes his head. “Shame you’re down here. I hear what you did for your old man. Say, I think you’re one of those lucky people, beautiful on the inside and the outside,” he says before leaning forward. “Although don’t tell my missus. She’d be heartbroken, see?” he says, gripping his chest.

“I’d hardly say I’m lucky,” I say with a mouthful.

“Aye.” He grins. “I guess you’re right.”

The door to the cellar opens again, and the youth jumps to his feet, dusting off his pants and straightening himself. I push the food aside, wondering if the kid lied to me and stole the food to bring it here. Why else would he be so jumpy?

He sighs when the person appears before us. “Ah, Carlson. Say, you gave me the jumps there.” He grins. “I was just giving her the food the boss...”

“Very well.” Carlson silences him. “You may go now.”

“Aye.” The youth nods before tipping his cloth hat at him and hurrying out of the cellar.

The man before me is older. The skin around his face is looser, though it doesn’t necessarily drag. He’s a handsome man, stern though. His white curled wig is heavily starched.

He stands with his chest out and his shoulders high, wearing a frilled collared shirt, a purple jacket that hangs from the back of his knees, closing upward onto his belly, with gold details, and high grey trousers.

The large keys jingle in his hand when he unlocks the cell door. "Follow me," he says, walking off.

My eyes widen, and my mind tells me to run, but I don't. I want to fight, but I don't do that either. Doing any of those things might make things bad for my father. So, I follow him. Lanterns light the long hallway, and I can tell by the windows in the nearby rooms that it's dark out. In the more illuminated space, I see that one of his eyes is completely grey, as if he's lost it. Trembling, I climb the stairs with him.

"Where are we going?" I muster up the courage to ask.

"To your room, Miss Primrose," he answers bluntly.

Before I can tell him that he's obviously made a mistake, he pauses before double doors and swings them open. Deep reds and pinks paper the walls. A four-poster bed sits in the centre. He steps aside and allows me entry.

"I don't understand..." I look at him.

"Mr. Molotov wanted to make sure you were comfortable," he says.

He appears impatient that I'm still standing outside, frightened of the room, so I accept his offer of entry. I see myself in the mirror in the far corner next to the bed. The bed, mind you, is far bigger than my own at home. My hair is filled

with cobwebs. My face is smudged with dirt. My white nightdress is no longer white. It's blackened, along with my feet.

"Ma'am." I hear a voice from the other far corner of the room, and I jump, spinning around.

"This is Gloria. She will be your lady maid while you're here," Carlson says.

Gloria smiles, and I stumble over my words. "B-but why? There's been some..."

"There's no mistake, Miss Primrose," Carlson finishes. "I'll leave you with Gloria now." He bows and disappears, leaving me with the strange woman who has a kind-enough face. She wears a white hat on her head, and her black hair is pulled back. She has small, buck teeth, but they suit her, giving her red lips more of a pucker.

She opens another door with pink wallpaper. The soft glow of candlelight dances on the walls. "Your bath is ready, Miss Primrose," she says.

I'm not sure what to do with myself. It feels strange following her, thanking her, and allowing her to scrub me. It feels even stranger thinking about sleeping in that bed. I'm a prisoner, not a guest. What is this madness?

"There's no need to be afraid, ma'am." She smiles.

My head rattles on my neck uncontrollably, and the room spins. "I don't understand," I repeat.

I'm certain that I'll need to be admitted in the asylum until it becomes clear to me that this must be a dream. I've fallen asleep in the bottom of the cellar, finally, it seems. And I've entered a very realistic dreamworld. That's the only sensible explanation.

"Ma'am," she says again, looking at me as if I'm odd.

If it's a dream, then I have nothing to fear. I follow her into the bathroom. A curved copper tub sits in the centre of the room. In the water, petals of different colours float, and it smells divine. The reason for the scent is sitting in tiny bottles on a small table next to the tub. On it, white towels are folded, next to a pitcher, bath sponges and brushes.

"Give me your clothes, ma'am. I'll put them in the wash," Gloria says.

Even in a dream, I can't stand the formality. "Please, Gloria. Call me Olivia," I say.

She nods. "Very well, then, Olivia." She smiles before turning away, so I can undress.

Taking my time, I climb into the water, and it isn't until the freezing temperature of it jolts me that I realize this is real. It's not a dream. I shriek before hopping away from it as if it has burned me.

Gloria can't contain her laughter. "Sorry, ma'am. The water got cold while we were waiting. I'll set a pot of water on the fire to even it out for you."

She must see that I'm shaking because instead of leaving, she walks over to me. I back away like an animal of prey.

"It's okay," she says. "Of course, you must be scared, you poor thing."

"What's going on?" I ask her. "Why was I taken from the cell to be put in here? What is the beast planning?"

"Come. Calm down," she says.

"No! Tell me what this all means," I respond.

"I don't know, Miss Olivia. One moment, you're in the cellar, and the next moment, you're in here. I know as much as you do." She shrugs.

"I don't believe you. What are you going to do to me?" I ask.

"Only help you take a bath if you let me," she says.

"I don't need help taking a bath," I bark.

She backs up. "No worries. But my advice is that you do what the boss says. If he says you should stay in this room, don't go making trouble. You stay in this room until he tells you to leave, get it? You don't want to make him mad. I'll fetch the hot water." She walks away.

"Don't bother," I mutter.

"But you'll freeze, Olivia," she whispers.

"I'll manage," I grunt.

She nods. "Very well. You'll find a new nightdress hanging from the screen. Send for me if you need anything. Do your

best to relax.” She smiles before leaving me alone.

Relax? How am I meant to relax? In thirty days, I learn whether I’m to be killed or kept alive. Whether I stay in a cell, or a bedroom fit for royalty won’t change that. But she’s right. I need to obey the beast’s orders to secure my father’s safety. So, if he wants me to stay in this room, then I have no choice. I suppose I should make the most of it. Besides, there are windows here. A means of escape if I need it.

I approach the tub, gritting my teeth before submerging my entire body into the cold water. The shock of it will keep me alert in case there are any more surprises. Pouring the pitcher of water through my hair, I shudder as it attacks my scalp. The pitcher isn’t enough to remove the cobwebs, however, so I submerge my head, wondering how long I can hold my breath and if it’s possible to drown oneself. But if I were to die before the beast commands it, it would harm my father’s chances since there’d be nothing for this arse of a man to hold over my father’s head.

I scrub at my skin, hating that the luxurious scents being embedded into my skin are from this scum. Hating to be in his tub. That he expects me to sleep in that bed. I scrub my skin, hurriedly and harshly until I’m red and raw when I stand up in the tub.

Grabbing the towels, I wrap my body and my hair in them, hating the way they feel against my skin. I’m clean, and it should be a relief, but there’s no relief in this hell. No matter how luxurious, it’s still a pit of fire. My skin burns from the

agony I caused, it but at least this is a pain I have control over. Who knows how much more pain this man will have me endure at his hands. I see the white fabric hanging from the red and gold screen. When I pick it up, I gasp. Silk.

I've never worn anything silk in my life. Not that it matters much to me. And it matters even less now that he's the reason I'll wear it. But on a padded stool behind the screen, I notice there's one more item of clothing: a corset.

I scoff. A corset? Who wears a corset to bed? In fact, I've never had any reason to wear a corset. It's not like I've been invited to any parties where my breasts had to be hoisted up on top of my chest. And I haven't felt the need to wear them to attract... suitors.

Holding up the corset, it's like watching the clouds go by as day fades to night if that makes any sense. But it dawns on me. The room, the bed, the bath, the scents, this corset...

Knock knock. The sound comes from the door, and I toss the corset to the floor in fright. Oh, what a fool I am. I remain still, listening to my own breath tremble as I lose my mind.

Knock knock.

I inhale but only wind up choking on the absence of air. "Please, please, please. Please just be Gloria or that Carlson man," I whisper to myself.

The knocks grow louder, and I hurry to the door, opening it, and the air becomes stifling.

It's the beast.

Chapter Eight



Adam

Wow. A thud hits me somewhere deep in my body. Deep in my crotch too at the sight of her. But before I can even greet her, her eyes widen, and the door swings shut on my face. That's not the way we do things around here. No one slams a door in my face. Especially not in my own house.

“That's not very kind of you, is it?” I grunt, stopping the door with my foot and shoving her aside. She trips over her feet and falls to the floor. “Not after I made sure to see to your comfort.” I stare down at her. Her face tenses and if the look in her eyes could kill me, I'd be bleeding out onto my carpets.

I must give her credit. She gets up from the floor and faces me, even if she's backing away. It makes me smile.

“What do you want from me?” she says. “I've already traded places with my father, and he's already out there getting your money.”

“You're sure about that, are you?” I ask, stalking toward her.

“Of course,” she says.

“Hm. Trust. Love. It’s all so innocent. So naïve,” I say, squinting my eyes at her before closing in. She backs up some more, but there’s nowhere else to go except into the wall. She’s breathing heavily, and I watch her, tilting my head to get a better view of all of her, her brown damp hair which I twirl about in my fingers, her plump lips, and long, dark lashes. She shudders.

“Well, I hope he’s worthy of your trust,” I say slowly and softly.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Exploring you.” I grin.

Her lips tremble as she tries to move out of my touch, but I close her in with my hands next to her head. Her eyes well up with tears. “A-a-are you going to r-r-ra...”

I groan in disgust. “Trust me, if I have you, you’re going to want it,” I say, trailing a finger over her cheek.

“That will never happen,” she says, pushing against my chest.

“It won’t?” I ask, pressing my body into her, watching as she gulps. “You know, you’re a lot prettier than all the other women I’ve sexed in this mansion.” I bring my lips close to hers, exchanging breaths. “I bet your cunt tastes even sweeter,” I whisper, brushing my lips against hers. She moans a little, and I grin. Of course, she does. All women are the

same. “You like feeling me pressed against you like this, don’t you?” I ask.

“No,” she gasps.

“No?” I ask, leaning off her and watching as her eyes follow my body. I’m dressed in nothing but open coat and trousers. My chest is completely bare to her, and she doesn’t seem conscious that her hand is pressed against it still from when she tries to push me away.

Smiling, I grab hold of her hand and pull it down my body. Her breath shakes as the heel of her hands grazes the rises and dips of my torso. I groan, watching her as she touches her tongue to her teeth in a move that seems unconscious. She jolts me, and I rush to unbutton my trousers. Still, she hasn’t attempted to pull her hand away. It’s as if she’s in a trance, and her lips dampen by her drool. I can’t help myself when I close her hand around me. Grunting, I grip her breasts desperately.

“Mm, I see you didn’t like the corset. Didn’t it fit?” I ask, breathing against her neck. She moans and bites her lip. Her hand, still wrapped around me, is unmoving. It’s driving me crazy, and I thrust into it.

“See what you’ve done to me?” I pant.

As if she’s just broken out of her trance, she pulls her hand from my pants, and I grab hold of it without thinking, spinning her around and pinning her head against the wall. My other hand pulls at her white nightdress, and I swear when it rumples up and fails to reveal her sweet nakedness to me quickly enough. When her ass is finally exposed to me, I lick

my lips. I don't know what's come over me. I haven't felt this passionate in a while.

"Tell me you want it," I whisper against her ear, pressing my still-clothed hardness against her.

Her voice shakes. "I-I-I don't know what I-I-I want, wh-what are you doing?" she asks.

I grin. "You know exactly what I'm doing," I moan. "Spare the chaste act for someone else. I don't care if you're a whore. My bed has seen the likes of many of you. Though, none quite as tempting as you, I must admit."

To my surprise, she throws her elbow back, and it lands in my ribs. It's unexpected, so I didn't tense in time to avoid pain. The pain is only minor, but it angers me enough to release her and spin her back around to face me as I hold her arms above her head. Her fists clench, her eyes slant downwards, and her face reddens as she scowls at me.

"I might not be a lady, but I'm not a whore," she says, kneeling me in the crotch.

My mouth falls open. Okay, that one hurts. Yet, I grin.

"Feisty, aren't you?" I say, moving to sit on the bed as I wait for the roaring waves of pain to come to a still. It's not the first time I've been kicked in the nether regions, but it never gets easier to handle.

She looks at me, eyes wide, raising her shaking hands to her lips. "Look, I'm sorry. Please, don't punish my father for this.

I'm here and willing to go back into the cell to endure the next twenty-nine days. I'm sticking to my end of the deal here."

I cock my head at her. "I don't remember making a deal with you. I made a deal with your father. Our deal hasn't been finalized yet."

She swallows. "Be that as it may. Whatever feelings you may have for me, I suggest you do away with them."

This makes me laugh hard. So hard, I can hardly feel the pain in my crotch anymore. She snarls at me before continuing, "But I don't wish for my first time to be here, with someone like you." She grips her dress, fisting pieces of the material to busy her hands.

I'm about to remind her about abandoning the virtuous act but when I look at her eyes, filled with true offense, the way she closes her shoulders in as if she's trying to hide her body from me even though she's covered to the toes in that nightdress. Something she's realized can't prevent her from being exposed. It becomes clear that she's telling the truth.

I sigh, swiping my hand over my scratchy beard. "Well, I'll be..." Leaning back on my hands, I can't stop looking at her. I'm blown away. "You're a virgin," I say.

She releases her dress and folds her arms across her chest, backing even further away from me as she looks at me curiously. "Well, don't look so shocked about it," she says.

I shake my head before getting up from the bed. "Well, I'm shocked. I was beginning to think your kind was a myth. Like

sirens. Well, not like sirens. That there are women luring fools into their traps and sucking the life out of them? I can believe that. But virgins?" I scoff.

She grimaces when I come to stand before her again, brushing her hair with the back of my hand. "You're full of intrigue, aren't you? Where did you learn to fight?" I ask, dropping my hand.

She gasps before swallowing. "I never always lived in Colderidge. I've lived in many places, some places where a woman needed to know how to defend herself."

I smile, and she looks at me as if she's wondering what I find so funny.

"What about you? Why are you such a mess?" she asks.

"Am I a mess?" I ask, grinning and avoiding the question. "You know, Olivia Primrose. You also have a debt to me." I trail my finger down the sleeve of her nightgown, and she backs away.

"Impossible. I've never met you before in my life. I've never borrowed a cent from you, and the money my father spent, I didn't know it was stolen..." she starts.

I press my finger against her lips, silencing her as she looks up at me with wide eyes. "That may be. But you are a Primrose. And your family has owed my family money for decades now. I'm the debt collector of the family. I'm good at it." I shrug. "But well, with those members of your family dead, the debt falls upon the shoulders of the living. At first, I

thought it would only be on your poor father's shoulders. But it seems you're his angel. Now, he gets to split that debt with you."

Her lips tremble, and she tries to speak, but nothing comes out.

"But no worries," I say, pinching her chin and pulling slightly so that her mouth will open for me. I stir for her again, growing harder at the sight of her wet, pink tongue. She swallows when I let her chin go, and she watches me as I pace before her. "I know you don't have that kind of money."

She sighs and when I look at her, she's flushed, almost smiling. "Thank you so much for understanding..." she starts.

"I wasn't done," I inform her.

"Right," she says, closing her mouth and nodding.

Turning to face her, I look her straight in the eyes. "So, in the thirty days you stay here, you'll have a job. You do what I tell you to do, we'll call it even," I say.

She nods. "Of course, Mr. Molotov. Anything to lighten the load from my father's shoulders. I'll work day and night on my knees, scrubbing this place spotless if you need me to. Or I'll tend to the bedding or the drapes..." Her words trail off as I shake my head.

She holds her hands out. "Okay, I'll do all of it. Tend to the bedding, the drapes, and the floors. I can cook too if you want me to. Oh, thank you, Mr. Molotov, for providing us with this choice. My father will be so happy to know I've lightened his

burdens. I'll be the best housekeeper I can be. I've scrubbed a few houses in my time. You won't believe all the places I've..."

I raise my voice above hers. "I do quite like the idea of you on your knees, but you see, Olivia, I don't need another housekeeper."

"Oh," she says, looking down at her hands. "Well, I can tend to your horses if you like. They respond well to me."

Laughing at her naivete, I walk into her personal space once again. "I don't need another stable hand."

She shudders. "Then what kind of job would you have me do?" She swallows and tries to avoid looking at my lips as she licks hers.

I grab hold of her hair. Something I've been wanting to do since I stepped in here. Tugging on the back of it, I expose her neck to me, burying my nose there. I pull my nose from her neck to her hair, and she shivers, grabbing hold of my coat as she loses her balance. "Those scents smell divine on you," I whisper before brushing my lips against the edge of her ear.

I hear the shakiness of her breath, though she doesn't speak. "Tell me, Olivia, why haven't you given your virginity away yet?"

"N-no particular reason," she whispers hoarsely. Her gentle breath stirs the hair on my neck.

"Has no man ever thrown themselves at your feet?" I ask.

She moans and gulps. "I've never been interested in them."

Pulling myself away from her, I study her, shaking my head. “How old are you?” I ask.

“Twenty-two,” she admits.

I smile. “You intrigue me, Olivia. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone like you. Allow me the honour of awakening the whore in you.” I lower my brows.

She pulls away. “What?”

“I’m sorry. Was that too harsh?” I ask with a chuckle at the disgust on her face. “Pardon me. Let me adjust my words. For the next thirty days, you’ll be hired as my entertainment.”

“I-I don’t understand,” she mutters, and I groan.

“How naïve can one woman be?” I ask, before grabbing a fistful of her hair again and pressing my lips against hers. Roughly at first. But I’ve never kissed lips so soft and full. It’s like kissing a cloud, and I can hardly get enough. Groaning against her lips, I move slowly, trying to savour the sensation, but the more of it I get, the more I feel as if I might lose my mind. I can’t lose control here. She can’t wield any sort of power. So as agonizing as it is, I pull my lips away from hers, feeling a part of me break as the sound of our lips detaching shoots straight to my groin.

Clearing my throat, I straighten. “There. Do you understand your role now?” I ask. “I have a feeling you’ll keep me entertained for quite some time.” Peeking into the neck of her nightdress, I catch a glance of her full, soft cleavage, and I must pull myself away.

Sex is about dominance. It's about ensuring my own pleasure while reminding the whore of my choosing who's in control. Women must never have the power to play me like an idiot again. I'll never fall victim to their traps. If I'm not in control, I refuse to have sex. So, as much as my ball and hammer tightens for her, shooting monstrous pain through me, begging for release, I won't give in. Not until I regain control of myself.

Releasing her, I rush through the doors, slamming them behind me. My blood moves so fast through me, it's as if my body might just lift off the ground and fly away. Swallowing, I open the door to my chambers, right across the hall from her. Panting with my back up against the closed door, feeling her warmth and curves still pressed up against me, I reach into my pants and squeeze, hard, before tugging in swift, repetitive movements until I'm grunting and losing vision. My chest is about to explode, and I barrel over as waves crash through my abdomen, causing me to cry out as ejaculate shoots off into my carpet. I come alive, touching my dampened chest, and needing more.

Chapter Nine



Olivia

Is it safe for my heart to race so hard?

That rogue. That horrid, contemptible swine. I should be furious at him for dishonouring my body and leaving his breath on my skin. I should be repulsed by the man who hurt my father over measly blunt.

And I am. I want to rip him apart, and I curse the day I was born female, wishing my hormones would measure up to his, so he could feel my rage as much as he can see it. But I also feel something else. It's foreign to me, and my hand surrenders to the feeling, needing more as I move my fingers across my neck where his beard scratched my skin, already tender from the bath. Never touching myself before, I startle at the tenderness in my breasts and the hardness of my nipples. They spasm. The simple act of stroking my own breasts commands a wave in my belly that's all so new and exciting.

Oh, what am I doing?! I gasp, dropping my hands and smoothing out my dress. He has defiled me. He might as well have stripped me naked and sexed me on the bed. I bring my

fingers to my lips, stroking it softly. Dear, goodness. My face tenses, and my brows wrinkle. Something twitches between my legs at the thought. Would I have wanted that?

Of course not. He's a rake. That's all. He uses his sexual power to do something to women's minds. I don't know what that is, but it won't work on me. That bastard won't have me. He'll have to find other arrangements for entertainment. I groan, flopping back on the bed. I don't have that luxury. I'm at his mercy. He owns me, and I loathe him for it.

My eyes drift toward the wall where he had me pressed up against it. My breasts hurt being squished up against the hard surface, but it's a sweet pain. Unconsciously, my hand falls to my breasts again as I recall the moment I felt a breeze on my backside. I wasn't sure what was about to happen. My mind told me to scream at him, but my body, oh my body, it begged for him to touch it. Dragging on my nightdress, I pull it up over my thighs just as he did, letting my nails scratch against my tender skin.

I wonder what it would feel like to be touched down there, and I take a deep breath in. Closing my eyes, I lower my hand.

Knock knock

My hand freezes. Is it him again? Excitement and disgust are at war within me. I stare at the door defiantly.

"Olivia, is everything okay in there?" I release a sigh of relief, and I think... disappointment.

Clearing my throat, I hurry to the door, opening it slightly. Gloria looks at me as if she's horrified. "Oh dear, are you okay?" She pushes the door wider and comes into the room, pressing the back of her hand against my forehead. "You're absolutely flushed, damp and cold to the touch. Sit down, my dear. Was it something you ate?" she asks. "Was it because you bathed in the cold water? I told you that you shouldn't. Stay right there. I'll warm a cloth and..."

"I'm okay, Gloria," I speak aloud. She turns to look at me. Her eyes travel over the rest of my body, and she smiles.

"Oh." She blushes. "Did you and the boss..." She raises her brows.

"Oh, heavens no." I swallow, turning away from her.

"Well, it sure looks like you wanted to. There's only one other explanation for that look. I get it with my Luci," she says.

"Your Luci? You're married?" I ask.

"No." She shakes her head before sitting on the trunk before the bed. "We aren't too fussed about that."

"You're not married, and you engage in..." I clear my throat. "Untoward things?"

"You know, you didn't strike me as a prissy lady." She drops her brows and curls her lips.

"I'm not," I stutter. "But it must be hard for you, facing judgment."

“Oh, please.” She fans me off. “No one cares about what I’m doing. Besides, I’m not ashamed of it. The sex is great.” She giggles. “And I guess I love the poor bugger, myself.” Her eyes gleam.

I can’t help but smile at her display. “That must be nice. What’s your Luci like?”

She grins before looking at me curiously. “I think you met him earlier. He’s the one who brought you in. Sorry about that. He’s just doing his job.” She gives a small smile.

“The man with the scar?” I ask.

“Yes. He’s delicious, isn’t he?” She pats my leg, and I cock my head.

“I guess. If cold, hard, and downright terrifying is your type. Did the beast do that to him?”

“Mr. Molotov? Oh no. He got it the night he saved Mr. Molotov’s life. So selfless, my Lucian. Yet, the boss still treats him like garbage sometimes.” She grimaces. “He lost all his softness.” She lowers her head, shaking it.

“Who?” I scoff and grin.

“Mr. Molotov,” she says.

That makes me laugh even harder. I can’t imagine either Lucian or that prick being soft.

She looks at me with wide eyes before grinning as well. “It’s hard to believe, but I promise you, he was.”

Humouring her, I ask, “What happened?”

She sighs. “Ten years ago, he killed someone.”

Well, at this point, that isn't surprising. I don't react, and she continues, “Look, I'll tell you the story, but you can't bring it up to him. If you do, there's no telling what he would do. And you can't tell him I'm the one who told you the story. The staff all talk about it in our quarters but never outside of that. Promise you won't tell him I'm the one who told you,” she says, gripping my hand.

I swallow. “I promise. Although you don't have to...”

She interrupts me, “He was in love with this woman. Thought he knew her all his life. But.” She nods. “It turns out she was hiding a huge secret. With her, he was a proper gentleman. He didn't want to defile her, even though he'd been with his fair share of women. But for him, she was this perfect, pure thing that he wanted to honour.”

I try to imagine it. It's hard, but I find myself buying into the fantasy of this story. Smiling at the thought of him being the opposite of what he is now.

“But on the day of his wedding, the poor sap got a rude awakening,” she says it all dramatically, and I find my lips parting and my body leaning forward in anticipation for the rest of the story.

“He walked into his bedroom and found her with him,” she says.

“Him?” I ask.

“Yes. His servant. The man he killed. Sources say his ex and his servant were quite spirited. So spirited in fact, they didn’t even hear him enter the room,” she says.

I gasp, covering my mouth with both hands. “She cheated on him?”

“Yes. Turns out she wasn’t as pure and perfect as he once believed. It’s believed she might have even been carrying on with that same servant behind his back for quite some time,” she whispers.

Invested in the tale, I can imagine his heartbreak, and my own breaks in return, for the man then, not for the man now. “That must have been horrible. Did he kill them together?”

“No, he let her go. His old servants remember seeing her running out of the house, naked, screaming on the top of her lungs that he’s a beast. That’s where he got his nickname. By the time the servants discovered he’d killed the man, he was long gone. Although, I’m sure if he’d stayed, he would’ve been able to pay off the authorities. But it was the shame, knowing he’d lost his authority over all his servants. He couldn’t bear the fact they bore witness to such embarrassment and would always remember it. Which meant he could never forget it. Although, I still don’t think he has. The sucker became brutal because of it and since then, he’s kept his heart enclosed in a metal box. He lost all his softness. None is reserved for friends, servants, and especially not women; he trusts no one.” She releases a deep breath.

I sit there in silence for a while, sorting through my feelings before speaking again. “That’s pretty sad,” I agree. “But I’m sorry. That’s the worst excuse I’ve ever heard for someone becoming as brutish as he has. So, what? He got his heart broken? He lost something and someone he wanted? Join most of the country who weren’t born with gold spoons in their mouths. We’ve all lost someone. I’m sure you have. I know I have. I lost my mother. Even if I didn’t know much of her, I felt her absence every day growing up. I’ve lost friends, having to move from town to town, on the run because my father lost his fortunes and the rest of his family members. We’ve all loved and lost, whether romantically or not, and it doesn’t give us the right to torment others with our sorrows, does it? Destroying others because we’ve lost?”

She looks at me wide eyed. “I haven’t thought about it that way,” she admits. “I suppose we all handle loss differently.” She shrugs.

And I nod, because I’ve said too much, and I still don’t know if I can trust her. I don’t know how much of that she’d take back to her boss and how he’d react to hearing it. As much as I might think it, I know if I’d like to keep my tongue in my head and my father alive, I can never say it.

But at least when he’s touching me, I can think of how pathetic he is. Thank goodness for this talk. I don’t think my body will ever be conflicted over what to feel when he’s in the room again. There’s only one logical feeling. Disgust.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter.

She reaches up and presses a tender palm to my knee. “It’s all right, my dear.” She pats. “It’s perfectly normal that you hate the man after what he did to your poor father and locking you in a dirty old cellar with who knows what running amuck.”

Sighing, I smile, and she smiles back at me. I hope this is genuine because I could do with a friend during the next twenty-nine days. How unfortunate that my first friend within the last couple of months is someone working for a demon. It’s too soon to call her a friend. No matter how desperate I am.

“So, how did you win his trust?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” she asks, pulling her hand back.

“Well, I’m assuming since the last situation with his servant, he wouldn’t have people working with him who he didn’t trust. And going by his whole... thing... I gather that he doesn’t give trust away so easily,” I say.

“Oh, you’re right about that.” She nods.

“So, what is it? If you don’t mind me asking. It’s not like you have to worry about your secret going anywhere.” I shrug.

“No, no. I don’t mind you asking. It’s just something I don’t like remembering, that’s all,” she says.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did he...?” I ask, gulping.

“No. No! Goodness, no. He never touched me. Besides, Lucian would kill him if he did. He’s a lot tougher than he pretends to be.” She smiles. “But well, Mr. Molotov is his

friend, so he's loyal to him." She rocks her head from side to side.

"When I met Mr. Molotov, I was working in a brothel I didn't want to work in. I was traded, in a sense. My family needed food and money. The people willing to give it to them wanted me in return. So, I was taken. I was just sixteen, so about ten years ago," she says, looking up at the ceiling in question. "It was the first night I was working there, and I had a client who wouldn't take no for an answer. Of course not, right? He was in a whorehouse, looking for a whore, and I was supposed to be working." She shrugs.

I'm thinking this man is going to do something outrageous to me when suddenly, his body leaves mine, and he's tossed to the floor, with a man I'd never seen before, holding a knife at his neck. I have no clue why this man I don't know would come to my rescue. But he did. This is before he becomes what he's known for today. The mysterious beast. He still has a bit of softness in him left then. And thank goodness.

"He held the man who ran the house at gunpoint as he walked me to the door. When I told him my story, he offered to give my family the food and money they needed, despite their wretched act. He got some bad people to keep watch on my house, so the brothel owners would be dealt with if they retaliated, and he told me that in return for his kindness, and to earn the money and goods he was giving to my family, I could work as a housekeeper for him when he bought his house." She smiles.

“Been with him ever since. I might not agree with everything he’s done but well, he rescued me. And if I turn on him, as he is now, there’s no telling what the repercussions will be. If he doesn’t kill me, I’ll rot in jail. It’s not like I didn’t know he was a criminal when I started working for him. I don’t have money to pay off the authorities.” She frowns.

“Well, that’s kind of him, I guess. The part where he saved you, I mean. It’s also ironic,” I respond, considering the way he handled me tonight. Caring about a woman’s wellbeing doesn’t seem to be the highest thing on his list of priorities. But I’m happy Gloria got out of that.

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “That was insensitive of me.” I lower my head. She just bared herself to me, and all I can say is, ‘it’s ironic.’

“Trust me. I understand.” She smiles before jumping up. “On a lighter note.” She grins. “There’s a ball coming up in the next two weeks. In town. Reserved for special families.” She wiggles her brows.

“Okay?” I say. “Well, how delightful for them.”

“I’m so excited!” She claps her hands together, spinning around as if she’s dancing.

“Why? Are you going?” I ask.

“Going?” she says, pausing to look at me before laughing aloud. “They’ll have their own servants there. I’m not excited for me. I’m excited for you.” She grins.

“Me?” I gasp aloud, looking at her like she fell and bumped her head on a rock before coming into my room.

“Yes,” she says before hurrying over to me and taking my hands in hers. “I think I saw a gown hanging...” she starts, and I stop her.

“I’m a prisoner. Remember?” I pull my hands from hers and stand.

“I know, but I think the boss has plans to inv...” she starts.

“I’m really sorry, Gloria,” I interrupt. “But the last thing I want to hear about right now is the boss’ plans. If I’m allowed, I’d like to retire to bed now,” I say.

Her face pales, and she presses her lips together, staring at me with wide eyes before nodding. “Yes. I’m so sorry,” she says before leaving.

Sighing and blinking away the sting of tears in my eyes, I turn to look back at the bed, cursing myself as I flop into it and go to sleep.

Chapter Ten



At the Primrose residence

Since Miss Primrose's disappearance, the servants have been bustling around wondering what to do with themselves and whether to arrange for a search party, until Heath shows up at the door. He announces that soon, they'll be working for him. He even demands that a party be thrown in honour of important news. Typical of Heath, he wouldn't allow others to get a word in, so the servants couldn't ask him about the whereabouts of Miss and Mr Primrose.

This is the reason, therefore, why their garden is packed full of people, dressed in fancy garb, wondering what they're doing here, instead of Lord Everton's mansion. The garden is filled with flowers of various pastels, some native and others imported. Wine is served in golden chalices. A magnificent band plays their harps and violins as people speak amongst each other. All the male guests are surprised that the party has gone on so long without Lord Everton's interruption. But he lives up to his reputation after all when the music pauses, and the tinkling of metal against glass takes hold of their attention.

“Friends, Foes. Ladies and Gentlemen. Welcome to an evening of celebration!” He projects his voice from a stage set up for him at the forefront of the party. “You must be wondering why I’ve invited you all to this quaint home with a subpar garden, which as you can tell, I’ve worked wonders on to transform.” He waves his hand across the decorations. “As many of you know, Colderidge has had a new visitor. A visitor so divine that all men, though they might not admit it openly, have thought about claiming as their own. But I’ve been the victor.” He laughs. Raising his fist in the air.

High on wine and dancing, the spectators raise their glasses in a cheer. As foxed as they are, they’d cheer anything. Some of the women bristle at his words. They’re not simpletons. They can put together quite easily the object of his speech, being that they’re standing in her garden. Other women, well, it takes them a little long to do the math, and they open their mouths in wonder, no doubt hoping he might be speaking of them. Their wishes are easily shattered soon enough.

“I’ve been courting Miss Primrose, with her father’s permission. And it’s with his blessing that I announce that I will soon call her my wife. I know, ladies, I’m off the market. That must be devastating for you. But it needn’t be devastating quite yet. I’m still a bachelor until there’s a formal ceremony. And if Miss Primrose fails to live up to the ideal she must, as my betrothed, then I reserve the right to withdraw my proposal.” He smiles proudly. “However, until then, it must be noted that Miss Primrose is also currently off the market. And

any man who dares to attempt winning her affections will have to deal with me.”

Some of the men chuckle before one raises his voice. “If she’s yours, why do you feel the need to warn everyone to stay away? Is it possible that she might not have fully accepted your proposal, yet?”

Heath’s face tenses in a hard scowl. “Nonsense. Look amongst yourself. Watch how the women drool for me. You, my... friends, are what women settle for. There’s just not enough me to go around. Be honest with yourselves. Do you think it’s possible for any woman to resist me? To refuse me? When I’m everything they want and more?” His voice grumbles as though there’s a roar in there waiting to escape, but he won’t let it.

It might have been reasonable for the men to react to his challenge in an aggressive manner. But everyone has grown familiar with Heath Everton. The man has been the same ever since his mother birthed him. She wouldn’t even let a fly near him. She coddled him until the day she passed. And the fatwit with his brawn and riches believes everyone sees him the way she did. Unfortunately, being lusted over by women isn’t one of his delusions. It’s as if his face and his money are the only things worth seeing, with them. For his competition, however, he’s accepted as a fool. They simply counter his words with their own.

The man who asked the previous question laughs. Another speaks up, “Where is Miss Primrose, then? Can’t she bear a

night of celebration with you?”

Heath downs a glass of wine and marches forward. He's stopped by his friend who grabs his hard, muscled arms. As he pauses, listening to his friend calm him down and remind him that some of these men at these parties have larger fortunes and more connections than he does, a woman, dressed head to toe in riches, approaches him with her hand on his other arm.

“And what might you want with the lady of rags, when you can have all of this and more?” she asks, cooling herself with a pink, feathered hand fan before dropping it at his feet. A heavy flirtatious act. He smiles, crouching to pick it up when his friend presses a hand to his chest.

“Best not to entertain someone else. You might lose the affections of Ms. Primrose,” the friend says, picking up the feathered fan and handing back to the lady who scoffs and walks away.

“Oh, stop ruining the fun. Didn't you hear what I said earlier? I'm not married yet, am I? Besides, she's not here. Is she? Who's going to tell her?” he asks.

“And why isn't she here?” The friend scrunches his brows. Heath's lips tremble. And as he most certainly was about to make up some excuse, none other than Mr. Primrose rides in, looking a right mess.

His leg is bandaged, and his eyes are black and blue. He's dressed in expensive clothes, still a bit too baggy for him. He winces as he jumps off his horse, staggering forward with eyes strained open, looking at the crowd.

“Wha-wha-what?” He stumbles as he tries to form words.

“Ah! Mr. Primrose! I was just telling the guests that your daughter and I...” Heath walks over to him with a big old grin and arms open wide.

“My daughter! Oh, my daughter!” Mr. Primrose screams before sinking to the grass, sobbing into his hands.

The guests gasp and whisper amongst themselves. “What’s the matter?” Heath asks coldly. “Is she dead?”

“Dead? Dead!” Mr. Primrose raises red eyes before wailing again. “I hope she’s not dead. Oh, I hope she’s not dead!” he cries.

His servants run forward and try to console him but without success. He thrashes about in their arms, breaking away. Sniffling, his voice shakes. “I’ve been beaten and tortured by the most brutal thug. And now he has my Olivia!” he wails. “My sweet Olivia. Oh, I’m so sorry, Olivia. Please. You must help me get her back. Please, he’ll kill her if I don’t return with his money. If we all put together, we can surely manage to round up three thousand pounds. Please! Don’t let him kill my Olivia.”

The guests groan, and Heath looks at Mr. Primrose in disgust. “Stop embarrassing yourself.” He grabs him by the arm, pulling him up, uncaring when he winces. “I’ve heard about you and your bad debts. You think I don’t know that’s why you promised your daughter to me? But now you go around making false claims to swindle others out of their money? Embarrassing me in the process as they laugh you to

scorn and me along with you? Stop this nonsense, right now. You're going to straighten yourself out, laugh, and tell them it's a joke." He tightens his hold on Mr Primrose, staring him down.

Horrified by the way Mr. Primrose's mouth falls open, he pulls himself out of Heath's grip. "I never promised you my daughter's hand. I only entertained the idea. Prove to me that you care about her. That you will be a good choice for her. Give me the money for her release, Lord Everton. Please. Surely, her life must be worth more than a few pounds."

"A few pounds? A few pounds! That's all the money I have, and I won't be giving it to the likes of you. How dare you try to trick me? How evil you are!" Heath raises his fist, and his friend comes to his rescue again, catching it in the air as it moves toward Mr. Primrose's face.

The man cries for his daughter, harder than any man has ever been known to cry. And with tears sputtering from his mouth, he informs Lord Everton, that if his daughter makes it out of the prison she's trapped in alive, she'll never marry someone like him.

Knowing of the announcement he just made publicly and that they're being watched, Heath drops his fist and tucks it away.

"Mr. Primrose has gotten into a fight with some animals, and the medication he received has caused him to have fantasies. Best he be taken inside to rest, so he can recover. I'd hate for my future father-in-law to have to end up in an

asylum.” Heath turns a threatening gaze on the wounded father.

The guests seem to relax, sighing their compassion. Some criticize the old man. But Mr. Primrose isn't done.

“I'm not lying!” he screams, kicking and punching as a group of his servants gather to pull him away. “Please. No! Let me go! I must get the money! Please. Someone believe me!”

His shaking sobs can be heard all the way back to the entrance of the house when out of nowhere, another horse's neigh captures the crowd's attention. Gaspings, they all turn to look at the large brown stallion raised up off his front legs. A large white stripe runs from between his ears to his nose. The crowd screams when the horse charges into them. The finest silks rip as they dive out of the way, landing in some spectacular positions which, if it were any other situation, would cause ruin to the women. So many legs and dresses overheads have never been spotted at an event such as this one.

Men cry out in pain as their legs are crushed under the horse's hooves. Heath's eyes bulge forward as the stallion marks him as a target.

“Chance!” Mr. Primrose shouts in delight, and the horse's hooves scratch the grass as it comes to a halt.

Forgetting about Heath, the horse charges toward the house. The servants, in their panic, forget to lock the door in time, allowing this Chance to crash through the house. Screams follow as they scatter. Only a couple of moments later,

Mr. Primrose ushers the horse outside. “You silly boy!” He pats his side. “Why did you leave me all alone in the cold?”

Mr. Primrose trembles, but the horse nickers, bumping its nuzzle into the old man who eventually offers up a smile and a head rub. The horse lowers himself, and it’s a sight to behold as he submits to Mr. Primrose, clearly telling him to mount him. So, the old man does, raising himself above all the guests.

“Look,” he starts with a scratchy, wobbling voice. He sniffles. “I know the lot of you might think I’m a lunatic. But I’m not. I need the money to rescue my daughter. If it’s that you can’t all put together and help me, then you can’t value me or my daughter. Therefore, I’m asking you to get the bloody hell out of my garden, just this minute!” he yells. “And you! Heath Everton. Don’t you dare pull something like this again.”

Heath charges toward him, fixing his mouth to whisper something, but Chance bares his teeth, causing the large man to step back, huffing and puffing, all the way home.

One Amused Spectator



Townes

“And what was all that about?” I ask, rounding up my servants who have a lot of explaining to do.

“Mr. Primrose, sir.” The head housekeeper steps forward and bows. “Forgive me, but Lord Everton informed us that you gave him permission, sir.”

“*HE* informed you?” I wheeze. “And what authority does he have to inform you?”

“Mr. Primrose. He told us he’d soon be lord of the house, and we needed to follow his orders. Without you here, we just assumed...” the housekeeper explains.

“You just assumed. Well, isn’t that wonderful. If I were expecting company, I would have told you so, either before I left, or by letter. I would’ve told you to make arrangements, but I didn’t. Do you know where I was, while Lord Everton decided to play master of my house?” I yell.

“No, sir. I do...” she stutters.

“Take one good look at me and make your best guess. Do you think I did this to myself? I wasn’t lying about what I told everyone, and how dare you follow orders to carry me inside. I should fire you all on the spot, right this minute!” Things move through my body. I don’t know what they are, but they cause me to shiver.

“We’re so sorry, sir. We didn’t...” The housekeeper opens her mouth again, but I can’t bear it. “Well, I can’t afford to let you go right now, can I? Look at the state of the place. In return for your lapse in judgement, acting on your own assumptions, rather than waiting for my orders, you’ll clean up that mess outside. You’ll scrub the house spotless. Then I might consider making you keep your jobs.”

The head housekeeper clears her throat, lowering her eyes from mine. “Yes, sir.”

She leads the rest of the staff outside, and I pull off these expensive clothes, loaned to me by the beast. I’m tempted to throw them aside, but he made me promise to bring them back to him as good as new. So, I fold the clothes of my enemy and tuck them away neatly. I might even handwash them myself to ensure they aren’t ruined.

Alone, behind my locked bedroom door, I look out the window at the servants cleaning the garden, and I break down sobbing. Firing them would’ve been convenient. I’ll have no money to pay them. I’ll have no money to keep this house. It’ll all go toward saving my heart and still, it might not be enough. Still, he might end up killing her. Because all I have left is a measly five hundred pounds, and I have no idea where to get the rest of the money. Even if I got a job, thirty days wouldn’t be enough to earn two-thousand-five-hundred pounds. My baby might still... Oh, I can’t bring myself to imagine the brutal ways he’d kill her.

I have no other choice but to either rob someone and not get caught or use the thirty days to come up with a way to stop him.

Chapter Eleven



Olivia

Groaning at the knock on my door, I put the pillow over my head. I've spent the better part of the day staring out the window, watching my life pass me by. My feet beg to feel the grass beneath it and though I open the window to feel the soft breeze on my skin, it still doesn't fill my lungs up enough. My chest is so tight. So heavy and constricted. I long for freedom.

The knock persists, and my body almost feels too heavy to move. But I drag myself to the door because I'm not free to do as I wish. Opening the door, I pause a bit, stunned as it appears no-one is there.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." A tiny voice floats up from the floor, and I turn my eyes upon a small boy, about four years old. He wears army short green pants with a matching vest over his long-sleeved wool shirt. His cloth hat matches the rest of his attire. His cheeks are rosy, his hair is blond, and his hands and feet are so small. I take pause. Whose kid is this?

“Good afternoon,” I respond, crouching down to his height. “Are you lost?” I ask, looking up and down the halls.

He smiles, and it’s adorable. Looking at him is a mixture of joy and sadness. Sadness that he wandered into this hell. Joy because of his innocence. “No, ma’am. The boss has asked you to join him for dinner, half past six this evening, ma’am.”

The boss? I nearly faint. This poor child. He doesn’t deserve to grow up around the likes of this evil pig. It’s only a matter of time until he gets the child involved in his dirty work. This child should be in a safe environment with a family who loves him. Then again, the idea of a child working isn’t crazy. I’ve grown up around it. Kids working in the slums, stealing just to get by, being roped into all kinds of criminal activities because of their low income and where they’re doomed to be raised. What sickens me is the fact that the beast can clearly avoid exploiting child labour with his riches. My eyes fill with tears for the small boy who must have the worst role model I can think of for him.

But I blink back the tears and smile at him. “Thank you for telling me. I’ll be down at half past six.”



No, I won’t be. I would rather stare at the paint on the walls than endure a moment of that man’s company. I think back to the window and run toward it, pushing my head out and groaning as I stare at the grass. Of course, he wouldn’t have made it easy for me to escape. He put me on the highest floor

so that if I try to leave, I might jump to my death, breaking my neck on the way down. My heart thumps forcefully as I try to gauge my chances. If I could ensure jumping and landing on my feet, all I'd end up with are broken legs.

And a broken spine. Where would I be going with broken legs and a broken spine? Nowhere, that's where. I had an uncle who broke his legs and spine. Ended up in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. I wouldn't last a second. It would be better to drop on my head instead. Because as soon as the beast or any of his staff found me, I'd be punished and killed.

It's torturous how close freedom is. I can see it, and I can taste it. If I put my hand out the window, I might even graze it with the wind against my fingers. But that's as far as I can go. I can't live it. Not until the beast deems it so.

He and his power. He and his control. He and his ownership of my freedom, my life, and my body. With each day that passes in this fiery pit, he drives it home that I'm nothing. With my hopes of escape dashed, I stare at myself in the full-length mirror and swallow back tears. Taking a defeated, mournful breath, I'm tempted to break all the furniture in the room, rip the sheets to shreds, and tear the curtains off the windows.

And in a small window of time, I forget about the consequences, marching toward the chest of drawers next to my bed. I push on it with both hands, but it's like moving a boulder. The thing won't budge. It's hurting me more to try to destroy it, and it mocks my weakness. Grunting, I kick at it,

hurting my toes on the hard wood. Grabbing for my foot, I bump my knee into the drawer that just flew open. Ow!

Hopping around, I swear, before reaching into the drawer and pulling out everything, throwing them to the floor. I move onto the next drawers and do the same thing until I open a drawer filled with silks. Long silks to be put over the neck and shoulders, beneath dresses for modesty.

I bunch one in my hand but rather than throwing it, an idea strikes me. Pulling the fabric as hard as I can, waiting for it to rip, I smile when it doesn't. I toss the lot of them on the bed, stretching them out to their full length. My cheeks move out of control, shaking and encouraging me to cry. This. This might be how I escape.

I tie the silks together and gasp a little too loudly at the length of it when completed. A knock on the door freezes the blood in my veins as I look around at the mess I've made of the floor. I hurry toward the door before it has enough time to be swung open by whoever is on the other side of it. Pressing my face right up to it, I open the door ever so slightly. It's Gloria, and my stomach is in knots. I think I'm about to be sick.

"Hi," she says, lowering her head. "I'm sorry about last night."

I flash her a bright smile though my brows tremble, telling me I'm overdoing it, but my face is frozen in this smile at this point. If I changed it now, she'd be suspicious. "Hi. No

worries. Already water under the bridge,” I respond. “I was feeling a little tender, that’s all.”

She sighs and smiles widely. I nod before attempting to push up the door. She places her hand against it, and I stop breathing. “Well, I’m here to get you dressed for dinner. The boss says I should um... dress you up.” She laughs nervously.

I’m guessing she doesn’t want to share with me what he said because surely, it would’ve been insulting.

“Thanks, Gloria. But I can dress myself up,” I say, attempting to close the door again.

“I’m sorry, Olivia. I know you don’t like this, and it makes me feel like a right arse forcing you to do something you don’t want to do but if you’re not dressed the way he asks for you to be dressed, I might be punished. I don’t want to be punished. So, please, make this easier on the both of us?” she asks.

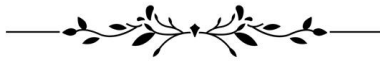
I sigh, tapping my feet behind the door. Swallowing, I look her in the eyes. “It’s just that I’m feeling a bowel movement, and I’d feel so ashamed if you were in the room with me while I used my chamber pot.”

“Oh!” She gasps. “Oh.” She lowers her head. “Yes, you’re right. That would be smelly.” She nods. “I’ll come back in a half hour to um... dispose of it before getting you dressed.”

“Thank you so much, Gloria. Yes, that will be quite fine. And please, if the boss asks what’s taking me so long, please be sure to inform him of my bowel movements,” I say.

And she giggles, hard.

Closing the door, I sigh and get to untying the silks and stuffing everything back in the drawers. I don't know if they're in their proper drawers, and my breaths grow shorter. I rearrange the drawers a few more times according to the fragments of my memory and flop backward in the bed. My escape has been postponed.



Adam

Storming into the servants' quarters and banging the door open, the weak wood splinters and almost shatters to bits. Servants dressed in grey wool dresses, white aprons, and white hats all startle at the sound. Some of them stop washing over the wooden basin, looking at me wide eyed before swallowing so hard, their gulps are audible.

“Mr. Molotov,” they say in unison.

Pans clatter in the kitchen, feet hurry forward, and heads peep out into the room before joining the other servants there, curtseying and bowing before me. Their skins are red, along with mine. But their redness is followed by dilated pupils, trembling lips, and hands. My redness is followed by panting and clenched fists.

“Can one of you tell me why I’ve been sitting by myself at the dinner table for over an hour?” I roar.

They gulp together, turning to look at each other, shaking their heads like they’ve lost control of their movements and have become blubbering idiots before me.

“You little dimwit!” I point at Mark. The little boy’s skinny legs shake along with his cheeks.

“Y-y-yes, sir?” He sniffles.

“Did you tell her to meet me in the dining room at half past six, like I said?” I bark.

He nods.

“What is this bobbing of the head? Answer me!” I roar.

“Y-y-yes, sir,” he says as his mother reaches forward to put protective hands on his shoulders. I challenge her with my eyes, but she doesn’t remove her hands.

“Then where in the bloody hell is she?!” I ask.

“I-I-I ...” he starts.

“Mr. Molotov. If I may,” his mother speaks. I swallow, freezing my lips and flaring my nostrils. “The boy’s only job was to inform her of the time. He did his job. You might ask the person responsible for getting her ready.” Her breathing becomes shorter, and she fixes her mouth at me.

The other housekeepers gasp at her bravery. But she has a point. I turn to Gloria. “Well?”

“Well, sir, I got her bathed and dressed by half past, just the way you asked. She said she’d be down just after.” She shrugs with both of her palms up, helplessly.

I scoff a mocking laugh. “She said she’d be... Need I remind you that she’s a prisoner?! Who cares what she said? Why didn’t you drag her downstairs? Very well since she’s incapable of following orders. Let’s see if she’ll listen to this.” I stalk toward Mark and pull him from his mother’s grasp. She cries out, and everyone gasps and murmurs amongst each other. “And since you’ve all seemed to have forgotten who I am, what I’m capable of, and what your actual jobs are, let’s hope she’ll follow orders this time.”

I pull the screaming boy, by his hand, out of the room while some of the servants intelligently turn their heads away. Others mumble their disapproval. Well, they best hope Olivia Primrose is in an amenable mood. Otherwise, this will teach them to enforce my orders or spare one of their own.

The little boy pulls against my tight grasp as we march up the stairs. “Keep pulling, and I’ll break your wrist.” I stare at him, and he whimpers.

Banging my fists upon the door I’ve allowed Olivia to remain in, is effective in getting her attention. She swings open the door, and I grab the boy before me, whipping out my blade and pressing it against his throat. I can feel his fear pouring out of his back and smell the urine soaking my carpet.

Olivia gasps and clutches her chest, looking up at me with her jaw slackened.

“Come to dinner right this minute, or I’ll kill him on the spot. Tell me, Olivia, do you really want to watch his blood splatter over this floor?” I say.

“You—you monster!” She reaches for the boy, and I press the blade even further into his skin.

“Okay, okay!” She brings her hands to her bosom, looking delightful, I might add. “I’ll come to dinner. I’m coming to dinner,” she says, stepping out of the room.

“Good. You may go,” I say, releasing the boy who runs down the stairs, crying. “Don’t push me, Olivia. You’ve forgotten your father’s life already but disobey me again, and

you'll have more blood on your hands. Understand me?" I step close to her, until our noses touch. She tears her head away, giving me her cheek, which I kiss and grin. She squirms and grimaces.

"Lead the way," I say.

"I don't know where the dining room is," she responds, and that makes me laugh. Too hard. Even I'm shocked by my laughter.

"That's right, isn't it? All right. I guess I'll lead the way." I step off before her. "Remember, don't try anything funny," I say over my shoulder.

We make it down to dinner, and I pull her seat out for her, watching her hate every minute of it, and I twinge a little. I wouldn't say I'm twinging from guilt. In fact, I'm not sure why her disapproval tugs at something within me. It's my wounded pride.

We sit before a dead piglet laying in a bed of vegetables and fruits. Different starches and gravy rest alongside it in smaller dishes and bowls. A three-candle setup is in the middle of the long table. I've brought her seat closer to me.

"Now look, you've made the food go cold. But no matter, I won't have Cook heat it up. I've waited too long, and I'm starving." Pouring some wine into each chalice, I push hers toward her before taking a smiling breath. "That's better."

Raising my wine, I nod at her to raise hers in a cheer. "To entertaining my company tonight, to Mark and your father

living another day, and to you not sleeping in a dusty, old cellar, crawling with vermin.” I smile before taking a sip and raking my eyes over her.

“You know, I never thought it possible for you to get even more beautiful than you are right now. But somehow, you’ve managed to do it. I see you’ve worn the corset this time.” I let my eyes linger on the two soft mounds sitting on her chest, bringing my gaze back up to her eyes which dart away from mine. Her breasts were perfect before in her nightdress, but tonight, they outdo even the rubies around her neck and dangling from her ears.

A few of her natural curls frame her face and is let down over one shoulder while the rest is tucked away in a jewelled clip. Her soft face is made even more striking by her strong, dark brows and long, dark lashes that make her eyes seduce without even trying to. How she’s never been sexed before is beyond me. Surely, it must have been hell for any man to resist those eyes or the calling of her full, pink lips. And when I ravish her, it won’t be because I can’t resist her. It’ll be because I can. And that makes me feel powerful.

Chapter Twelve



Adam

My knife squeaks against my plate as I cut into the pork. I look up at her while masticating my food. Those are the only sounds in the room. She sits there in silence. She hasn't made a sound since we've come down to eat. I'm almost halfway done with my second plate, and she hasn't looked once at hers.

“What’s the matter?” I huff, dropping my knife and fork. “Does meat offend you, now?” I ask.

She says nothing, and her silence bubbles up heat within me. I slam my fists down on the table, sending vegetables and fruit flying, wine and gravy spilling, and rocking the partly eaten pig. “Answer me!”

She jerks her head around to look at me, stifling a breath before releasing it. “I’m not hungry,” she mumbles.

“You’re not hungry?! You haven’t eaten all day!” I remind her.

“That’s not true. I broke my fast,” she mutters.

“Oh, you broke your fast,” I repeat, mockingly. “Well, let me remind you that you are my entertainment. That is your role here. I don’t feel as if my company is being entertained. Do you need some encouragement? Was my earlier display not encouragement enough?”

She inhales deeply, tightening her lips. Her eyes darken beneath the candlelight of the vaguely lit room. She turns those darkened eyes upon me, breathing fire as she clenches her jaw. Her cheeks redden with the memories of earlier. I can tell as she clears her throat and grabs the knife and fork. Her hands grip each with might and temptation. I smirk, daring her to attempt the fantasies that must be swimming in her mind. But she proves to be a smart girl. Smart enough at least to release the breath she was holding and use the knife and fork on the cold, smoked meat on her plate.

“No,” she mumbles. “That won’t be necessary.”

Satisfied, at last, that she’ll be joining into the game I’m playing, taking her as my company for the evening, I salivate in anticipation for the meat to touch her lips. As I swallow, my titillated pipe groans in my pants. Now, I’m the one holding my breath, and that breath threatens to suffocate me when she presses her knife and fork to the tiniest piece of meat, which she puts in her mouth before gulping as if she attempted to swallow gravel.

“There,” she says. “Satisfied?”

Satisfied? I growl, throwing the linen square from my lap. My fingers twitch, urging me to slam her face into the plate

and shove the food into her mouth. But I control myself.

“What do you think this is? Do you think I’m playing with you?” I ask. “Don’t let the fancy corset, the beautiful dress, the maidservant, the room of luxury I’ve provided you, or the mercy I’ve shown you, fool you into thinking you’re worth anything more than what you are. A bartering tool. A prisoner....”

She interrupts me, “Trust me. I’ve not forgotten that I’m not free in this hell.”

My eyes widen at her, and I press my lips together, shoving my chair back and steaming at her.

“You don’t speak when I’m speaking! I wasn’t finished! What are you not getting here?! Until your father comes back with or without the money, I own you. You’re *my* bloody property. Do you hear me? You don’t get to have opinions; you get the choices I give you, and you do what I say!”

There’s thunder rumbling in my bones, lightning flashing through my blood as I’m ejected from my seat by the fire under my arse. “You are nothing! Do you hear me?! Nothing!”

Still, she glares at me and when I reach for her face, pressing my nose against her cheeks, she pulls her head away from me. If I’m being honest, my ego is a little bruised here. I’m accustomed to women wanting me. Even that whore Agatha, even if she professed false chastity and never gave herself to me, she wanted me... as well as the other men she was with. I’ve never had to beg a woman to sleep with me. It was my idea to protect what I thought was Agatha’s chastity at

the time. But the lightskirts have always been willing. Too willing, in fact, to the point of being sickening.

There's something both refreshing and infuriating about her disdain for me. Her resistance challenges me and as much as I hate being challenged by a woman, my member hardens at the thought of getting her to submit—surrender to me.

“It seems you're in need of a lesson. You don't know how to act yet. But you will soon enough,” I say, sniffing the scents of sage and lavender in her hair and on her skin before pulling her up from her seat by her neck. “Kneel,” I demand.

Except for the smell of melting wax and the eyes from rich paintings of people I don't know, we're alone in the dining room. The audience wouldn't have mattered to me anyway, but the male servants weren't needed. And I'm glad they aren't here to witness her disobedience, have them question my authority. She needs to learn to fear me, especially under the watchful eyes of the servants in the future.

“Over my dead body,” she spits.

“Over your dead body or your father's?” I ask. “Ah, you've forgotten, huh? I hear he made it back to Colderidge in one piece. I also heard that the old fool tried to tell everyone about me and your disappearance. Luckily for him, no one believed him. You know, if the old man doesn't stop talking, some people might think him crazy, and you know what happens to the crazies. And well, it goes without saying, doesn't it? That if he ends up in an asylum, well, you're dead.” I say, twirling her hair.

“But from the goodness of my heart and to keep him out of the asylum, I’d be happy to send him a reminder to keep his mouth shut.” I grab her hand and press it against the table before holding a knife to her fingers. “What do you think? One of your digits? Or maybe an ear? You know what, better yet, it’d be just as effective to cut off one of his toes and have it delivered to you, wouldn’t it?” I say, putting the knife back in the waist of my trousers.

“I have men all over. I know exactly where your father is right at this very moment. All it would take is a few hours for an order to get to my men in Colderidge.” I smile before pressing my lips against her ear. “I’ll tell you a secret. I really don’t care about the debt. Look around you. Does it look like I need the money?”

I lean away to look at her face, to trace my fingers against her tightened lips. “This is all about a lesson to your father.” I laugh. “If you dare believe it, this is me being merciful. But listen carefully to what I’m telling you. If you push me, Olivia, there’s nothing stopping me from sending an order to have your father killed. It can be done by tomorrow. Is that what you want, Olivia?” I grip the back of her neck. “They don’t call me the beast for nothing. Rest assured, these aren’t empty threats.”

Her lips shake, and her eyes become glassy, but she doesn’t speak. This stubborn mule needs proof. Fine by me.

“Frederick, come in here!” I yell to one of the servants outside the dining room doors. The knob of the door creaks

before it's pushed open. I look into her eyes as she twitches. Her chest heaves, and she gulps.

“Yes, sir.” The white-haired man nods toward me.

I cock my head at Olivia, narrowing my eyes and pulling in my brows at her.

“I'd like to send an order to the men in Colderidge.” I speak to my servant without looking at him.

She snuffles and closes her eyes.

“Yes, sir.” The servant nods again.

She swears before yelling, “Fine!”

She refuses to look at me. Her skin has paled, and her body shivers.

I pretend not to hear her. “I'd like to order the men in Colderidge to...”

“I will do whatever it is you want. Please!” she yells, looking toward me this time, trying her best to make eye contact with me.

Ah, submission. Well, partly.

“Never mind,” I say to the servant, waving him away. “My prisoner has finally come to her senses. An order won't be necessary.”

“Yes, sir.” He nods before bowing out of the room.

Her breathing has become louder. More rattled. And she clears her throat. “Why should I believe you?” I ask her.

“Let me prove it to you,” she says, moving toward her plate and cutting a huge chunk of meat. Her submission causes my member to throb, and I reach for her hand.

“Oh, you will prove it. Kneel,” I say again. She swallows and nods before falling to the ground.

“Look at me,” I demand, and she raises her head. “I have something else to feed you,” I groan, pulling at the waist of my pants and stepping out of my drawers. The happy brick springs free.

Her mouth falls open, instinctively, and my blood burns through the erect shaft. “If what you say is true, prove it,” I say, standing half bare before her, trying to fight the temptation to stroke myself.

She clears her throat and tries to control her breathing. When she speaks, her voice rasps.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asks, staring at it in wonder. Her tears have dried, interestingly.

I swear beneath my breath. “Well, put it in your mouth.” I wave my hand at it.

She flashes her gaze between me and it several times before biting her lips. “I’d like to do as you’ve asked, but I-I don’t know how. I-I-I don’t think it will fit,” she says, and I leak.

Blood rushes to my tip, shocking my whole body. I reach for her head, gripping the back of it, and she whimpers. “I’ll show you. Open your mouth.”

The sight of her wet, pink tongue causes my balls to throb. “Wider,” I instruct.

The darkness beyond her tongue promises to suck me deeper, and I press into her, shuddering as my tip comes up against her teeth. I should pull her off and reprimand her, but the pain feels justified, somehow. I whimper and pull my eyes open to look down into hers. My body folds into itself as I push past her teeth again. I seek more of the torture against my sensitive tip, but my body begs me to be cautious. I don’t want to lose my manhood. Still, the very idea that she could bite it off in her anger makes it almost impossible to pull away. But I manage, gasping as I leave her mouth, and the soft breeze in the room meets with the wetness against my shaft.

“Wow, you really haven’t done this before.” I chuckle as the words tumble from my mouth, vibrating my body. I grip onto the table, leaning over.

She swallows and wipes her lips. “No.” She shakes her head.

“An honest whore.” I sigh. “Well, I guess, not a whore until tonight. What a wonder you are.” I smile while brushing my fingers over my tender tip. I don’t know if she’s drawn blood, but it stings a little. I like it, but I’m not sure if it can handle more damage. As I reach down to cup her chin roughly and run my thumb over her lips, her warm breath mists my fingers, and I groan. “You’re my whore. All mine.”

I’d known it before that no other man had the pleasure. But there was still a chance that it could all have been an act.

Tonight has proven that it wasn't, and the confirmation urges me to dominate her, truly use her as my special whore. Mine and mine alone. I almost feel bad ruining her chastity, the only genuine chaste woman I've ever met. But all women become no more than loose skirts after a while. She'll lose her novelty eventually. I'm happy to be the first of many. Although, while she's with me, she can have no other.

"Don't bite and don't scrape your teeth against me. Unless I ask you to." I smile, and she shudders. "Loosen your jaw. Can you do that?" Uncertainty fills her eyes, so I press my fingers into her cheek and push down on the lower teeth beneath her skin. She nods, moaning. Her eyes shift in confusion, and she swallows from the air filling her mouth.

Having her surrender completely to my guidance pushes me over the edge, and I fill her mouth once again with me, inserting my tip in that tiny hole in the back of her throat. She gags, and I shove myself against it, needing it to squeeze my tip, but I don't want to kill her. Not yet. So, I pull myself from her mouth. All my nerves catch fire, and I can barely hear her coughing as I shut my eyes and throw my head back. It's ripping me apart to hold back and when I narrow my eyes back at her, she swallows as if she knows that this time, I won't stop anytime soon.

My rod is filled with the blood pounding from inside, red and bulging. She opens her mouth again without instruction when I grip the back of her hair. And I press into her. There are teeth at first, and I swear, tugging against her scalp until she moans and slackens her jaw. The candlelight grows larger

and smaller, rapidly as I lose all sense of where I am. The pressure is fleeting, building, and evading, forcing me to chase it as I shove myself against the wet softness of her tongue. Her heat rises through her body, past her throat, setting my tip ablaze. It's like the sweet end is so close, yet so far away, and I wonder if it'll ever be reached.

Pounding her head against me, I groan, thrashing my other hand about the table as I demand my release. Glasses, ceramic plates, and metal utensils crash to the ground, shocking my nerves ever so slightly, but it's the slightness that causes me to jerk so viciously against her gagging mouth. Her muffled moans stifle any other sound, and I can only hear her.

Soon, the pressure is constant. It grows rapidly, until my already tender tip strains against the fullness. My balls slapping against her chin is filled with such rippling that my legs don't know what to do with themselves. They freeze, and I can't feel my feet. I grip the table in desperation, needing it to support my weight. I'm certain I might fall as the tiny hole stretches to expel a flood of seed into the back of her throat.

I growl aloud as both pain and pleasure leave my body buzzing like a bee. I feel like the wings of a hummingbird, too quick to catch hold of. That must have been the hardest release I've ever had. My body is filled with more power than I ever thought possible. Staying inside her mouth after that is like being struck with an arrow through the heart, signing my death certificate. I pull myself from her, needing to regain stability and the sense of my surroundings. When I can make her out again, she stares up at me in horror.

Clearing my throat, I pull my pants up and turn away from her. I'm not sure what to feel, whether it's guilt or elation and dominance. "You're dismissed," I grumble before hearing her feet scramble from the room.

Chapter Thirteen



Olivia

“Olivia?” Gloria, standing outside my bedroom door, reaches out for me as I run past her.

I keep belching up the taste of him, and I bend over, dry heaving. She hurries in behind me and runs for an empty bucket in the bathing room. I grab it from her and chuck up the contents of my stomach. Mainly his seed. The sounds that escape me are horrifying as I choke on air, and my body juts forward, pushing bitter bile from my stomach. Gloria strokes my messy hair. Some of the accessories that once held my curls together must still be on the floor of the dining room. Others are boring into my scalp. She moves her hand to rub my back, soothing me.

“Was it something you ate? Did the food go bad?” Gloria asks.

I shake my head, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. She jumps up from beside me and fills a small bowl with water. She returns with a cool, damp washcloth pressed against

my forehead. She wipes my face before handing me the cloth to wipe my hands.

“Thank you,” I croak. My throat is sore from heaving and his pounding. Falling backward into the bed, I sigh, and she brings me a cup of water.

“Rinse your mouth out with this. Can’t have your teeth going bad and ruining that beauty of yours.” She smiles and brushes her thumb across my cheek.

Leaning up on my elbows, I do as I’m told before hovering over the side of the bed to spit in the bucket. I’m about to flap backward into the bed again when she catches me and cradles the back of my head. “Drink some of it too. It’ll make you feel better,” she says. My head feels heavy as I gulp the water down into my empty stomach. I can hear it echo as it settles in my belly. Another sense of nausea arises but this one is accompanied by a rumbling in my aching stomach. I’m hungry.

“Did the boss get sick too?” Gloria asks.

“It’s not the food. I barely ate anything,” I tell her as my cheeks grow hot. I can still feel the way he filled my mouth. My tongue still remembers the heaviness of him resting on it and the movement of his velvet skin along his shaft. The metallic saltiness of him is embedded now in the molecules of my saliva.

“Oh, dear. Well, of course, you’ve thrown up. You haven’t eaten all day. Why would you refuse all that food?” Her eyes widen, and she licks her lips.

Guilt slams into me. I imagine the servants only get to stare at that food longingly while they feed on dried bread and leftovers. Much of those leftovers were flung off the table during the beast's moments of passion. She must think me haughty and wasteful to refuse such a feast, especially as her fellow servants toiled over the food.

"I should've eaten, but I didn't want to give him that power over me. Not that it helped. He ended up succeeding anyway," I say, covering my face.

I watched him as he bit his lip and groaned, as his veins bulged, and his hand fisted as if in torment. In some ways, I also felt powerful as he lost control of himself, yielding to the sensations my mouth provided him. He whined and whimpered, and I knew that if I wanted to, I could tear into his skin just as I would meat. But I didn't want to. And sickeningly, not wanting to, had nothing to do with my hate for him but because being the reason for his pleasure, pleased me. It's abominable! I groan.

"What do you mean?" she asks. I'm sure the servants who stood outside the dining room doors know what happened. I'm sure it's already been spread among the rest of the staff. She must not yet have heard it or is playing coy. There's no sense in hiding it.

"He forced me to... well, he didn't exactly force me; he gave me a choice. But it wasn't really a choice; it was a threat. I told him I'd prove my obedience to him, and he told me he

had the perfect way for me to prove it,” I say, muffled behind my hands.

When she doesn't say anything, I look through my fingers to see her staring at me the way I read an interesting book. As if she needs to know more, and she's waiting for the reveal. Her eyes also frown, in a way, like lips do in anticipation of bad news. I bring my hands down, only covering my mouth now, holding her gaze.

“It's so embarrassing,” I say. “He uh... I uh...we um...” I stutter.

She presses a soft palm to my upper arm. “Did he force you to have sex?” she asks. Her voice is a whisper, as if she's afraid to ask the question.

“Well, not exactly. He threatened me beforehand, sure.” But when he disrobed, and I saw his large... when he suggested, I got excited. Oh dear, I can't tell her that. I don't even want to admit that to myself. The room grows hot, and I fan my cheeks. I'm a horrible person.

How could my breasts have betrayed me, tingling the way they did after he threatened me? How could my abdomen quiver and clench for him, knowing the way he threatened the boy, my father... the way he treats everyone? Being his prisoner, he should disgust me. What's wrong with me? Was it just a survival instinct, to just accept my fate?

“So, he threatened you and didn't force you?” she asks.

I groan and sit up resting my back against the firm pillow. “I don’t know!” I look into her eyes, searching them for answers I can only find within myself.

She sighs and motions for me to sit up so she can undress me for bed. “Sometimes, my Lucian gets a bit rough.” She giggles. “A bit demanding. It’s not always fun at first but eventually, I enjoy it.”

I swallow. “Do you mean he forces you too, sometimes?” I ask.

“That’s just the way of men, my dear. They can’t control their passions. It’s easier for us women just to give in,” she says. “It makes things a lot more pleasant.”

I pull away from her as she loosens my corset. Spinning around, I look into her eyes. “It shouldn’t be that way. If they want respect from us, they should respect us too,” I say with such passion, she presses a hand to my shoulder.

“Don’t misunderstand me, Olivia. My Lucian does respect me. He always asks beforehand. And if I’m not feeling up to it, he helps himself out. It’s just that sometimes it can get a little rougher than I might like at first,” she says. “But when it gets good, it’s so good.” She giggles. “Other times he’s tender and caters to my every need. It depends on the day he’s had. I quite enjoy catering to his needs as well.”

I blush, unsure of what to make of what she’s telling me. What happened tonight doesn’t feel like it’s the way it should be. I’ve read of love and romance. The sex always seems so right, tender, and passionate. I’ve always imagined that my

first sexual experience would be founded on love and respect. Not contempt and anger. I shouldn't like what happened tonight. In fact, it scares me. I'm afraid that each day in this place strips me further and further away from reality. I'm scared I might be slowly losing my mind and losing my sense of self. I'm afraid I might be normalizing the abnormal and accepting my fate. I'm not sure I know who I am anymore.

Holding up the shoulders of my falling dress, I scoot away from her. "I'd like to be alone."

Her voice trembles. "Have I offended you?" she asks.

I shake my head. "It's not you. It's me. It's him. It's tonight. It's everything, really." I scoff an unamused laugh.

She nods and picks up the bucket. "If you're sure you won't be needing me for the rest of the night, get some rest. And feel better," she says before bowing out the door.

Slowly, I peel my clothes off before heading to the dressing table to untangle the barrette from my hair. I can barely look at my own reflection without feeling shame, and I brush through my hair while staring at the ground. Braiding the now poofy curls, I head into the bathing room to retrieve a rough cloth and charcoal which I use to scrub my mouth until it's tender, rinsing it with some water and changing into my nightdress.

Sleep can't come soon enough to rid my memory of today's events.



Calloused fingers grip the soft skin of my bare arse. Scratchy beard and firm lips follow. I grip my breasts instinctively. They're on fire. My whole skin is, and I can't help but run my hand over my stomach. But my hands are trapped above my head before I can keep going, and I'm engulfed by the warmth and heavy weight against my back. Hot breath sizzles my neck, and the scratchy beard finds that spot too. Again, instinct has me grinding my rump against the hardness poking the sponge of my arse.

I beg for a kiss, for the hardness to do more than just poke me. A familiar chuckle hammers through my chest and tumbles to my toes. I'm spun around, groaning. My eyes are closed in desperate anticipation.

"Look at me," the brush of firm lips against mine demand.

Anything for more. I'll do anything. I open my eyes.

The beast.

I gasp and try to tug my wrists from his grasp, but he's too strong. I narrow my eyes at him, snarling. "Let me go," I bark.

He grins and heaven help me, my knees go weak. His hooked nose brushes against mine, and his dark-blond hair falls into his face, cloaking us both in privacy. I can't see around the room. I can only see him, those pink lips, and those dark-blue eyes.

"I thought you wanted more," he whispers.

I do. But not from him. Oh, dear. Not from him. I try shifting, but he's so close, all I succeed in doing is rubbing my

body against him. His lips touch mine without kissing me. The restraint on my wrists hurt, but I like it. And I moan.

“Please. Tell me, Olivia, you want me to do more than just torture myself loo...” he says, but I can’t stand the tease of his lips moving against mine as he speaks. I need more. And he’ll have to do. Shutting him up and surprising myself, I press my lips firmly against his, and he groans, releasing my hands and thrusting a hand in my hair while the other scoops me up so that I can wrap my hair around him.

He sucks and pulls on my lips, biting them and licking them until my nipples ache and movement happens between my legs. He throws me on the large firm bed and reaches for my nightdress, ripping it from my body. His lips and beard are on top of my breasts, which he squeezes hard as he sucks. I grip his hair as he usually does mine, pulling hard on it, but he comes up and grabs my hands, securing them on either side of me with his own. He hovers over me.

“No. Submission is your role,” he says while rubbing his hardness between my legs. My hips move of their own accord, trying to match his rhythm with my own.

“Please,” I beg, needing him inside me, though I don’t know exactly what that means.

But he just smiles before groaning as he continues to rub his thick length against a sweet spot between my legs. I moan, needing to touch my breasts, but my hands are restrained. Pressure builds on that sweet spot, and I no longer need him to penetrate me, just yet, just keep doing whatever he’s doing.

Waves ripple through my body, rising and rising, until I burst, opening my eyes to the red and pink wallpaper of my room and no beast. I'm by myself. I pull my hand from between my legs, gasping as the weight of my reality slams into my chest. My throat goes dry, and I can't breathe. Shifting to sit up, hoping it will help my racing blood to slow and my breathing to return, I grip the sheets.

I can't believe I allowed him into my dreams. Although it seems that wasn't much of my choice either. He does whatever he wants, uninvited anyway. The room spins as I think of my betrayal. This man will kill my father if he doesn't return with the money, and then he'll kill me. How can I want such a creature? Nausea hits me like a train, and I run to the bathing room to find another bucket. Thankfully, there are a few empty ones, and I heave in one. But all that leaves my stomach is spit.

I've lost control of my body, my needs, and my wants to him. He's stolen them from me, like he robs the joy from those who work under him. I'd like to run from myself, but I can't. I'm a traitor.

Falling to my knees, I cry and pray before grabbing my heart and apologizing to my father, though I know my words won't reach him.

Chapter Fourteen



Olivia

Perhaps not eating was a mistake. I might not want his food, but my stomach is wounded. It's like the organ is being cut and squeezed to death at the same time. Or there's a tight cord connecting the lump to my chest. Vicious hands pull as far as it can go without breaking away from the cage behind my flesh. I envision if I were cut open, it would be like looking into hell. All red and inflamed. Lying on my back makes it even worse. In fact, there's no possible comfortable position. I must eat, or I'll never sleep again.

Stumbling from the bed, I grip the wooden posts to steady myself as the room settles back into one image. Doubt accompanies slow steps toward the door. The last thing I'd want is to run into the beast on the way down. He'd surely send me back to my room, punishing me for not eating. But I have no choice. Some hot tea, at least, would take this pain away. Although now would be the perfect time for that pig on a platter. I think I could eat that whole thing without his help.

The door squeaks open and before this moment, it had never sounded so loud. I wince at the jarring noise and take a deep breath. This gap is so far only large enough to push my head through. I examine up and down the lantern-lit hallway and listen for voices. Blast, I hope he's in his room or outside shooting at trees, whatever he does to entertain himself. Barefooted, I tiptoe across the swept wooden floors. Lifting my nightdress, I try to hurry toward the stairs, but even the light linen feels too heavy.

The stairs blur with each step, and the sound of footsteps jerks me to a stop. If I spin around at this very moment, I'll tumble down these stairs like a burst sack of potatoes. Gripping the wooden banister like it's my lifeline, I listen. My body is pressed so close to it, it's as if I'm trying to become one of the balusters. My heart races, and I wait for the footsteps to depart, but they don't. The silhouette grows, and I hold my breath. I suppose sending me to my room would be a merciful act. Heaven knows he could do a lot more to me. I'm not up to his games right now.

Defeated, I slump. If he's going to send me back to my room, the least he could do is carry me there himself; I'm swaying forward.

“Oh, dear. Are you okay?” Gloria's voice sweeps through me like a wave. Oh, thank goodness.

She hurries up the stairs. Her face fades in and out before she wraps her arm around me. “So hungry,” I say.

She presses me close to her body and guides my feet forward. “It’s okay. Let’s get you something to eat. The next time you think about punishing the beast, try not to punish yourself instead,” she says, squeezing me closer. There’s a reprimand in her tone, and I smile.

“Thanks for caring,” I whisper, leaning my head against her shoulder as she shushes me. Her slippered feet hurry along and with my body pressed up against hers, it almost feels as if I’m gliding across the floor. She pushes a door open, and she mutters when we come upon another set of stairs. My heart leaps. A part of me worries whether I misinterpreted her actions and if I’m being taken back to the cellar. But the smoky whiff of roasted pig quickly removes any concerns.

“Oh, dear. What’s the matter wit’ her?” I hear someone ask as a chair scrapes across the floor.

“The stubborn girl refused her meal earlier,” Gloria says as she slumps me down in the seat.

My eyes ache against the candlelight but as I look up, I can see that I’m surrounded by servants plating food, which some of them take through another door; I assume it leads to their quarters.

“Now, why’d she do that?” A plump woman scooping out hot, aromatic gravy turns to look at me with a furrow of her brows.

I lick my lips.

“Thought she was making a statement with the boss,” Gloria says, slapping her hand against her hip.

Another voice from the shadows sucks their teeth. “Pity. It’s hard to make a statement with him. He does what he wants and gets what he wants,” the voice says before stepping into the light. “So, what’ll it be? You already know what’s on the menu. We’re just having the leftovers.”

I put my hands up. “Oh, I don’t want to deprive you,” I start.

“Oh, shush,” Gloria says. “She’ll have some slices of meat, bread, gravy, vegetables, and potatoes. Pile it on her plate,” she says.

“Don’t worry, lass. We’ll fix y’up,” the plump woman says with a smile.

She plates me a heavy serving, and my lips water as Gloria brings the plate over to me. I dig in immediately.

“Well, slow down. You don’t want to chuck it all up,” Gloria says. “What’ll you have for drink? Wine? Water?” she asks.

“Water is fine,” I mumble with a muffled mouth packed with food.

She shrugs. “More wine for me, then.”

“The poor girl. How can he be so cruel?” the other woman says. I can see that she’s missing a couple of teeth and like her meaty counterpart, she’s also a bit older than Gloria.

“Well, he wasn’t always like that,” the plump woman says as she hands one more plate to another departing servant and takes a seat to feed herself.

“I told her that,” Gloria says. “Shame seeing what he’s turned into now. But shhh, if Lucian ever heard me, he’d have something to say about it. And well, if the boss ever heard anything, well...”

“We could all lose our jobs,” the other woman says.

“Aye. But it’s a shame though. Isn’t it?” the plump woman asks me.

I lift my head swiftly from my plate and try to swallow the food in one gulp, unsuccessfully. I’m not sure if this is a test, so I reach for my water instead.

When I don’t answer, she lowers her voice. “My aunt used to work for him when he was a boy. Although, he doesn’t know all that. He wouldn’t have hired me if he did. That’s why, when I came here for the job, I pretended I didn’t know a thing about him. Like my aunt didn’t share stories with me.” She grins. “He was a sweet little boy too. So full of life. Mischievous.”

Ah, mischievous. Him? No. I’d have never guessed. Such a surprise. What new and exciting information! Of course, not.

“Yeah, my mother worked for him too,” the other woman whispers. “Listen, it’s difficult to find unrelated servants since we all kind of grow up within the same position. But he doesn’t need to know that.” She snickers, fanning at me before

biting into the slice of pig meat between her fingers. “Heard he used to get in trouble a lot for jumping from tables and interrupting adult conversations, but my mother didn’t have to deal with him directly, so she found it amusing.”

The plump woman chuckles, and her round belly shakes. “Ah, poor Adam,” she says.

I stop chewing. Okay, now I’m lost. “Adam?” I ask. “Who’s that?”

Gloria and the two women laugh. “Why, the boss, of course?” she says.

“You didn’t know his name? Adam Molotov, of the Molotov family?” the plump woman asks.

The Molotov family. The name is familiar. I think they’re a big deal. Well, that explains this expensive mansion and everything in it.

Adam.

Somehow, hearing his name humanizes him to me. Even if he is a monster. I can imagine him as a little blond boy of means, playing pall mall in a luxurious garden, or even jumping off tables as they said, giggling and getting into innocent trouble. A boy, quite like Mark, if Mark had wealth and wasn’t subjected to this hell along with the rest of us.

“Well, it’s not like he goes around shouting his name from the rooftops, does he?” the woman with the missing teeth says.

“Aye, yes. That poor kid went through a lot. Although, he never let it stop him from being sweet until that Agatha,

woman,” the plump woman says. “After that, he wanted nothing to do with the name or that life.”

Yeah, right. He didn’t detach himself from the money though, did he? He seems quite comfortable with that. I guess, for a man like him, who has had everything handed to him, he’d die quite quickly if he had to live without it. His fragility is ironic since he’s the one lording fickle power over us.

“I mean, how could she cheat on him,” Toothless says. “Back in my day, if I had a man like him, I wouldn’t need any other.” She grins.

“Be careful, you don’t want Clifford to hear you,” the plump woman says.

“You’re right. He might knock the rest of my teeth out.” She laughs aloud.

I turn to look at her. “He hits you?” I ask.

“Well, of course, dear. Don’t look so shocked,” she says as if I’m the odd one. “All men lose their temper every now and then.”

I growl. An actual guttural, unladylike sound leaves my body.

“This one’s a bit sensitive,” Gloria whispers behind her hand, and I roll my eyes.

“It makes me angry that men have all this power, and they abuse it. That’s all. I’m sorry that happened to you,” I say to the woman with the missing teeth.

“Oh, don’t worry about it.” She waves flippantly.

It’s horrifying, but I also get it. These are the cards we’ve been dealt. It’s the way women in relationships have learned to cope with their circumstances. It’s not like we have a voice or many choices. I think it’s why I’ve remained a virgin and unmarried for ‘so long’ and why I escape into books. Especially books by female authors who write empowering female characters. Because it’s like a fantasy. It’s so far from our reality, but it’s the kind of world I’d like to live in, where women have the same rights men do. And they won’t be turned away when reporting their abuse to the authorities.

I wish women were allowed to train in defence sports. I wish I were stronger, then I would’ve cupped the beast by the sacs and brought *him* to *his* knees instead. I’d become the one he feared so he could get a taste of what it feels like. I wouldn’t only defend myself, but my father and that boy, Mark.

And I wouldn’t wake up touching myself to the thoughts of Adam Molotov dominating me. Or I still would. I don’t hate his dominance. I just hate that he’s a living demon, devoid of love or compassion and filled to the brim in hate.

“I have a question,” I say, interrupting the conversation I’ve already zoned out of.

They all pause to look at me.

“How are you all sitting with me, knowing he’s keeping me here as a prisoner and acting as if everything is normal?” I say.

“We’ve seen many prisoners here, haven’t we?” the plump woman asks Gloria and Toothless.

They nod. “But to be sure, I’ve never seen him quite taken with a prisoner. Never seen him allow a prisoner to lay in his silk sheets,” Toothless says.

“Yeah, I think he might be quite taken with you,” Gloria says.

“She is pretty special, isn’t she?” the plump woman asks.

“Special? What does it matter where you keep a prisoner, if you’re just going to kill them anyway?” I ask.

“Just try your best to do as he says, and he might let you out alive. I’m rooting for you to live, and I’m telling you, I’ve never seen him treat a prisoner with such kindness,” she says.

Kindness? It’s more like an animal disarming their prey. Playing with their food before killing it and eating it. There’s no kindness there. Just a pure exercise in power.

“So, no more refusing to eat or challenging him. And try your best to enjoy your time here. I know. It’s crazy, and it’s hard. But we’re only one level up from prisoner. We’re just as powerless. One step out of line, and we’re in the same shoes as you, although I doubt we’d be given luxury sheets.” Gloria waves her eyebrows at the other ladies. “Sure, Lucian would fight for me, but I wouldn’t want to put him in such a dangerous position.”

My appetite is lost. I’d like to finish the rest of my food, but I can’t. The world outside of these walls is crazy enough as it

is but inside these walls, it's worse than an asylum; the people here are comfortable in their lunacy.

“Aye. And the rest of us don't have a Lucian to fight for us. It's all on us. So, we feel your pain, but what are we to do? We're just trying to help you feel less trapped and alone. Maybe take your mind off everything with a few laughs and conversations. I imagine it's quite a nightmare in your room with no one to talk to,” the plump woman says.

Is it crazy that she makes sense to me? Or is it just more evidence that the longer I stay in this place, the more my mind is being eaten away. Of course, I'd appreciate more than just pleasant conversation. Like offering to help me escape but at the same time, I understand they'd be risking their lives to save mine. And my life isn't more valuable than theirs. I could never ask them to risk their life just so that I can live.

With new understanding, my heart warms from her words, and I nod, though I'm also gutted. “Thank you.”

“It's just the way we cope, sweetheart,” Toothless says. “We talk together. We gossip. We laugh. Because if we don't, we'll cry, we'll riot, and we might just lose our lives in the process.” She shrugs before knocking her chest and belching so loud, I'm impressed. It's so unexpected that I laugh, and once I start, I don't stop.

“Ah, there you go,” Gloria says, running a soothing hand down my arm.

My heart aches for their situation. My heart aches for mine. But I can't cast judgment upon these women. At the end of the

day, it doesn't take a handful of men to fight wars. If we want to fight, as women, it's also going to have to take more than a handful of us. And most of us aren't willing. Because the world isn't designed for us. We have no rights. To survive, we depend on men.

Oh, how I crave my books to dive into and imagine a world that's made for me. My mind longs for hope. My feet ache for grass, fresh air, and the boredom I once thought was stifling. I miss freedom, but it might be something I never experience again. So, I guess they're right, that for now, to protect my father and keep him alive, I must accept the circumstances as they are.

And when it comes to Adam Molotov, or men entirely, I must give up all ideas of love, respect, and tenderness. I am, whether he releases me, just a prisoner.

Chapter Fifteen



Adam

Pale green drapes are pulled open along the rod tucked away beneath matching green cornices. Daylight streams into the drawing room of my family home. My mother is perched on a padded, dainty sofa, doing needlework while my father reads the newspaper on a single seat across from her. Children giggle and tiny feet sprint around all four corners of the room. The door slams when the children leave the room only to return in their chase of cat and mouse.

“I thought I told these kids not to run in the house,” my father mutters.

My mother looks up from her needlework and swallows. Her cheeks flush and her voice shakes “Children, you know your father doesn’t like it when you run in the house.”

We don’t hear her, and our play continues. My father slams the newspaper down on the small table next to him, holding his cigar tray and spirits.

“You’ve got to be firmer than that, Priscilla. They need to learn to obey and respect their authority,” my father says to my mother. When we run past him, he sticks his foot out. My brother jumps over it, but I trip and fall, knocking over his little table. All the contents fly to the floor. “Look what you’ve done! You imbecile!” my father roars.

My small lips tremble, and I’m not equipped to control the tears streaming down my face.

“And now he cries! Tell me, Priscilla. Are we raising girls in this house!” My father’s eyes widen, and his lips press together in a thin line. His cheeks are so red, a blood vessel might burst. He picks me up by my neck and holds my skinny body, so he can look me in the eyes. “Stop the crying,” he says. “Men don’t cry.”

My tears stop, only because I can’t breathe. My little feet kick against the wind, and my tiny fingers wrestle with his stronghold. My mother’s voice becomes a fading echo.

“That’s enough, Edward!” she says, reaching for his arm. His other arm whips around and slaps her to the ground. “He’s just a boy!” she cries as my face puffs up, turning blue.

He throws me to the ground, and I lie there, gasping and coughing. My brother has already fled the room.

“And if you keep raising him the way you do, he’ll never be a man,” he says, stomping toward her and grabbing her by the neck. “What did I tell you about challenging my authority?” he says, pulling her forward as she begs him for his forgiveness. I

can't tell if her begging enrages him more or emboldens him. He pulls his blade from his leg sheath.

Mother's voice becomes a whisper as she pleads with his eyes. He presses the pointy end of the blade against her skin, making a dent. "Are you going to challenge my authority again?!" Spittle flies into her face as he speaks.

"He's just a ... oof." My mother's words are cut off by his tightening hand, and he presses the blade even further into her skin, drawing slight blood. My mother sobs. My little heart quakes at the sound.

"Mama?" I say in the tiniest voice. Tears stream down my face as I get to my feet. "Mama!" I say louder when fear slams into my stomach, and the thought of losing her becomes a real possibility.

"Shut up, boy!" My father pulls away from her, spinning around to look at me. My mother jumps to her feet, clutching her neck in horror before my father grabs me by the scruff of my shirt and pulls me out of the room. The collar of my shirt chokes me as he drags me across the floor. My mother cries for me, and I try to pull away from his grasp. "I'm going to teach you what it means to be a man," he growls.

My heartbeat builds, pounding blood that rises to my throat, suffocating me. I'm drowning in it.

"No!" I try to pull away, but I can't. "No!" The rooms of the house fade to black, and my father's rock-hard fist heads toward my face. I jump, trying to dodge it.

When I open my eyes again, I'm back in my own mansion, yelling, "No!" My voice frightens me, and I gulp against the shock.

There's candlelight, and the blue light of the morning streams in through the windows. I should feel relieved, but my body is on fire, and I'm drenched in sweat. I'm sweating so much, my throat is like a desert. My chest tightens, and I rub it, trying to relieve the pressure. But I can't breathe. It's like I'm dying.

"Hey, hey. It's okay," a voice says from beside me, followed by a soft palm against my skin.

The touch scorches me, and I spin to look at her, shaking. Who is she? Where did she come from? This stranger has seen me weak and trembling.

"It's okay," she says again, reaching out for me. "Did you have a bad dream?" she asks.

She mocks me. She must think of me as an imbecile, an overgrown fool. I grab her hand. "Don't touch me," I growl.

"Sir, it's okay. You have nothing to be ashamed of," she says. "I can kiss it better," she offers.

Rippling booms crash through my body, and I reach for her neck. "Ashamed?" I ask. "Ashamed?! I have nothing to be ashamed of," I say before hauling her out of my bed by her neck and throwing her across the room.

Ah, shit. Shit! Guilt spreads through my body like an inescapable fire. But it's already done, and I'm not taking it

back. Taking it back would be a sign of weakness.

“Leave,” I shout at her.

She’s horrified as I tap my foot against the rug, fighting against the guilt, shame, self-soothing, and justification running amok through my veins. My veins bulge at the restraint I’m trying to exercise.

“M-m-my clothes.” She points with a shaky hand.

I grab them and fling them at her, waiting for her to leave the room. I sigh when she runs naked out the door. The fire in my brain cools significantly, and I rub my eyes with the heels of my hands. I don’t even remember how she got in my bed but with her now gone, I flop backward in the safety of privacy.

My mother’s face flashes in my mind once more, along with the other horrible memories trying to win out as I struggle to keep the image of her in my mind. That was the last time I’d ever seen my mother. I don’t know what happened to her, but I know my life changed at that moment. My father had sent my brother off to boarding school. He later lived with an aunt. Meanwhile, I was stuck at home with my nightmare Papa.

He spent many years trying to get me to hate my mama, but the only thing I remembered was that she fought for me, and I never saw her again. He remarried several times, for the sake of society’s perceptions but behind closed doors, those marriages were sick. His wives entertained men, and he entertained women. As I grew older, my eyes and ears were sullied by the images of women and men engaging

shamelessly with sex. It wasn't long until I was seeking my own pleasure in whorehouses across town.

Agatha was the first one who made me think that my mother wasn't so rare among the female kind. In the same way my mother was an angelic memory for me, Agatha became an angelic reality. Being in her company was so precious, I'd have done nothing to taint our time together. When our relationship transitioned from friends into romance, I thought I'd gotten another chance to experience love in its highest form. Hope sprang forth within me like a spring. She shone like a brilliant light. She could save me from the life I seemed doomed to live.

With her, I was able to believe that everything that man had taught me about women or even life in general had been wrong. It was like being given a new lens to view life through. But she soon proved him right, didn't she? She proved him right, and she proved me a fool. I hated her for it.

I chose to never be a fool again and to silence the mocking, hateful voice of my father. I chose to prove to him, even in his death, that he wasn't right about me. I am a man, I'm not too soft, and I'm capable of power and control. Love was that rare thing I got one shot at and lost in childhood. My mother was an anomaly, unmatched in her compassion and love. She was one and done. An experience never to be had again. A chance I missed at experiencing tenderness.

Until Olivia. The way she easily offered up her own life in exchange for her father blew my mind. It seemed too good to

be true, but it also gave me the first hope in years of connecting with someone so pure.

Still, the memory of my father's teachings and Agatha's betrayal has served as constant warnings. So, I'm of two minds when it comes to her. One mind tells me that by keeping her here and breaking her down, her true nature will come true. She'll soon show me like all women, where only her needs matter. Soon enough, she'll break and risk her father's life for her own. She'll go back on her word and betray him.

As for him, I don't care for him in any way. Punishing him gives me great satisfaction. I can't imagine a father to be anything but monstrous. It matters less to me what he does and more what she does. Of course, it'd be satisfying to teach the man a lesson and restore the money he stole from my father. But more than anything, I want to push her to the edge.

In my 'other' mind, however, I feel so close to the thing I lost when I'm with her that I want to keep her here forever, to never lose that connection. I'm torn between killing her and keeping her, ruining her, and preserving her.

Bloody hell. Groaning, I pull my naked body from my bed and head to the bath to scrub away that woman's touch. Yesterday must have been Friday. I've lost track of the days since Olivia's arrival. On Friday nights, I'm usually too busy to head into a brothel to get my needs met and at the end of a heavy day, I would require a woman in my bed. As such, Lucian has been instructed to send a woman to my room at a certain hour. She must have climbed into the bed with me

while I was asleep last night. I must have a word with him about that. Things have changed around here. Why would I require a whore when I already have one at my beck and call?

I shiver from the cold water I pour over my head. Olivia's face appears to me. That look of horror before she ran out of the room the night before last. I avoided her all day, yesterday, because I think I might feel bad. I've been wondering if I hurt her and how she felt about last night. I've even contemplated asking Gloria if she's said anything. Even the idea of displaying that lack of confidence to my staff chills me.

Those feelings have no place here: regret, guilt, affection, none of it. Any affection I experience for her is met too quickly with the reminder of my father's voice. It rings loudly in my head, mocking me for being too emotional. Too easily swept up in a woman's charms and lacking the manliness to give her what she needs. Having to convince a woman to view me as a man with the only thing I have going for me, my family's fortune, which of course she'll use and squander to her delight. She may even use it to facilitate her cheating because I'm not enough. I'm not manly enough. And I'll be too stupid to see it until it's too late.

He was right with Agatha, though I never knew for certain if it was my money she was after. But what else could it have been? She did to me exactly what my father said a woman would. I will never be caught slacking again.

Growling, I rise to my feet. Water splashes from my naked body onto the wooden floors. My soaking hair is slicked back

against my shoulders. I reach for my white towel, vigorously drying myself before stepping into my shirt and trousers. Soft morning light streams through the windows, and my stomach growls for breakfast. As soon as I open my bedroom door, I run into Carlson who has his fist readied for a knock.

“Sir.” He bows slightly. “Miran has come back from Colderidge.”

I nod. “Have him join me for breakfast,” I say, hurrying alongside Carlson.

Miran is my right-hand man. He gets the technical stuff done. And since he’s here, it must mean that he wants to discuss preparations for the upcoming banquet. It’s a family event that I’m forced to attend. My aunt has been insistent on being a part of my life. She tries far too hard to make me part of the family, again. I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do. And in some ways, I resent her for only having my brother living with her. On the other hand, there will be some important people at that banquet, which means prospective business. More business isn’t a bad thing. Investments, land, commerce—it benefits me to attend.

But I’m more excited to hear what he has to tell me about Townes. Miran lives in Colderidge, which makes him a great extra pair of eyes. Walking into the breakfast room, I smile at the unassuming man. He’s small and skinny. A little older. He seems harmless, but the man has spent many years in the army and somehow, he made it out alive, without visible wounds.

He still has all his limbs intact and is only missing his back teeth.

“Miran,” I shout with my arms spread wide. “How’s the banquet coming? I assume you’re here for my input?”

“Everything is good so far. I just want to run an idea by you about the layout of men spread across the outside of your family’s house,” he says.

With a reputation like mine, I’m not a likable man. When I go to events, I like to make sure I’m protected. He talks about ideas of where some men could hide, out of sight and others, in plain sight, as guards, coachmen, and banquet attendees. He nods at my input, and we formulate a plan before we eat breakfast. He sits on the opposite side of the smaller table. Towers of pastry separate us along with various protein choices, beer, tea, and coffee.

“Any news on Townes?” I ask, while cutting into my brioche.

Miran’s fork, holding a piece of plum cake, clatters on his plate. He clears his throat. “Right. About that. We haven’t been able to locate Townes.”

The brioche crumbles in my hand as I raise my head to look at him. “Why, perchance, wouldn’t you lead with that?!”

The table shakes with my rage. As if I give a damn about the banquet. My blood boils to a rippling peak as I call for the only person who must know where he went. “Olivia!!!!”

Chapter Sixteen



Olivia

Women might not have the same rights men do. The world outside these walls might be crazy, but I stand a better chance out there than I do in here. At least out there, I have the luxury of boredom. Although, that luxury only comes after my father stole money from Adam Molotov. Oh, Father. Why? Surely, he must have known his reputation. I don't hate him for stealing. Apart from living in Lhyrenia for some time where an honest living could be made from fishing, we've lived in the slums.

In the slums, which stink of the contents of the residents' chamber pots tossed out the windows of rickety old buildings, rammed packed with the poor. Stealing becomes a survival choice. The men steal, and the children, dirty from head to toe, are trained to steal. It's something I never engaged in but witnessed as a part of the norm. I never thought my father had engaged in such things. Naively, I believed that one of his inventions was finally successful. But learning he stole doesn't

change my love for him. I just wish he hadn't stolen so much money from a criminal.

I don't have a luxurious life to go back to, but I can find my father, and we can travel anywhere. As long as we're not robbed of our freedom. I can't do as Gloria and the other servants suggested and surrender to that beastly creature, doing all that he's asked and hoping he doesn't kill me in the end. That's not acceptable to me.

I've tied ten long silks together, knotted, and pulled on them to test their strength. I don't weigh an awful lot, so they should support me. Now, where should I tie this silk rope? My hands are shaking, and even the soles of my feet are sweating as I hurry about the room, tugging on objects to check their sturdiness. My scalp and my forehead are on fire. My heartbeat is too fast for my lungs to catch up. My chest tightens, and my breathing grows short.

"Oh, please. Please don't let anyone come into the room. Please don't let anyone catch me," I mutter to myself as the mist of sweat turns into droplets, rushing down my spine.

I dart my eyes around the room. Ah! Of course. The bedpost against the wall. It's only about three feet from the window. Quickly, my eyes flicker between the knot I'm tying and the door. I pull on the knot as hard as I can. Neither the bed nor the post moves. The knot remains intact. I think I've got it! Marching to the window, I inspect the grounds once more before dangling my makeshift rope from it.

Blast! It's not long enough. That's fine. There are more silks in the drawer. My escape is near and though I panic, I smile as my hopes build to a delightful crescendo. In a rush, I pull the silk from the windows and rush to the drawers for more, when there's a knock on the door. Bloody... nut cheese! I press my lips together to keep from exploding.

"Just a minute," I yell, shakily untying the silk knot from the bedpost. Kicking the evidence under the bed, I run to the door. When I pull it open, I stagger backwards. A man I've never seen before stands there. He's about my height, a few shades darker than my usual olive-toned skin, with silky black and grey hair that shimmers a little on top of his head. What does he want?

"Olivia Primrose?" he asks.

"Yes?" I ask, studying him warily.

He smiles and nods as if relieved with himself. Did he knock on several other doors before coming to this one?

"Mr. Molotov would like for you to join him in the breakfast room," he says.

After what happened the last time in the dining room, no thanks. Besides, I don't know this man. Why would he send this old man and not Carlson or even Gloria to call for me?

"Thank you," I say with a trembling smile. "But you can tell the beast... I'm sorry... Mr. Molotov that I'm not feeling up for having breakfast at this time," I say.

His kindness fades and in its place is an alarming sternness. He reaches for me, grabbing me by my hair and pulling me out of the room. “I’m afraid that wasn’t a request.”

“Ah! Ow!” I yell, grabbing his hands, trying to pry him off. He looks old and feeble. He’s anything but. He drags me down the hallway as I try to remain on my feet. “Okay, fine. Let me go! I’ll walk,” I say, but he ignores me.

When we get to the stairs, he pushes me before him, though he never lets me go. I’m off balance as my legs hurry along without me. My near future doesn’t look so pleasant, and I keep hoping that I don’t land flat on my face. We’re on the other floor before I can blink and before my heart can decipher what in heaven’s name is happening, he opens a door and shoves me into a bright room with yellow and cream wallpaper. The sunlight is reflected off the walls and smaller white table.

The beast paces with his hands on his hips. His heavy breathing reminds me of Chance’s nickering. When he sees the man pushing me around, his mouth falls open before he closes it. His nostrils flare.

“Here she is,” the man says.

Adam marches toward me and the closer he gets, the more my breathing shortens. “Thanks, Miran. I’ll take it from here,” he says.

The man releases me, but he doesn’t leave the room. Adam growls, and his large hand wraps around my throat. My eyes fly open, and I wonder if someone spotted my silks hanging

from the window and reported it to him. I gasp for air as my head seems to swell in his grasp.

“Where is your father?” he asks.

What? I’m not sure I’ve heard him properly. The room is spinning. Air rushes quickly into my lungs again, and I cough, only realizing as I rub my throat that he let me go. My body wobbles from left to right before I crash to the floor. Adam towers over me.

“Answer me!” he roars.

The room grows smaller and darker, somehow. I shake my head. “What?” I ask.

He fixes his hand as though he’ll hit me with the back of it but as it sweeps over my head, he punches the wall instead, before picking up a chair and throwing it across the room.

“Don’t pretend to be simple with me, Olivia. Your father is missing. Where is he?!” he asks.

I gasp, and my eyes go wide. My father is missing? This news hits me in a surprising way. He’s missing, so he must be out of danger, right? If Adam doesn’t know where he is, then his men couldn’t have done anything to him. My father escaped? My heart soars. Yes! I hope he doesn’t come looking for me. If he is safe, then I have no reason to stick around here. Oh, thank goodness. We’ll find each other again. I almost smile but when the old man in the corner snickers, I scowl.

“Are you suddenly mute?” Adam asks as I tighten my lips at him. His eyes seem to almost jump from his skull. The orbs

have lost any hint of blue. Red lines like lightning appear in the whites of them. He lifts me by my dress. The fabric rips. “Tell me where he is?!”

There are several places that come to mind, but I doubt my father would be silly enough to go back to places he’s lived before. It would make him far too easy to find. So, I genuinely have no idea where he is. But even if I did, I wouldn’t tell him. He could beat me until I was bloody and bruised, staining his carpets, I wouldn’t say a word.

He yells before tossing me to the ground. My hips crack as I land on my bottom, but my adrenaline is too high for me to feel anything. Backing up on my hands, I make my way to the wall and ease up to my feet. He balls his hand into a fist and stalks toward me. He swings, and I shut my eyes. The wall vibrates next to my head, and I stop breathing.

“You refuse to speak?! You still haven’t learned!” he yells, grabbing my head into his hands and squeezing so hard, I feel like a watermelon about to explode. “Your chances aren’t looking too good, Olivia Primrose. I might kill you before your time is up,” he says as sweat drips down his face.

He releases me and marches to the other end of the room. “I’ll give you one last chance to think about whether you want to withhold information from me. Because without your father, your life is pointless. Think long and hard, Olivia. The next time I ask, you better have an answer for me, or you’ll beg for death. Leave,” he says.

As I run from the room, I hear the voice of the man he called Miran tumbling down the halls. “Are you growing soft, Molotov?” he asks.

The beast roars, and something crashes to the floor. “I can’t exactly kill her now without the information, can I?” he asks.

They mutter some more, but I’m already up the stairs, rushing back to the room. It’s now or never. I can’t hesitate any longer. Slamming the door behind me, I push on the chest of drawers in the corner with all my might. The heavy wood fights me, and the legs get caught in the rug. I kick and swear at it, but I refuse to give up. The edges bore into my palms, they dig in my backside, but nothing. Grunting, I fall to the floor and tug the carpet out from beneath it. Pushing on it again, it squeaks across the wooden floors. Blast!

I pause, rushing to the door and pressing my back against it, while muttering a prayer. After a few minutes of waiting and determining that no one seemed to have heard it, I run back for another attempt. Pushing it seems to take several years of my life. My shoulders are sore, and my body is heaving by the time I get the heavy, noisy piece of furniture toward the doors, blocking it. It dawns on me then that all the time I used to push the furniture could have been used in my escape.

Sweating and swallowing, I catch my breath and pull the makeshift rope from under the bed, before adding some more silks to it. Adam sounded serious in his threats and since I have no intention of saying anything to him about my father’s whereabouts, my chances of survival are slim either way. I’ll

either be caught trying to escape and end up dead, or I'll wait for death in this room. I'd rather die trying to save my own life. With a quick glance out the window, I toss the silks down.

My heart gallops in victory as I hang from such height with the bedpost supporting my weight. I've never swung from a rope before, so I keep slamming into the side of the brick-and-mortar building. I swear. My hands slip against the silks, and I stop breathing. Bloody hell, my heart stops beating. My head is spinning, and I'm filled with nausea. But more than my fear is exhilaration. I'm almost there, I just have to figure out how to make it down without constantly slamming against the building. I close my eyes against my slipping hands and decide to trust that I won't die.

Voluntarily slipping, however, burns through the palm of my hand too quickly, and I wince, using my knees to stop me. Bad idea. The skin scrapes off against the grit of the outside walls, and I try not to yowl. Still, that bad idea leads to a good one as I realize that I can use my feet to give me leverage and steady my descent. I can hardly believe my luck when my slippers hit the grass. I could jump in joy, but I don't have time. Looking from my left to right shows me that one guard is taking a pee break against the wall. The other seems to be sleeping on his feet. This seems too good to be true. It must be my lucky day. I dash forward into the woods before they turn my way. I almost expect to feel a bullet in my back, but nothing happens.

I don't stop to catch my breath until I'm far away. I collapse in damp dirt and fallen leaves, but laughter tumbles out of me.

I'm free. I can't believe my luck. I'm free! Laughter soon rolls into heavy, ugly cries. Tears fall from my eyes that I can't afford to waste. I'm already running low on bodily water, and thirst claws at my throat.

Chapter Seventeen



Adam

The breakfast room is in shambles. If the furniture and fixtures weren't of the highest quality, they would litter the room in splinters and other broken pieces. My stomach burns as I watch Olivia run from the room. Miran studies me, quite bemused. He questions my methods and whether I've grown softer. I'm on the verge of picking him up and throwing him across the room as well. Yet, I burn from shame. Sometimes, I hate how angry I can become. But this time, it's justified, no? Why, then, did I feel the need to reach out and apologize as soon as she fled?

After Miran's departure, I've been walking up and down, past Olivia's room door, wrestling with myself. While Townes' debt doesn't matter much to me, I don't take kindly to anyone trying to deceive me. His disappearance makes me feel like he's managed to score one against me. How dare he think he can outsmart me?

And her. She must know where he is. She must be in on this scheme as well. Still, the memory of the horror I caused to

appear in those beautiful brown eyes once again, stops me from kicking her door in. I find myself rationalizing that her father, like mine, has betrayed her. Maybe she doesn't know where he is, and I've just frightened her for no reason.

Ugh! I fist my hands. What is the matter with me? I don't want to care about her feelings. I don't want to find any reason to believe in her innocence. In fact, I want her to prove to me that she's a deceptive wretch. The sooner she does so, the better. Cocksucker! Why can't she do something to help me kill these fantasies I've drawn up about her in my head? *Prove to me that you can't be trusted. Prove to me that I'm right to keep my distance from you! Oh, prove it to me for the love of...*

I groan, raising my fist. I'm about to rest my forehead against her door, contemplating whether I should knock, when Carlson comes up the stairs. Heat floods up my neck, and I curse myself. What if he had witnessed me pining for her at the door? The news would spread like wildfire through the rest of the house. They'd see past my armour. They'd mock me. Laugh at me. Just as before. *No!* I must get a hold of myself.

Clearing my throat, I drop my fist and turn to face him with the hardest jaw and sternest face I can muster, as he informs me that I'm needed in the study. A few of my collectors have returned from their journeys with the money they've been able to retrieve from those that owed me. This is where my head needs to be. Not on her and her daft feelings. Spinning away from her door, I march alongside Carlson, more than happy to be as far away from her as I can get.



An hour has passed, and my mind has settled into the thrilling discussion of money and tales about how the collectors managed to ‘persuade’ some of the unwilling debtors to pay. The metallic scent of gold, silver, and copper mixed with tobacco smoke and spirits manages to capture my focus. I’m not bogged down by thoughts of Olivia any longer. Thank goodness.

As I count out the heavy bags of coins and sort out the collectors’ payments, I’m feeling more like myself again when my door is pushed open. Immediately, my hand reaches for my pistol, and I point it at the intruder. It’s Lucian.

“What in the bloody hell are you doing?!” I ask. Everyone, especially Lucian, knows not to mess with me when I’m dealing with money. I could have easily shot his head from his body.

“Can I speak to you outside?” Lucian asks.

“I’m busy,” I grunt.

“It’s important,” he returns with urgency.

Releasing a noisy, rattled breath, I turn to the men. “Give me a second. And don’t try pocketing any of the money. Thanks to Lucian here, I must start over counting from scratch.” I glare at Lucian, but he only steps outside the door and waits for me. Huffing, I face the men again. “So, I’ll know if any of you touch anything. And you know what’ll happen to

you if you do,” I warn, before joining him. This better be bloody worth it.

“Olivia isn’t in her room,” he says when I close the door behind me.

“Okay?” I ask, getting angrier by the second. Is this the big emergency? “Did you search the rest of the house?”

“I didn’t have to,” he says. “Olivia escaped.”

My brain jerks around in my head a little, and I grow dizzy. “What do you mean?” I ask, aware how silly I sound and want to punch myself in the throat.

“I mean, her door was blocked with furniture and when I managed to get into the room, she was gone,” he responds. “What do you want us to do?” he asks.

“Well, go and look for her, you bloody twat!” I wave toward the rest of the house.

This can’t be happening. This is impossible. There’s no way she could have escaped when I have so many guards. The doorknob almost breaks under my grasp when I enter the study.

“All of you, get out! I’ll sort out your payments later but right now, you’re going to have to help me with something,” I yell at the collectors.

If this woman has simply wandered into another part of the house, and Lucian interrupted me for no reason, having me employ everyone to go in search of her like a dimwit, he’s going to feel the blast of my rage. My body shakes, and it

separates from itself. As everyone else searches every inch of the house, I hurry back toward her room for some personal proof.

The door to the bedroom has been broken off the hinges. I can hear the thump of my heart like the feet of Goliath approaching. The evidence is already clear enough to warn me that this won't get any better. I pull the door away to see the heavy chest of drawers, chipped on the back.

I'm almost impressed by her strength and determination. A lady might have struggled to move something so heavy. But she isn't a lady. She's said that often enough. The chest blocks my path of entrance into the room, and from the doorway, I can see that my wooden floors are streaked from the drag. The rug is tossed up, revealing the dust beneath.

I roar, throwing the mahogany chest of drawers to the side with ease. The room warms significantly, and the scarf around my neck seems to tighten as I lay eyes on the silks tied to the bedpost and hanging out the window. The clever wench!

Hurrying toward her means of escape, I push my head out the window to see the silks extending toward the ground. It was a long descent, but obviously successful. The decreasing oxygen and erupting blood crackles and pops like explosions beneath my skin as I stare into the woods.

“Oliviaaaaaa!!!!” I growl. My voice bounces off the trees and mountains as it's swept away by the wind. Birds shriek and flutter away from their hiding places. Wolves howl in response. She can't have gone far. After ripping the silks from

the bedpost, I run from the room, alerting the rest of the house. “Everyone! Search the woods! If you find her, bring her back alive!”

If she dies, it’ll be by my hands alone, if the wolves don’t get to her first.

“Aye, sir!” A collective agreement shakes through the house followed by hefty footsteps clamouring outside.

As I load my guns and sheath my knives, I swear. This must have been her and her father’s plan all along. The deceptive witch! It sickens me to think that I wasted one second comparing her to my mother. Of course, her actions weren’t selfless. She’d already concocted a plan of escape. Together, they sat in that cellar, conspiring and laughing at me. They put on quite the show and again, like the bloody idiot that I’m continuously proved to be, I bought into their charade. I knew she was too good to be true.

Heat stings my eyes and blazes through my fingertips. I can’t promise to hold myself back from killing her at first sight, but if I can manage to be smart enough just this once, she might lead us to her father. Then I’ll kill her. And him.

Taking the stairs a few at a time, I rush through the already opened door. I don’t know why seeing my guards still standing at their posts shocks me. But of course, they are. It makes sense. The house is in the perfect position to be robbed and seized with everyone, but the housekeeper’s gone. But I don’t feel gratitude or pride in their sense of duty. Instead, I march

around to the side of the house to find the guards who let her escape.

The two numb skulls straighten when they see me. In a few seconds, I register the growing redness of their skin before I blast them with my fists, knocking them out cold. As I slap one of them awake, he mutters his apologies to me.

I pull my pistol from my waist and press it to his skull. “Did you aid her escape?” I shout in his face.

He tries to shake his head, but my hand holds him still. “N-n-no, sir.” He forces out the words through his seized jaw.

Lies. She must have gotten help from someone. It’s far too convenient for her to disappear without either of these two ass wipes seeing her. I hit him with the butt of my gun, and as he reaches for his own, I slam his body into the ground, before pulling it from his waist and tossing it away from him. He groans.

“What did she offer you to get you to betray me?” I ask. Sharp edges of pins and needles drag along my bones, my veins, and my organs. The pain is excruciating as I think about them having her before me. Is she even a virgin? Is she pretending to not know what she’s doing with my cock in her mouth? Internally, I yell. I could rip her apart! How stupid can I get? She’ll pay for her bloody deception.

“Nothing!” he yells. “I didn’t touch her.”

My hand tightens around his neck. I can barely hear him as the greens and blues of the outside fade to red. I don’t see him

anymore, only the images of them together playing out in my mind. “Did she allow you to taste her? Sex her?” I growl. The veins on my forearms bulge as I press deeper into his neck.

He wheezes and claws at my hands, but I don’t stop until he’s unconscious, and his bones crack. Blazes! Hovering over him with my hands still on his neck, I loosen my hold in my realization that I can’t feel a pulse. I think he’s dead. Ah, cocksucker!

Groaning and hopping over to the other one, I slap him awake. “Sir!” He jumps up. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened,” he starts.

Restraining myself from murdering him too, I slap him again. “Shut up. Where did she go?”

“I-I-I don’t know,” he says.

My teeth press into my lips to hold it together. “What do you mean, you don’t know? It’s your job to know. Did she sex you, too?” I yell.

“What? No!” he says. “I barely even know what she looks like.” He looks genuinely alarmed. I wonder whether the other guy was also telling the truth. My head is spinning. I don’t know what to think.

“Oh,” I mock. “You don’t know what she looks like? Is that what prevented you from seeing her climb out of the friggin’ window and bolt into the woods? Did you think she felt particularly adventurous and chose the window, twenty feet in

the air, instead of the door like any other woman you've seen dash from here?"

He swallows. "I didn't see her! I'm telling you the truth. I don't know how she did it," he says.

"Oh, I suppose she made herself invisible, then. Did she? She must be quite skilled in the art of magic," I jeer.

"Sir, by the time I saw the silks, I alerted Lucian..." he continues.

"Ah, so I suppose you did your job then, didn't you? You're sticking with your story. You don't know where she went?" I ask again.

He lowers his head before shaking it. "Sir, if I knew where she went, you know I'd tell you."

I nod. "Correct me if I'm wrong, here, but you're pretty bad at your job, aren't you?" I ask.

"Sir, I didn't mean to... I don't know what happened," he starts. "It was one mistake."

I rise to my feet. "A very bad mistake." I shrug before pulling out my weapon and pointing at him.

"No! Sir, ple—" he starts, but his pleas are cut short with the blast of my gun.

For good measure, I shoot the other one as well. He may already have been dead, but it serves me to make sure. It's clear that under their watch, anyone can slip by. They're terrible guards and well, I can't fire them, lest they go out into

the world and report all the things they've seen. Plus, they had to die, if at least to serve as a lesson to the other guards to always keep their eyes and ears open.

I gather a couple of male servants to carry their bodies toward the stables, with specific instructions to take them past the other guards. It's a reckless act on my part as I walk alongside the bodies while the other guards watch me. Should they think it noble to retaliate against me, they'd outnumber me as all my men are in the forest searching for Olivia. They all have loaded pistols, but I don't care. The only thing I care about is making Olivia pay for tricking me and punishing anyone who facilitated her.

Fortunately for me, whether it's out of respect for my authority or fear of what would happen if my men returned to find me dead, the guards keep their heads held high as if they've seen or heard nothing. The dead bodies are placed in the stables for my men to take out back and burn later. In the meantime, I mount Midnight, allowing him to sniff one of the silks before setting out after Olivia.

Chapter Eighteen



Olivia

There must be a lake somewhere close by. It's been a couple of weeks since I've arrived here, and so much has happened that I can't remember whether I passed one on my journey to this hell. Unless there are fruits available, which there aren't, I haven't passed a single fruit tree, I'll need to find a lake soon to quench my thirst. I haven't eaten breakfast and already lost enough fluid during my night's rest. Last night had been spent contemplating my plans. It had been a restless night accompanied by cold sweats. And drinking water before escaping was the last thing on my mind until I'd run far enough to exhaust myself.

Inside my nostrils burn. The pain shoots all the way up between my eyes, cramping my brain. I wiggle my eyes, but they're heavy and stinging from the salty sweat settling there. It's like my throat is gaping wide, exposed to a constant gush of wind. Swallowing is a task. If Chance were here, he could direct us to some water. He's great with direction and commands. As for me, I'm hopeless. Everywhere looks the

same to me. Just trees, dying leaves, bugs, and mud. I can't tell if I've moved from the same spot, and it's making the earth spin. It's like I'm getting smaller and smaller, being sucked into the ground.

If I can manage to remain still and listen, I could hear the trickling of water, coming from somewhere. There's got to be some lake or stream close by. But my brain pounds from the fear of lingering in one spot too long. I don't know how long it'll take them to know I'm missing, but they're bound to figure it out soon enough. I already feel like I've not gotten far; I don't want to be stuck on my own out here. But if I don't get some water soon, I might die.

It's ridiculous how hard I must try to be silent and simply listen. Every leaf fall or wings of a flapping bird, mating calls of animals, any sound at all fries my nerves and sets off a deafening alarm in my head. Bracing myself against a tree, I try to settle my shaky breath and close my eyes. Images of being struck in the heart or opening my eyes to see the beast standing before me buzzes through my mind. But desperation allows me to force my eyes shut, to count my breaths until I hear what sounds like water.

I don't know if I'm delusional because in my excitement, the sound fades. Convinced it's real, I prick my ears and hold my breath. That doesn't help. Here comes my loud, thumping heart again. Oh, blast! Oh, wait! There it is. There it is! The faint trickling reappears, and I follow the sound.

Coming up on the tiny stream is like being kissed by angels. I fall to my knees and scoop up the water in the cup of my hands. In my glee, I barely hear the footsteps approaching me until I open my eyes. Instinctively, I jump up, shooting backward like an arrow being launched through the air. But when my eyes settle on the smiling figures before me, I wonder whether this is my chance to be saved.

“Don’t be scared. We’re not gonna hurt you, are we?” one of them says as I dash around the trees. They’re all males, and none of them are dressed impressively enough to be regarded as one of the beast’s men.

“Y-y-ou don’t know who I am?” I ask.

The men look amongst themselves before a few of them laugh. “Why? Are ye someone important or something? Did ye get lost in the woods?” he asks, taking in the state of my ripped and muddied dress.

I breathe a tremored sigh. “Oh, thank goodness.” I grab my tightening chest and gasp against the pain. “I’ve been kidnapped, and I’m trying to escape. Please. You must help me,” I plead. “Do any of you have horses, perhaps? Would you consider lending me a horse or giving me a ride far away from this place?” I ask. My hope lies in their hands. I grip my dress, silently begging them to say yes. If they do, I’ll be long gone before the beast and his men even know where to look.

They all look at each other again and smile. “Sure, gorgeous.” One man takes off his brown parish cloth hat, revealing slick dark hair pasted atop his head. He rests the hat

against his chest in respect. “We’ve tied our horses that way.” He points deeper into the woods. “We just stopped here to fill up our canteens, didn’t we?” he asks the others.

“Aye,” they agree, lifting their water flasks.

“Ah.” I nod. “If we hurry, they can’t catch us. Especially during the night,” I say, lifting my long dress, slightly, to aid a quicker gait through the mud.

“All right, all right. We won’t be long.” They grin, kneeling to fill their flasks as I shift on my legs and jump from anything shuffling behind the trees.

“All right, that’ll be it then,” someone else says. “Follow us.”

I almost run forward, holding back my sobs of gratitude. My escape is so near I can taste it. As we walk, I catch a few of the men looking at my shin and ankles. My skin flushes and when they lick their lips, my mind grows wary. But right now, they’re my only hope out of here, so I’d rather err on the side of trust.

“So, your horses weren’t thirsty?” I ask.

“Who’d ye think drank all the water?” One man smiles at me.

I give him a shaky smile in return. The deeper we get into the forest, the more suspicious I become. But my fears are soon alleviated by the sound of a horse neighing.

“All right, all right. We’re comin’, you old mug!” the man at the front yells.

Thank goodness. Angelic songs pour into my mind, and the horses, tied to trees, seem to glow as if there's a giant halo around them. I hurry forward.

“Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you!” I yell before I'm pulled backward against a hard body. Stink tobacco wafts off the breath of the person holding me. The stench chokes me as he leans his lips against my cheek.

“Just a minute,” he says. My arse collides with something I now recognize, thanks to the beast, as this man's hard member. It pokes me through his soiled brown pants, and I yelp, backing away from it. But his hand tightens around my upper arm, squeezing into the bone. “We'd be delighted to help you,” he says. “At a cost, of course.”

I nod, trying not to inhale his breath as I open my mouth to speak. But it's impossible. I'm afraid my breath now smells like his. “If you take me to my destination, I promise there will be a hefty sum waiting for you,” I lie. Lying isn't something I like to do often but in a matter of life and death, I'll take my chances. My only objective is to get out of here safely.

The man laughs, and his breath slaps me harder in the face like a windstorm. His calloused finger moves my frizzed-out hair to the side. He sniffs my skin and sighs as the other men stare at me, licking their lips. “We're not interested in money, are we?” he asks. “What are ye willing to do for our help?” He grunts as he wraps his arms around my body and presses his rough lips into my neck.

The other men rub themselves before undoing their pants. No way. Absolutely no way. I'd rather die. I kick against him, struggling against his hold when the other men close in on me.

"No!" I scream, reaching behind me and grabbing his thing. I squeeze it with all my might, digging my nails into his skin, and he throws me to the ground.

Crawling through the legs of one of the approaching men, I manage to dodge the five of them. A victory short lived, as one of my legs is grabbed, and I'm pulled against the tiny stones and leaves in the mud. Apart from my Papa, I really hate men. If they're not as obnoxious as what's his face, Heath, back in Colderidge, they're scalawags like the beast and these twats. In trying to escape one devil and his imps, I run into another entourage of demons. Evil lives everywhere. Well, they're going to have to kill me before I ever let either of them have their way with me.

Kicking back against them, I keep my eyes on their horses. If I want to survive, I can't let fear consume me. I must focus on my escape. If I can manage to kick myself free, I can mount one of the horses. But it would take too long to untie them. I'd have to run for my life. Tears flood my eyes. There's no way I can outrun them, but I will give it my best shot.

In all my kicking, my dress flops about until I can feel wind on my bare behind. One of the men hisses. Another groans. "Blimey, what a sweet quim."

"I'm feeling for cherry. Something sweet and red." Another whistles and grins.

“Quick, grab her hands, you big lug!” someone else yells.

No. With one big pull, I tug my ankle free. I stun myself, but I shake off my shock and take off running.

“You know, I quite like the chase,” someone yells.

“You can run, lass, but you can’t hide!” Another laughs.

I’m huffing as I push my body forward. My lungs burn, threatening to give out, but I’d rather run myself to death than stop for a breath. I don’t pause for a glance behind me. Their heavy feet advance, and I hear a whip slashing the wind.

“Hiya!” someone yells, and horse hooves join the charge. One horse pulls to a stop before me and when I spin to run in the other direction, I’m closed in by horses on all sides.

“Now lass, there’s no way out, is there?” the sticky-haired man says as he dismounts his horse. “You’re not going to get out of this, so you might as well enjoy it.” He advances toward me, and I gulp. The sun is setting and soon, I’ll be trapped in the dark with all of them. A chill sets in, and my body shakes uncontrollably.

“Aw, come on, sweetheart. There’s no need for all that,” he says. “I promise you’ll have fun. And if you behave, we might just take you anywhere you want to go afterward,” he says. “Sounds like a fair exchange, right?”

I shake my head, resorting to pleading. “Please,” I mumble shakily. “Don’t hurt me.” My voice sounds so tiny and helpless, it sickens me.

“We’re not going to hurt you. Are we, lads?” He reaches for my face, running the back of his smelly, dirty fingers against my cheeks before looking behind him. I take my chance to reach for the pistol in his waist, but he turns back around and catches me before I can grab it. The kind act he’d been performing falls away, and he twists my arm, turning me so that he stands behind me.

“We were going to try our best not to hurt you but since you can’t play nice, neither will we,” he grumbles in my ear. “Grab her arms and legs. I’m going first,” he says.

I’m seized. My limbs are stretched out on either side of me. Trying to pull away is pointless. “Please. Don’t. Just kill me instead. Please. Please!”

“Trust me, we plan to do just that when we’re done with you,” the sticky-haired man says as he rips my dress away from my body. The fabric tears into my skin, wounding me. I struggle against their hold, and my body flops like the top of a canvas cloth flapping in the unforgiving sea wind.

“This one’s quite the fighter, isn’t she?” one of the men holding my arms grunts as they wrestle with me as if they’re wrangling a herd of cows. Collectively, they shove me into the ground. My head slams into the earth, and everything goes silent for a few seconds as the sticky-haired, scrawny scalawag mounts me. He slaps me in the face.

“Submit!” he says before slapping me again.

I can taste blood and spit it in his face.

“You know what? I’m going to like this,” he says, pushing up my dress.

My life flashes before my eyes. I don’t see any other way to fight. I try kneeing him in his marbles, but my legs are being held taut. “Get off me, ass wipe!” I scream. “Get off me! Help! Help! Help!!!!!!” My vocal cords shake like the strings of a violin about to pop off.

The man laughs, positioning himself between my legs. I can feel his nasty prick brushing against me, and I want to kill him. “No one’s going to hear you out here,” he says, just as there’s an echo.

“Olivia!!!” My name reverberates through the forest.

It’s the beast and at this point, I don’t know whether to feel relieved. Oh, it’s hopeless. No matter how this plays out, I’ll end up tortured and murdered in the end. There’s nothing I can do about it. The beast might end up applauding them for taking the task off his hands. Hell, he might even employ them for good measure. But his loud echoed voice plays out in my favour for a few relieving moments as the men, startled, hop to their feet. I hop from the ground, quickly adjusting my skirts.

“Don’t you make a sound, or I’ll shoot you,” stinky breath says to me as they all reach for their pistols.

“Is that a promise?” I ask, and he hisses.

I’m getting ready to run, as they all prick their ears like hounds do, when one of them grabs me and pulls me to his

side. “You hear that?” he whispers to the other men, and they shush him.

Hooves, lots of them, advance toward us. Oh, how wonderful, to face doom from all angles. I’m tempted to scream just so stinky breath can shoot me and save me from the torture I’ll surely experience at the beast’s hands. He won’t go easy on me, I know it. But I think, sadly, that I’m all out of hope. There’s no more fight left in me.

Chapter Nineteen



Adam

Her gargled screams bang into me like a deadly blow to the chest. Gently pressing into Midnight's side and spine, I nudge him forward toward the sound. Whoever or whatever made her scream will have to answer to me. If she screams, if she's afraid and horrified, it'll be because of me, no one else.

Yelling her name, I hope she'll keep making noise to assure me she's safe. I shake my head at that. Of course, she won't. She doesn't want me to find her. But the lack of sounds breeds concern. Am I too late? My heart crashes, and I try to convince myself that my concern over her safety has everything to do with someone killing her before I can. She's my property. Whether she lives or dies is up to me. And if a single hair on her head is harmed, the perpetrator will be punished. Especially because they've wandered onto my property and messed with my possession.

The mansion and the entire vegetation region surrounding it belongs to me. Usually, it doesn't bother me if travellers

journey through the forest on their way to their destination. The forest is grand enough for them to not happen upon my mansion. But when they've decided to take what doesn't belong to them, well, that's when everything changes.

I hear my men gathering from a distance, but I'm closer to her. I move a lot faster. I'll reach her before my men do. Lantern in hand, I keep my eyes peeled for movement. Whoever or whatever scared her has gone still.

"Olivia!!" I yell again.

No answer. For sard's sake! Gripping the reins, my fingers dig into my palms. My eyes are focused on one spot, guided by the memory of her cry. Bloody hell, I'm hoping she's still there when Midnight seems to pick up her scent on the wind. His hooves quicken, and he charges through the leafy trees where I see six men holding guns at me. Blimey.

"Whoa whoa, you can be on your way. I'm just looking for a girl," I say, raising my hands. "Have you seen her?" I ask.

"Ah, you mean this bitch?" A bulky, red-skinned man pulls her out from behind them and pushes her to the ground. She's muddy and scarred. Her hair has leaves sticking out of it, and I can't be certain in the dim lantern light, but there seems to be blood on her hands. The air escaping my nostrils whistles as my breath steams up. My voice grows deeper as I slowly bring my hand to my pistol.

"Hand her over. She's mine," I say.

One small-faced man with a surprisingly heavy voice steps forward. “Ah, so you’re the kidnapper she was running from. Tough luck she has, doesn’t she? Doesn’t sound like she wants much to do with you.” He grins.

“It doesn’t matter to me what she wants. She’s mine. And I’m commanding you to hand her over now,” I say.

The group of men laugh. “Oh, you’re commanding us, are you? And why should we listen to you?”

“Because this is my property, and you’re trespassing,” I say.

“So? You’re outnumbered. What’re you gonna do? Shoot us?” The small-faced man grins. “Look, we’ll make you a deal. We’ll leave your property, and we won’t kill you, but she’s coming with us, aren’t you, love?” He steps forward and grabs her face before bending to attempt to kiss her.

I want to jump from the horse and wring his neck but until my men gather, it wouldn’t be smart of me to attempt anything so sudden, at least not so obviously. They’re all confident with their weapons, and I’m certain they’re not afraid to use them. Pressing my teeth into my top lip, I growl beneath my breath before exhaling.

She pulls her face from his grasp, and he slaps her. She spits at him. “I’m not yours.” She glares at the man. “Or yours!” She turns toward me. I try to silence her with my eyes, staring into her soul, but she gets to her feet. “Both of you want to kill me or use me, anyway, but I’m not coming with either of you unless I’m dead, so go ahead and kill me now,” she says, widening her arms.

Silly girl!

“Or!” I interrupt, silencing her as she spins around to stare daggers at me. When we get out of this alive, she’ll be punished for her disrespect. “I’ll make you an even better deal,” I say to the men. “We’ll fight for her, without weapons,” I say, raising my pistol above my head. “If any of you win, you’ve earned her. If I win, she comes with me.”

Horses breathe heavily behind the trees, and I know that my men have found me. However, no one else seems to notice. Especially Olivia who runs as soon as the six men and I toss our weapons aside.

“Grab her,” I command when she disappears into the trees. The six men jump and turn to see her being carried back out toward us. Lantern lights highlight themselves, and three of my men walk out between me and my opponents, grabbing all the weapons before any of the men can move forward. “Don’t worry, they won’t interrupt our fight, won’t they, lads?” I ask, imitating the men’s accents.

“No, we won’t, sir,” they echo.

I smile before raising my fists. “Well, come on. Let’s see what you’ve got.” As I circle the first opponent, studying his movements, I smirk at him. “So, I’m guessing you don’t know who I am, do you? Else you wouldn’t have sought to challenge me,” I say.

“What? Are ye someone important?” my opponent asks.

“Some may think so,” I say. “But I guess we haven’t had the honour because you haven’t had the need to borrow money from me, I assume. Good for you. It would’ve been good for you if we hadn’t met at all. But well, here we are. Come on, aren’t you going to throw? What are you waiting for?” I ask.

“I don’t care who ye are. I ain’ scared of you,” he says.

“Ah, but you should be.” I smile. From the side of my eyes, I see Olivia struggling against the men holding her still. Perhaps my opponent has spotted my attention is otherwise engaged, but he swings. I can feel his fist move along the wind before it comes close to my face, and I duck. “All right, now we’re in business, aren’t we?” I grin.

It’s like a dance between us. I have no intention to swing yet, only to tire him out. I must save my energy for the rest of them. So, I continue to mock him and make him angry, dodging his swings until I can see him rocking on his feet.

“You know, you can all just give up. Admit defeat and continue your journey,” I offer.

“No. I was just about to get a taste of tha’ sweet quim before ye showed up and ruined it. Be a shame for a beauty like that to never know what it’s like to be sexed by a real man. I’m guessing ye were such a bad lover, ye scared the girl away,” he says.

My eyes widen, and pressure builds behind them. They jump with the blood pulsing through my body. That’s it. I swing, knocking him right out. I’m about to jump on him and indulge in battering him when another man runs at me. What

did that bitch mean by, he was ‘about to get a taste?’ Were there others before him? Did they all sex her? Did this cocksucker, swinging at me, sully her body with his rank odour and filthy fingernails? Did his rotten mouth touch her?

For a moment, I rock on my feet, dizzy from the images of them restraining her and taking her against her will. In that moment, a fist slams into my stomach, waking me up immediately. The pain and the audacity of my opponent focuses me. Something tender inside me also shatters for Olivia. I don’t have time to think about it as rage overtakes me, bubbling up through me like an erupting volcano.

I swing and don’t stop until my fists sting from tearing open on his face. We’re both bloody messes, except he’s unconscious, and I’m fixing my eyes on the next guy like a rabid animal hungry for blood. He runs toward me, and I scoop him up by his shirt, flinging him into a tree. The other three men swear and when I turn to look at them, they’re huddling together. Two of them stand in the back, nudging the third one forward. He decides to be brave, rushing toward me. I’m huffing and puffing, breathing heavily, more from the adrenaline than fatigue.

When he attempts his first shot, I sidestep him, grabbing his arm and breaking it before kicking him in the spine. He howls in pain, falling to the ground. He tries to stand but he’s unable to. The other two men mutter something to each other before charging at me. They seem to think two against one gives them better odds. It allows them to get a few punches in. This

boosts their confidence, but I have a thing about people who are too cocky.

Getting low and charging forward, I scoop one of the men up by his legs. Using his body as a weapon, I swing it into his friend who tumbles down. The sheer force of the contact knocks the man I'm holding unconscious. The other guy whips out a knife, and I shake off the tension in my body.

"That's against the rules," I say.

"Yeah, well, I haven't survived this long playing by the rules," he spits.

I nod and frown. "See, I can respect that," I say. "But well, if you're changing the rules, so am I," I say, stopping dead and staring at him. He raises his hand to strike me, and I smile. "Shoot him," I command. He only has about a second to register shock before his brain is being blasted from his head. Groaning now from the pain and fatigue making it known in my body, I bend over with my hands on my knees. "Whew! Do any of you happen to have any water I can have?"

"Aye," Lucian says, jumping from his horse and rushing over to me with a canteen. "That was pretty impressive, mate," he says.

"Well, thanks." I groan, straightening. I'm trying to hide the fact I'm getting too old for this. I don't want Lucian or any of the other men to think I'm getting weak. Still, I trust they wouldn't use it against me, yet. They rely on me for their hefty wages.

As I quench my thirst, I hear groaning coming from behind me. Retrieving my gun, I spin around, nonchalantly shooting the rest of the men. When I get to the last one, a shaky cry erupts, and I glance toward the sound to see Olivia shaking. Her eyes are wide, and tears stream down her face. Unreasonable agony rips through me. There's still time for me to curse myself for it later.

"You can let her go," I instruct the two men holding her.

She doesn't attempt to run. I think it's obvious to her that she wouldn't get far. But her mind doesn't even seem to process the idea of escape as her trembling hands cover her mouth. My hand shakes as I point the pistol at the other man. I almost want to spare her the sight, but she's seen so much already. What's one more?

"It makes sense to kill them, Olivia." I shrug. "I can't very well let them escape, can I? Not after what transpired here. It's only logical." Why am I explaining myself to her? Seeking to soothe her?

When I pull the trigger, killing the other man, I wince this time. I wince for her pain. But I can't say I regret killing him or any of the other men. Not after what I imagine they might have done to her. With those cocksuckers out of the way, I rush toward her. She backs away. It's only normal, but it bristles me.

Still, she's mine to touch, and I bring my hand to her face. Up close, I can see the welts on her cheek, and I groan at the way the daft maggot men marred her perfect skin. She gasps

and shudders when I move my bleeding knuckles up to her face, brushing them across her skin. I should stop. All my men are witnessing this. They'll think me a fool, but her hollowed eyes hold me in their trance. They widen at me, and I can't help but display tenderness. Her tremorous breaths warm my knuckles and something in her eyes shift, though she stands as if wary of me still, pulling ever so slightly away. But that horror from earlier, it's faded and in its place is shock, confusion, and... hope?

I pull my hand away, dropping it to my side. No, this is dangerous territory. She's my prisoner. I need to remember that. My property. Nothing else. There's still the matter of knowing whether she planned to meet up with her father, whether she plotted with him to run from his responsibilities, and whether she tricked me into thinking she was kind and selfless. I should be dangling her by her neck, demanding information from her. But sard it, today has been a long day, for all of us. And as much as it kills me to admit, I can't imagine causing her any more distress tonight.

Bloody hell. With some rest, I'll be set right again. For now, I can't be asked to overthink things. Turning to my men, I wave at the dead bodies. "Gather them. I don't want anyone riding through the forest to discover them and ask questions. Cover their blood and brain matter with dirt and leaves," I say coldly, aware of Olivia's sharp intake of breath. I ignore her. She and my men need not forget who I am.

"There are two more bodies back at the house," I inform the men. "Burn them together."

The men I can see, nod. “Aye,” the others respond.

Turning back toward Olivia, I grab hold of her arm. She winces and before I can stop myself, I loosen my hold. She must be bruised there too. Damn it. Why do I care? Feeling ridiculous, I take care not to hurt her as I pull her forward.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks. I take note of the fact she isn’t pulling away. I don’t know if that’s a good or bad sign.

I pause to give her a warning look not to argue. “You’re riding with me,” I say.

She swallows, and her chest heaves, but she doesn’t say anything as we walk toward my horse. If she thinks I’m ever letting her out of my sight again, she has another guess coming. She bites her lip when her palm presses into mine on the mount. I can tell she’s trying to fight the pain. The wounds scratch against my palm, and I overflow with such rage, I could kill the cocksuckers again.

Huffing, I climb up after her, placing her behind me. “Well, go ahead. Wrap your arms around me; you’ll fall off if you don’t,” I grunt.

Her arms move slowly around my waist, and I hiss, groaning as she keeps from touching me. I roll my eyes. “You’ll have to hold on tighter than that if you want to stand a fighting chance,” I say.

“This is comfortable enough for me, thanks,” she responds.

Her response shocks and relieves me. At least, after everything she's witnessed today, she still has her spirit.

"Okay." I shrug. "Suit yourself," I say, nudging Midnight forward. She slips immediately when he gallops, and she swears before tightening her hold. I smile at the victory and squirm at the warmth.

Chapter Twenty



Olivia

Getting off the horse is quite the scene. Impatient, the beast swings me over his shoulders in front of all his men, before lowering me to the ground. He doesn't let go of my arm as he pulls me through the house. He doesn't speak; he simply huffs in his gruff manner. My mind and my heart race as I wonder what will happen next. There's no telling. Today has been strange. Strange is a severe understatement.

Before tonight, I didn't think the beast could have different sides to him. But when he'd brushed his hand across my cheek, I wondered. I'm still wondering whether it was my imagination. I wouldn't be surprised if it was; my head has been rattled from the day.

Pressure bangs through my body as he continues to pull me, silently, past all the rooms on the ground floor. My legs follow along. They don't have it in them to resist. Time simultaneously stretches on and runs away from me with each step forward. The pressure inside me swells. If his earlier tenderness was nothing more than my imagination, then

perhaps he's leading me to my inevitable punishment. Too physically tired to fight, my mind screams, *'This is it. You're about to experience so much pain, you'll beg him to kill you. And he will. You're all out of chances.'*

I'm surprised when he marches into the helper's quarters and calls for Gloria. She gets to work cleaning my superficial cuts and caressing my face, but I can't even bring myself to look at her. My head is too heavy, and my eyes hurt in the dim room. My mind is active enough, though, to wonder why he'd get my injuries taken care of before killing me. The atmosphere is tense with his heavy breathing. It almost seems as if a literal hole is being burned through the skin of my neck with his eyes. The heartbeat in my throat makes it hard to swallow.

When she offers to clean his wounds as well, he refuses, only accepting the mixture of warm vinegar and brandy, along with some bandages. He also takes an entire bottle of brandy, instructing one of the male servants to carry it to his room, before holding onto my arm again and walking in the direction of my bedroom. Eyes wide and mouth agape, I stare at him as we march up the stairs. He's gotten my wounds taken care of, *and* he's allowing me the pleasure of sleep? This must all be playing out in my fantasies. Perhaps I'm still in the forest, on the verge of dying, imagining all this.

My heart jumps with glee the closer I get to the bedroom. I've never been happier to be alive and to have a place to lay my head. He slaps me with another surprise when he carries me past the room and walks toward the door before it.

“You didn’t think I’d leave you alone tonight, did you?” he asks. He’s been so silent all this time that his voice startles me. My lips tremble as I try to form words. He looks at me, narrowing his brows. “After that stunt you pulled, I’m never letting you out of my sight again,” he says before opening the door and locking it behind us.

“Undress,” he demands when we walk into his bathing room.

After witnessing what he did to those men tonight, I’ve learned that he’s not just a man of words; he’s a man of action. Hearing the way he callously instructs his men to discard the bodies chills me. I’m not in any position to fight him. With trembling fingers, I do as I’m told while watching him do the same.

My heart thumps with each article of clothing he removes, beginning at the top. It almost stops beating, entirely, when his bare chest is revealed to me. My breath catches at the sight of him. My cheeks grow heated and when he moves away from me, my heart collapses.

“I’ve instructed the servants to bring the things you’ll need in here,” he says while dipping a clean strip of cloth in some steaming water. His back muscles ripple as he hisses, and a new need to touch him overcomes me.

Something is different between us. I can’t tell what it is, but I’m yearning to get closer to him. Sure, what he did tonight was gruesome and despicable. But with what those men wanted to do to me? I shudder. He saved my life and for some

reason, he spared me from his wrath. I'm so confused because despite everything else he's done, him saving my life fills me with the need to repay him.

Walking over to him, I place my hand on his back, and he jumps. His eyes darken, and he glares at me, before letting out a sigh of what sounds like annoyance and pulling his eyes back to his wound.

"Here, let me help," I suggest before reaching for a strip of cloth.

He grabs my hand, stopping me. He squeezes my wrist so hard, I squirm and instinctively try to pull away. He doesn't let go and pulls me toward him so that I'm flush against his hard body. But I don't think arousal is what I'm feeling when his darkened eyes fix on me, his nostrils flare, his jaw clenches, and he flashes his teeth.

"If you even think about running again, you better hope I don't find you," he says. "Because if I catch you the next time you try to do something like that, you will die the most brutal death."

His warning registers. I don't take his threats lightly anymore, and my mind screams at me to run. My body tries to get away but why on earth am I staring at his lips, wanting to kiss them? I think the events of tonight have killed my remaining brain cells. He releases me, and I stagger backwards, rubbing my wrists.

He groans when pouring the vinegar and brandy mixture over his bruised knuckles. "Cocksucker!" he yells before

whirling around to look at me. “Well, what the hell are you staring at?” he barks. “Get in the bath!”

My body shakes. My mind screams at him to go to hell. I glare at him, stifling a moan as I fist my hands against the bandaged cuts. But I spin and get into the damn bath water. He removes the last of his clothing, and I stop breathing. My resistance wavers. Is my tongue hanging out of my mouth? He’s like one of those statues of men, except he’s far better endowed. I’m so frozen, I don’t realize how much I must be staring until he catches my eyes. My head swivels away so fast, I almost crick my neck. My entire body grows warm. My skin tingles. Swallowing and keeping my eyes on the second bathtub in the room, I jump when I feel the one I’m in, rock.

Whirling around, I come face to, um, face? With his rising member. Gasping, I fix my eyes on the water instead. “What are you doing?” I ask. He settles in the tub, and his feet brush up against my hips. Hugging myself around the knees, I tremble.

“Whatever I want,” he says as if questioning my audacity. “Besides, we can save water like this. Hold still.”

Hold still? What’s he about to do? Am I ready for this? I look up slightly to see his hand moving toward me, and I gulp. When he picks leaves out of my hair, I almost laugh aloud in relief. But I don’t. I won’t give him the satisfaction. Except, when he brings his hand to my cheek again, just as he did earlier, I find myself hoping he’ll end up giving *me* satisfaction.

His moments of tenderness don't exist only in my imagination. My eyes widen as I lift my head to look at him. He's not looking into my eyes. Instead, he looks at his hand as he moves it toward my chin, stroking it. The grit of his thumb rubs across my chapped lips, and I tremble. This is wrong. It shouldn't feel so good. But I can't control my body's reaction. My nipples tighten. They're so sore. I've never felt this much desire before, but I don't want it to stop. My cunt grows heavier as if burdened. I'm not sure what will relieve its ache.

Holding my breath, I try not to make any sounds, but I must have because his eyes flicker up to mine. There's darkness in them still, but this time, they glisten with heat. The kind of heat I saw when he was in my mouth. In memory of his flavour, I lick my lips. He doesn't suppress his groan, and I shiver.

He pulls his hand away, and I'm not only disappointed. An unreasonable flood of irritability consumes me. He reaches for one of the jugs of water and hands it to me, before taking the other jug for himself. I hesitate, transfixed by the picture of him pouring water over his head. Oh, sweet heaven. When he swipes the water away from his eyes before opening them, I pretend to be unaffected by him, pouring water over my own head.

With my eyes closed, I hear him hiss, and I gulp. My breathing increases as my lungs try to bring enough oxygen to my pounding heart. I'm afraid to open my eyes, but they widen at the gentle brush of his fingers against my neck. He runs his thumb over my larynx, pressing slightly, but it's

enough to cause me to gasp and try to catch my breath. This spot is sensitive. He could easily kill me by pressing into it too hard. Yet, in this moment, a thrill runs up my spine at the sense of danger.

With my hands hanging off on either side of the tub, my upper body surrenders to him, leaning into his touch. I should be fighting this, but I want more.

“Look at me,” he grunts, and I jump.

It’s almost like my body is finding it too hard to do so many things at once. Nipples aching, centre throbbing, heart racing, trying to breathe, needing more, *and* opening my eyes? But I do as he says, lifting my lids, because I don’t want to face the risk of him stopping. My skin buzzes from the eye contact. Now, I can’t look away. His gaze magnetizes me to him.

Wings flutter beneath my skin, deep in my stomach, my lower belly, and my heaving chest. His hand continues its journey past my neck, to the sweet lumps on my chest. They rejoice from the slightest bit of attention as his hand grazes over one. His other hand comes up to join, caressing its twin, and it’s heaven. This is absolute madness. But it’s so good.

When he presses my nipples between his fingers, a rush of something escapes between my legs, and I choke out a moan. There’s no holding back the sounds now. And I don’t care. My eyes fall closed, and my head rolls back.

“No. Look at me,” he barks, and my eyes fly open. My lids are heavy, and it’s hell trying to lift them. But through the slits of my eyes, I do as he says. He swears before grabbing my

knees and pulling me forward. I almost fall backward against the tub, but I catch myself. With a rounded mouth, I question him with my eyes. He taps my knees.

“Part your legs,” he says.

I gulp. My legs shake, and I keep them closed. He leans forward. So close, I think he’s about to kiss me, but that’s too much to hope for. He breathes an order against my lips, “Part them.”

Trembling and hanging onto the sides of the tub, I slowly ease them open, all the time thinking I swallowed my heart, and I’m about to pass it out my ass. His hands run up and down the inside of my legs. The motion relaxes me, and I sigh until his fingers brush up against my second set of lips. I clamp my legs closed, tight around his hand and for the first time all day, he chuckles. At me. It’s brief. His hardness returns in seconds, but his tone is softer.

“Relax,” he says, tapping my legs again with his other hand. Inhaling, I split my legs once more. “Good,” he murmurs before running a single finger up and down my slit. I’ve never been touched here before by anyone but myself. My head whirls but instead of backing away, I keep perfectly still, wanting him to continue.

And he does. He inhales sharply, letting out a slow breath as his thumb meets my nub of flesh. Oh! It’s so much better when someone else touches it. The surprise contact causes explosions throughout my entire body, and I surrender, giving up the control of directing my own pleasure as he takes me on

a ride I've never experienced. His fingers hold magic and as he strokes me, he holds my gaze. His lips part a little, and soft breaths escape me. Louder ones join in, and my bottom can't remain planted firmly anymore. Leaning into his strokes, I rotate my hips.

“Oh, sweet cunt. Am I the first one to touch you here?” he asks.

I nod.

“Not even those bastards from earlier?” he says.

I shake my head.

“Are you lying to me?” he grunts, and I throw my head back as a tremulous moan pours out of me. “Look at me,” he commands.

My voice grows higher in pitch as I try to speak, to tell him I can't look at him right now. He grips my hair, pulling on it and forcing my head up as he continues circular strokes between my second lips. “Look at me!”

My head fights his grip, my eyes barely open, and my mouth rounds. “Oh, Adam.” His name slips from my lips, and we're both startled. He freezes. I freeze. We look at each other. I don't want to beg, but I can't help it. “I'm sorry. Mr. Molotov. Please, don't stop.”

He swears before resuming as if I said nothing. I burst like petals exploding off a flower. With tender hands, I grip the sides of the tub, screaming my pleasure.

“Tell me no one’s ever made you feel that,” he says and when I look at him, his face is red. His eyes are pleading. There’s tension in his brows, as if he’s in pain, yet it’s wildly sexy.

“You’re the first,” I whisper.

He stands, and water splashes all around him. His member? So hard. It’s pointing at the ceiling. So thick. I can still taste the metallic saltiness of him. He steps out of the bath and extends his hand. But when I take it, he scoops me up in his arms and carries me to the bed, throwing me onto it.

There’s a knock on the door, and he groans. “That’ll be dinner. I thought it best to have it in the room tonight,” he says, walking naked to the door. “We should eat. We used a lot of energy today.”

I nod while hurriedly reaching for the white nightdress next to me on the bed and pulling it over my head as quickly as possible. Just in time too, for the door to be opened as one of the male servants pushes the tray into the room.

Chapter Twenty-One



Adam

She's asleep. She's tired, but I'm also hard as a rock, and I don't want to finish myself off. She snores softly through parted lips. After we ate, I questioned her some more about her father and told her in detail what her father did; she stopped talking halfway through and was already nodding off. Being ignored would anger me usually, but I was bewitched by the sight of her lashes fluttering closed. By the time I let the male servant in to remove the trays, she'd been all the way knocked out.

I've been pacing in front of the bed, wondering what to do with this brick between my legs. It throbs, and I'm desperate for her. But desperation means loss of control. Earlier, I was in control, bringing her to climax. Once she came though, it was all over for me. She'd never submitted to me so easily. It set off a ripple effect in my body. My nerves danced from my head to my toes. Still, I managed to hold myself back, cover it with a sheet, eat and engage in conversation. But that did nothing to kill my erection.

All I can think about, now, is the last time I kissed her lips, how I held back from kissing them again, and how much I want to kiss them now. I want to kiss her lips and feel inside her. I need to or else my body will burst into flames. Maybe it has something to do with almost losing her tonight, and the reminder that tomorrow isn't promised. But for a single moment, I forget about my need to maintain perfect control, and I climb on the bed. Kneeling, I reach for her hands and pull her up by the wrists.

Her eyes spring open, and they flash about the room. “Wha—” She’s about to ask, but my lips are upon hers, and I moan like a man starved, finally being fed for the first time in months. I fling my arms around her waist, pulling her closer than possible to my body, needing the garment between us to be removed as she presses against my aching manhood.

Sucking on those soft, pillowy lips, I groan when her arms come around my neck. She hooks onto me, and I bite her lip with the shock slamming into my body. Hell and damnation, she’s delicious. I imagine it must be ecstasy feeling her lips move against mine as I plunge in and out of her. I can’t wait. Wrapping her legs around my waist, I lower her to the bed and push. But she pulls away, backing up toward the head of the bed and wrapping her arms around her knees. I shake from the loss before reaching for her ankle.

“No,” she says.

My brows drop. “No?” I ask, falling to my elbows.

“Thanks so much for saving my life, but I’m not ready to give myself to you,” she says.

Sitting up, I study her. She’s serious, and I crack up laughing. What world is she living in? I’m genuinely confused.

“How,” I say, grabbing one ankle. “Many,” I say, grabbing the other. “Times.” I pull her toward me so she’s lying flat on her back, and her legs are spread before me. “Do I have to tell you?” I sweep her nightdress over her knees until her pink flesh peeks out from beneath the brown hair there. I groan and swear before hovering over her again. Holding her hands above her head, I lean down until our noses are touching. “You’re my prisoner,” I say, groaning. “You don’t have a choice,” I remind her.

She scowls at me and struggles against my hold. Her submission from earlier has slipped. The food and the nap have strengthened her. I growl, wanting to force her to submit but when it comes to sex, that’s not what I do. If it’s not offered willingly, I don’t want it. It’s always offered willingly, and her resistance tears me apart. I release her arms and back away. Sard it to hell!

Fisting my hands against the sheet, I try to fight the overwhelming urge to claim her, despite her resistance. It enrages me. “I always get what I want and what I want is you,” I say before grabbing her again. “Tell me I didn’t make you feel good earlier. Tell me you haven’t thought about me

moving inside you. I saw it in your eyes as I touched you. Tell me you don't want me."

Groaning, I run my hands beneath the dress piled up on her stomach. When I get to her soft peaks, she gasps, shaking. "That's it, you like that, don't you?" I moan against her lips before sucking on them and sticking my tongue deep into her mouth. She moans and writhes beneath me. "I can make you feel so much more," I say, unaware now of how much I'm begging. "Let me have you, Olivia. I promise, I'll be gentle." I tug her nipple while kissing her neck.

Her hand explores my shoulders and dips into my hair. She grabs it hard, pulling against my scalp. "You?" she scoffs. "You don't know how to be gentle."

The pain is sweet, but it's not her role. I won't have her dominate me. Growling, I grab her hands and plant them at her sides. "Don't do that!"

She rolls her eyes. "See?"

"What? I can be gentle. Or at the very least, I'll try!" I roar before hearing my own voice and releasing her hands. "Okay," I concede. "It's okay to touch me, just don't do that again."

She drops her eyes, and her cheeks flush. "I'm sorry. I thought you'd like it."

"Why? Do you like it when I do it to you?" I challenge her. When I do it, it's about punishing her and controlling her.

Her cheeks flush even brighter, and I smile, gasping. "Oh, so you do like it when I'm rough," I say, running my hand up

the back of her neck and gripping her hair. “You like that?” I roll my brows at her, and she moans, nodding.

“Hmm.” I smile before indulging in her lips again. Her hands come up around my shoulders, and she moves them, with caution, across my back. Sighing, I ease up to see her pretty brown eyes darken. Taking her hand, I rest it against my chest, and her lips fall open. “You can touch anywhere you like,” I say. Her eyes flicker up to mine as if double checking with me before she brushes her hand across the dirty-blond hair on my tensing pecs and down the centre of my abdomen. “You’re driving me mad, Olivia,” I hiss. “Let me have you.”

She gazes at me and swallows. “Your heart. It’s beating so fast,” she says.

“Because I’ll explode if I can’t have you,” I grunt.

She gasps, and her breath rattles. My chest tightens in anticipation. My eyes plead with her. Slowly, she nods. Explosions crash through my body. Rushing, I rip the dress over her head and toss it to the side before lowering my mouth on her breasts. She moans, and the sound whips me in the spine, prompting me to pull more of those beautiful sounds out of her.

Her hand moves to my hair again but this time, her fingers simply graze my scalp repeatedly. Tingles shoot through the back of my neck, setting my spine on fire once again. My hand shakes from the pressure pushing through my veins as I put it between her legs. Oh, so slick. Her arousal is thick in the air. Pre-ejaculate is thrust against the head of my cock, oozing out

as I'm driven by compulsion to press my middle finger inside her delicate darkness.

“Ah!” she moans.

It's so tight, I worry about whether I'll ever get to bury my thick cock within her. It seems impossible. There must be a way. I stick another finger in there, and the tight, thin flesh stretches around my fingers. She freezes, and I raise my head to look at her. She's biting her lip and wincing.

“Do you want me to stop?” I ask, begging for the answer to be no.

“I-I-I don't know,” she says.

I fix my attention on the inside of her legs, kissing and licking while keeping my fingers perfectly still inside her. “Breathe,” I whisper before moving down and kissing the lips of her cunt. Using my other fingers, I separate the hair to reveal the hard, pink flesh. Her scent calls to me like a siren upon the sea, and I dip my mouth against her willingly.

Hmm, salty, rich, mine. My tongue laps against the tender flesh, hungrily, and she moans. My fingers become drenched in more slick, sweet liquid. Her hips move a little, and I use that as my cue to thrust my two fingers against her ever so softly while licking her. Her sweet moans grow louder, and my cock grows harder than I ever thought possible. The foreskin squeezes me like a shirt a few sizes too small. I thrust against the sheet as she rides my fingers. My fingers slip in and out, moving against her with a lot more ease. The tips of my fingers delight in the soft velvet deep inside her.

“Adam,” she whispers, and my tongue presses harder against her. She gasps, pants, and explodes around my fingers. When I remove them, there’s the tiniest hint of blood. I lick my fingers clean.

“Hmm. You weren’t lying about that virgin thing,” I say. “I’m honoured to be your first.” I rub the head of my cock against her swollen, dripping quim. She swallows, breathing heavily while she gapes at me. “I told you I can be gentle.” I smile. “Did you like that?” I raise my brows in a quick flash.

She nods.

“Tell me,” I say.

“I...” she gasps. “Liked it.”

I smile. “Do you want more?”

She licks her lips, before nodding.

“Say it.” I grip her jaw.

“I want more,” she breathes.

Bracing my body on my palms, I shift my hips so that I’m in line with her centre, and I press against it. She groans. “This is going to hurt. It might hurt a lot at first. But it’ll get better, I promise,” I say, easing back and pressing into her again. Biting my lip, I swear as my width struggles against her entrance. “Breathe,” I instruct both her and me. All I want to do is drive through her. Patience isn’t my strong suit. Damn it.

She closes her eyes and presses her lips together. “Olivia,” I say, bringing her attention back to me. “Breathe. Relax,” I say,

with sweat gathering on my forehead.

She nods and takes a few deep breaths. But she doesn't seem to relax. Cocksucker. I groan. This is going to take a while. It's not like I can walk away now. I want her too much. Lowering my body on top of hers, I brush my knuckles across her face. This is the most tenderness I've shown to any woman in ten years. Reaching for her hand, I bring her palm to my lips, kissing it before resting it against my cheek. She strokes me while looking into my eyes, and my chest swells with warmth. This is working to my advantage now, so I'll not stop to question it.

I lean into her lips, placing soft but firm kisses there. I coax her tongue into my mouth, and I suck on it. She moans, gripping my shoulders, and she stretches against me. I'm encouraged, deepening the kiss. Our breaths synchronize, bouncing off each other. Her soft, wet, hot tongue dances with mine. In one quick push, I get half of me inside her without terrifying her. She pants and wraps her arms and legs around me, groaning as she pulls me the tiniest, half-inch deeper.

Gritting my teeth, I move in and out of her, but control is slowly slipping as I try to work a bit more of myself inside her at a time. Her name is on the tip of my tongue, but I don't say it aloud. It stays inside my head. *Oh, Olivia. Sweet, Olivia.*

"Adam?" she whines.

"Yes," I gasp, moving my lips and tongue to her neck. Current bolts through my scalp to the soles of my feet at the sound of her saying my name.

“You don’t have to be so gentle anymore,” she moans.

Jerking up, I look into her eyes. Her words rip away my last shred of self-control. I slam the rest of my length inside her. She screams. “More?” I ask, watching her.

Nodding, she licks her lips, and it’s as if she’s gripping my lungs tightly between her fingers. I groan in agony, slamming into her again. Pressing my hand against her throat, a surge of power rushes into me like a drug. I tighten my grip, holding her life in my hands. Her mouth falls open, and she clutches the bedsheet as I fuck the hell out of her perfect body. A tad too hard, a little too heavy, and her neck could crack beneath my weight. Yet, as she entrusts me with her surrender, she sets me on fire.

Her wet, swollen folds slap loudly against my pounding. Warmth rushes up my spine and sets into my belly. I don’t release her neck until she turns the slightest shade of blue. She wheezes as air rushes back into her lungs before swallowing hard and wetting her lips. “Did you like that?” I grunt as her body jerks up toward the head of the bed with each plow of my hips.

“Yes,” she rasps.

“You dirty little whore.” I grin, reaching behind her head and pulling on her hair and scalp again as I ease her into my lap. “You like it when I fuck you like this,” I say, tugging her head back to reveal her neck to me. Her breasts jiggle as I bring her down, flush against my entire length. “You like being fucked, don’t you?” I say, licking her larynx.

She shakes and grips my shoulders. “Yes,” she wheezes.

“You’ll never resist me again, will you?” I ask, biting down on her neck and sucking until the area is raised with blood.

“No,” she whispers.

I release her hair and bring her face toward me, kissing her. “I can make you feel like this all the time, whenever I want?” I pant.

“Please.” She nods, whimpering.

“Oh!” I shout as my body shakes violently. I shake so hard, I freak out. The room spins. She blurs before me as I tug myself out of her, spilling my seed onto the bed. Her hips writhe, humping the air, and I thrust my fingers into her hole, now perfectly sized for me. I pump her as I shudder. I might be dizzy, but she’s too sweet to resist. She tightens around my fingers before dropping her forehead against mine and vibrating against me.

We’re both spent and as I toss her backward in the bed, she watches me with dark, glossy eyes as I lick her from my fingers.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Olivia

The chill of the morning has me reaching for the covers and throwing them over my head. Only then do I remember that I'm naked. I hoped that last night had been a dream, but the sheets smell of him and our sex. A knock on the door startles me, and I pop my head out from beneath the covers. Where's the beast?

"Olivia?" Gloria calls from outside the door. "I'm coming in," she says.

I groan, hiding myself beneath the covers once more. I'm flushed with the memory of last night's events. The door opens, and I take a deep breath.

"Mr. Molotov asked me to come in and get you cleaned up." She sits on the bed and rests her hand on my head beneath the sheet.

"It's far too early," I mutter.

"You know Mr. Molotov doesn't like to be disobeyed, Olivia," she says. "Please, come out from beneath the sheets

and make this easier on both of us,” she groans.

Right, he doesn't like to be disobeyed. Despite everything that happened last night, I'm still just his prisoner. I still must do as he says. I can't believe I gave myself to the likes of him. It's so shameful. Have I no self-respect?

Sighing, I throw the covers off my head, concealing my breasts as I sit up. I don't meet her eyes until her gasp prompts me to spin and look at her. “Oh,” she says, covering her mouth. Her cheeks grow red against her pale skin. “Oh! Well, this is such a relief. I was so worried, after the mad stunt you pulled yesterday, that I'd find you in the worst way. But oh, I'm delighted. This is much better.” She claps before covering her mouth again.

I shiver. Yes, I remember. He saved my life last night. But he did so after putting me in danger in the first place, so what must I feel about that? Gloria's eyes scrunch up, and a muffled noise escapes her clasped hands.

“Are you laughing?” I ask, reaching for her hands and attempting to pull them away from her face. She moves away from me, still hiding. “It's not funny,” I say, folding my arms and wrinkling my brows at her.

“Why? Oh, I was overjoyed for you, but should I not be? Did he? Did you not want to?” she asks, removing her hands. The flushed color drains from her face.

I groan and throw my head back against the pillow before shaking it. The truth is that I loved it. I loved it so much, I hate him for making me feel so bothered. I hate that I woke up this

morning without him in bed, without him initiating another moment, because I certainly wouldn't. I'd rather suffer a desperate need than give him that victory. Although, last night, I made no efforts to hold back what I felt.

Now, I'm the one covering my face. "What's wrong with me?" I grumble. "He called me a whore," I say, widening my eyes at her. "And I liked it," I whisper, bringing my hand down swiftly against my mouth. She smiles even wider, and I groan, "How can I want anything to do with such a detestable man?"

Grinning, she whispers, "Have you looked properly at the man? How could you not?"

"Gloria!" I gasp, dropping my hands to my lap.

"What? Just because I have a man, it doesn't mean I can't see. All the women in the house practically drool over him. Not me, of course. I'd never trade my sweet, kind Lucian in for such a beastly man." She waves.

"See?"

"But it's not in the least bit surprising that your loins ache and weep for him," she says, grabbing my legs and laughing.

My tightened lips tremble with the laughter I bite back. I fight against the heat rushing up my skin. "Yes. Well, looks aren't everything. Why are men so..." I squeeze the air, imagining his neck.

"Well, they're not all bad," Gloria says.

I tilt my head with raised brows. “Yeah, well, my father doesn’t count, and he’s the only good man I know. Take Heath for example.”

“Heath?” Gloria cocks her head.

“Yes, Heath something or other. I’m surprised I forgot. The man sure knew how to talk about himself, without stopping. He loved the sound of his own voice.” I grimace from the memory as a bout of nausea washes over me. “Even at night, when he’d already left for the day, and I was getting ready for bed, I could still hear his voice droning on like the constant buzz of a bee.” I shiver.

“I mean, he *was* good looking. Like the beast, he had all the women of Colderidge swooning over him. And boy, did he make that go to his head. He couldn’t understand why I wanted nothing to do with him, and the rejection seemed to make him cling even harder. I thought that was torture then. Look at me now.” I tilt my head at Gloria.

“Marriage to him wouldn’t have been so bad. But I would have been miserable. I could never love that man. And even the men before him who I thought I loved, they soon grew bored with the idea of me not proving my love to them by letting them sleep with me. Or our interests didn’t align. Soon, that temporary love would fizzle out. Have the romantics been wrong about love? Does it just not exist?” I ask.

“Oh, it does. It certainly does.” Gloria nods. “What I’ve found with Lucian is incomparable. Hearing your stories, I think I might be luckier than I realized,” she jests.

The beast's voice echoes in the hallway. His bass is like the bang of a gun going off. It sounds as if he's moving toward the door, and we both straighten. Our hearts seem to have stopped beating. My blood gushes within my head, pounding at my ear drum as if it's about to spill out. We both look at each other. I'm still comfortable lying in bed, and she's not doing what he's ordered her to do.

"Come on. Make haste." She reaches for my hand and pulls me from the bed.

We don't breathe again until his voice fades toward the stairs along with whoever he must be talking to. My chest tightens, and I swear. "See? I don't want that. I don't want to love... that!" I throw my hands up in the air.

Gloria rubs my arm. "Let's try to accomplish speaking and working at once." She walks ahead of me, into the adjoining bathing room.

Following alongside her, something catches my attention in the mirror. The brightest reddish-purple bruise is on my neck, and I touch it in confusion. My eyes widen as I press my fingers against it. "What is that?" I gasp.

Gloria peeks out from the bathroom at me. "Oh, that's a love bite, dear." She grins. "Lucian gives me them all the time."

Her voice fades as she disappears in the bathing room, and I'm left staring at it. A love bite? I'm trying to recall whether I was bitten when last night's images flash in my mind. My entire body heats up again, burning from the memory of his

sweet aggression. Looking at my naked image, I see everywhere he touched and filled with a part of him. My lips part at the obscenity. My own hands, against my skin, feel naughty, and I drop them to my sides. Damn him.

“You know what I love the most about my times with Lucian?” Gloria says, and I hurry away from the mirror to join her. She’s ladling last night’s water from the tub into a small metal basin. It’ll take several of those basins to empty the tub. I grab the second pitcher to help scoop the water out.

“You don’t have to do that, dear.” She looks up at me with wide eyes.

“I want to. Besides, it’ll go a lot faster with two people, won’t it?”

She lowers her voice. “Yes. But if the boss catches you, he’ll punish us both.”

“Well, ‘the boss’ isn’t here with us, is he?”

She pauses and exhales. “I suppose he isn’t, and we did spend too much time talking. But if you want to help,” she says, moving toward a wooden barrel and filling a pot with fresh water. “You can get this on the fire. It should be heated by the time I’m done here.”

Happily, I take the heavy pot and carry it to the gold-lined fireplace in the bedroom. It’s a lot larger than the room he’d let me stay in before. Everything in here is much larger. The reading chair, the full-length mirror, and the tubs. Then again, he’s a large man. Gold and deep-green wallpaper adds to his

decor. His sheets are also deep green. It's quite pleasing to look at, like a blend of mountains and seas. It makes me miss painting.

The fireplace stays lit throughout the night. Although these months are warmer, the mornings and nights still have quite the chill. Quickly, I release the pot onto the blackened wood, throw on my nightdress, and return to the bathing room quite pleased with myself.

"Thanks, dear," she says. "Though you mustn't make a habit of this. I don't know what I'd do if he'd walked in on you just then."

I want to grab the second pitcher again, and continue to help until the water heats, but I can tell I'm agitating her, so I nod. She nods in return, exhaling.

"As I was saying. What I love most about spending time with Lucian is after a long, exhaustive, harrowing day, sometimes, it doesn't end in rough sex. In fact, most of the time, it ends in conversation. He either comes to the servants' quarters or takes me to his room. I'll lay my head against his shoulders with his arm wrapped around me, or he'll rest his head in my lap. I'll stare out the window at the stunning night, and I'll listen to him talk. Sometimes, he'll listen to me. And we'll just comfort each other. The warmth of his soothing embrace is often what I look forward to when my back and shoulders ache, when my ankles wail, and my knees tire." She smiles when speaking, and tranquillity softens her features.

I gasp, “That sounds wonderful.” It really does. I never imagined such tenderness between them. I hardly even see them together. Then again, I don’t really leave the room unless it’s okay with the beast. But that’s not the reason I haven’t been able to imagine it before. The brutality of last night flashes in my memory, and I groan. The last thing I want to do is remember it. Sleeping with the beast had helped me forget it for a moment. I think even focusing on my hatred for him has conveniently kept me from recalling every terrifying moment. I swallow and focus on Gloria’s smiling face, forcing my nerves to relax.

“What do you feel when you think of him?” I ask, even though what I want to ask her is how she copes with knowing her man does such wicked things, and if she can help me forget all the cruel things the beast has done.

She grins. “Lots of things. Sometimes he irritates me.” She shrugs. “Sometimes, when he leaves for work, I worry. But whenever I think about him, about us together and the love we share, my heart expands, and peace fills it.” Her smile is so wide, I can’t help but smile along with her.

“You’re right.” I blink, playing with the strings on the centre of my nightdress. “You’re lucky.” I nod. Her cheeks grow rosier than ever, and I chuckle. “If what you share with Lucian makes you glow like that, then I want what you and Lucian have. I want to think about someone and be filled with peace, not fear or disgust. I’ll never find that with the beast. If I’m not disgusted with the things he does, I’m disgusted with myself for wanting anything to do with him.”

Gloria stands and stretches out the cracks in her back from bending for so long. She walks over to me and takes my hand. She holds it for a moment, patting it, but I don't think she can find the words to soothe me. Last night, I might have been spared his wrath, but the beast is unpredictable. It's impossible to know my fate here. There's a tear in her eye when she looks at me, but she blinks it away before releasing my hand.

"Right," she says. "I'll take those downstairs in a minute." She gestures to the basins filled with dirty water.

I gulp. I never thought I cared much about spending my days with the love of my life before. But sitting on the edge of this tub, without reassurance and a possible short lifespan, I find myself fearful that I might never get the chance to experience true love. Heat floods my eyes, and I choke back a sob as Gloria leaves to retrieve the hot water. We don't know where to look as she fills the other tub with some water from the barrel, warming it with the boiling liquid and filling the water with flowers and scented oils.

"Your bath is ready," she mumbles.

I nod. "Thank you."

Just before I take off my clothes, however, she hurries over to me and pulls me into a hug. She tightens her arms around me, and I break down, sobbing. She rubs my back. "I know he acts without reason at times, and I know you're stubborn, Olivia," she says. "But this is life and death. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, whether you want to take my advice or not. Do your best to survive this. On the other end of

it, you never know, your great love may be waiting for you out there. But you've got to survive, okay?" she says, leaning out of the hug and looking me in the eyes.

Sniffing, I nod. "Thanks for being the best part of my stay here. I've longed for a new friend since leaving the last place I lived and despite the circumstances, I'm glad to have met you. You're so deserving of true love, Gloria. And I'm glad you found it. I wish you and Lucian the best."

"Oh, Olivia." She snuffles, running her hand over my curls. "You deserve to find love too."

A knock on the door pulls her away from me. In the bath, I hear her giggling with Lucian. My eyes burn from the tears, still I smile. I can tell by the wet noises that they're stealing kisses. The door closes, and they whisper to one another. I might be over the moon for Gloria, but it doesn't mean I want to walk in and find them otherwise engaged. My cheeks heat up and when she comes back into the bathing room, I jump.

She's blushing and smiling so hard as she clears her throat. "That was Lucian," she says.

Oh, I know.

"He came to deliver a message to you but when I told him you were indecent, he left the message with me." She squeezes both her hands together and pitter patters her feet. "I told you that you'd be invited." She grins.

"What?" I ask.

“The ball! A few nights from now. You’re going to a ball!”
she squeals.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Adam

“It took us a while, but we found him. Lancelot Silbermann,” Lucian says as our boots clap down the stairs of the cellar. “The man Lord Rutherford hired us to kill.”

Ah, that’s right. Whenever people hire us to carry out an elimination, I don’t ask many questions. Lord Rutherford had spoken to Miran, who arranged for payment to be made to me. I assigned the task of tracking down this Lancelot, to Lucian and other members of my personal army. And well, I get the pleasure of killing them, of course, after deciding whether they deserve death. I do that by sitting with them, face to face, and engaging in discourse. I can determine a lot through conversation. If they don’t deserve death I keep the money, but I set them free. No one has dared so far to demand their money back; they know the risks going in.

“Why does Rutherford want him dead?” I ask as we walk around the corner to see Lancelot bound to a chair by his hands and feet. His mouth is also bound by a bloody cloth. His

face is swollen. He grunts and pulls against his constraints, shouting muffled slurs.

Lucian shakes his head and swipes a gloved hand across his forehead. He sighs. “The lad is hell-born,” he says. “There’s something wrong with him. We’re going to have to kill him.”

I shake my head. Look, I have no problem killing a man. It’s not hard. It’s not easy. It just is. If I had a problem doing it, I wouldn’t do it. I have the freedom of doing whatever it is I want. So, something about it thrills me, obviously. But well, I still have a bit of humanity left, I reckon. Because whenever I kill, it’s nice to have a break in between. It does something to the mind and body, to take a life. To know that the person, however vile, has lived and, will have people missing them, waiting for them to return home. It’s quite chilling. Foul, really. It gives me the shivers. And yesterday was a bloodbath. So, if I can avoid killing today, I just might.

Plus, I’m in a great mood, given last night’s activities. Olivia’s a lot more amenable, though; there’s still a little quiver within me that’s on constant alert. I wonder whether she’ll be stupid enough to attempt running again, and I worry that if she does, I might learn that my control is slipping. I’m afraid I won’t be able to bring myself to kill her, or I’ll force myself to pull the trigger to prove to myself that I’m not too soft. Neither of those options bring me much ease. Nevertheless, there can be no place in my thoughts of Olivia now. I don’t want to be thrown off task.

There's a seat ready for me, placed before Lancelot. "So, why might someone hire me to kill you for a hefty three hundred pounds?" I sit. He mumbles through the bloody cloth in his mouth. "Oh, my apologies. Lucian?" I gesture.

Lucian scowls at the man as if his stench is rotten. He walks toward him, grabbing the cloth from his mouth and tugging his neck forward in the process. Lucian's hand creeps toward his knife, as if he'd love to be given the order to stick the blade in his neck himself. I know Lucian must be itching to tell me what this unlucky scalawag is guilty of. But well, I like to give the floor to the damned beforehand.

"They're telling lies all about the town. I'm no kidnapper!" he says.

Slowly, I rotate, locking eyes with Lucian who is giving me that, 'I told you, now let's hurry up and get rid of him' look. My legs shake as my blood comes to a boil. "What did you do with the children?" I narrow my eyes at Lancelot.

"I told you. I didn't do anything!" he yells. "They're all lying. They just want to get rid of me."

My voice scratches. "What have you found out about this man?" I ask Lucian.

"It's not just rumours. We've several eyewitness accounts and missing children who were last seen with him," he says. "Fortunately, there have been a few survivors. One of those survivors is Lord Rutherford's dear niece. The youngster reports the horrific things she's witnessed," he says, shivering as if he too has seen them. "He's messed her up entirely. The

poor lass might have to endure the asylum before she's even lived life," he grunts.

Lancelot squirms and scowls at the wall next to him, unable to face us. The contemptible arse! I'd like to bang his head into that wall and demand he tell us what he did with the children, but I already know by the look on his face they're dead. Call it a killer's instinct, from one murderer to the next.

"That's his worst crime, but not his only crime. He's also guilty of licentious acts, such as forced sex with women and um..." Lucian clears his throat and shuts his eyes tight. His nostrils flare as if he's gotten a whiff of that rotten stench again. He swallows. "And other *lewd* acts," he says, and his voice rattles. Opening his eyes, as if his forehead is weighing down on his brows, Lucian goes pale. His lips tighten, and he clutches his knife before stomping up and down the room. He's on the verge of blowing up into tiny bits. "When we collected him, he was just about to..."

"Okay, enough!" I say, reaching for my pistol immediately. I don't need to know what other lewd behaviour Lucian saw, but I know it must have been horrifying if he's reacting in this way. It's not necessary for us to both have the imagery in our conscience. Lucian exhales as I point the weapon toward the swag-bellied pig.

"He's lying!" Lancelot yells when he spots the weapon. He spits at the ground and glares at me. But the guilt swims in his eyes, weakening his gaze.

I rest the pistol against his forehead. “My partner’s words are good enough for me. Children are innocent.”

Recalling my own youth and the abuse I suffered, I envision the face of my father as I press the nozzle into his skull. My teeth dig into my bottom lips.

“They deserve to be given love and happiness, not to be ruined and scarred for all eternity because of pigs like you who take out your own depravities on helpless lives. You’ve taken the life of the innocent and now, you lie to spare your own life? You’re contemptible.” I spit in his face.

He fixes his mouth as if he’s about to spit back at me, but he’s too slow. I fire. Bang. The explosion is deafening. But as the swish of gunpowder settles, a shaky gasp echoes. Spinning around with my gun pointed in the direction of the sound, I lock eyes with Olivia. My mouth falls open, and hers swiftly closes as she turns on her heels and takes off running. Ah, for the love of...

I hand Lucian my pistol because my shaky hand can’t be trusted as I take off after her. Her breathing echoes as she turns out of the hallway, thankfully, not toward the friggin’ door. “Olivia!” I yell, rounding the corner after her. She bolts up the stairs, and I groan. “Stop running!” I demand, but she doesn’t look behind her once.

With her dress in her hands, she takes the stairs one at a time. Holding onto the banister, I swing my weight toward the stairs, flinging my body forward and catching up to her. Grabbing her by the arm, I shove her against the wall. My

chest is tight, and my heart is pounding, from killing that ass wipe and her doing what she always does. My fingers are still vibrating off the weight and buzz of the exploding weapon. Growling, I punch the wall behind her head, bringing my nose down to hers.

“What are you doing out of the room?” I roar. She grimaces and reaches for her ear with a shaky hand. I grab it and push it down. “Answer me! Didn’t I tell you not to leave the room? Do you want to be next? Is the room not to your liking? Would you like to return to the cellar?!”

She swallows and with her wrist in my grasp, the rapid pounding of her blood flutters against my thumb. She glares at me. Her gaze is loathsome. But she shakes her head.

“The next time you disobey me, not only will you be returned to the cellar, but you’ll face the same fate. Tell me, Olivia. Do you want to be next?”

Tears transform her eyes into glass, and my chest burns like the pit of hell. My brain flips, and my stomach sinks. Snarling at myself, I release her arms and hover over her, resting my hands on the wall above her head. “Why have you chosen to disobey me? Does your mind fail you, Olivia? Do you need to be constantly reminded of the rules?” I bare my teeth.

She tightens her lips, and her nostrils flare, but she clears her throat and straightens her neck. “I was looking for *you*.”

“Why?!” I ask. “What couldn’t wait until you saw me tonight?”

Her lips shake. “I got your invitation to the ball. I thought...” she starts. “Well, it doesn’t matter what I thought.” She looks away. “I’d like to go back to the room now if that’s okay.”

Her jaw is rigid as she stares ahead, beneath my arm, yearning for her escape. Her breasts rise and fall with her frustration. Now that she’s made the request to go back to the room, I want to deny her. I’m the one in charge. I decide when she goes back to the room.

“You came looking for me because of an invitation or something else?” I ask, reaching for her chin and pulling her head toward me. I lower my lips, and she drops her eyes, determined to deny me. Sighing, I let my hand fall from her face. “How long were you standing there? And don’t get all quiet and refuse to answer me. It’s infuriating. And I’m not in the mood to be messed with.”

She rolls her eyes ever so slightly. I should correct that, but I might like it. “Not long. I heard a blast coming from the cellar and ran toward it,” she bites out.

“He was a bad man, Olivia. A horrible man.” I grit my teeth and slam my fist into the wall again.

She pulls her brows in and looks up at me, curling her lip. “So are you.”

“And I bet you want to kill me, don’t you?” I ask, though the comparison blisters my skin. “Imagine how you’d feel about him if I told you what he’s guilty of. I’d look like a saint!” Pushing myself off the wall, I walk toward the banister,

leaning over it, gripping the wood, and pulling on it. If the fixture were weak, it'd rip apart.

“I very much doubt that. The part about you ever looking like a saint. That's impossible.”

As I look at her over my shoulders, I'm surprised she hasn't taken off running back to the room. I'm no longer stealing her air and trapping her with my body. She's free to walk away. It doesn't do me well to flatter myself that she cares enough to want to hear what I have to say. It's possible she's just awaiting her order, afraid to upset me. And it strikes me that I'm using it to my advantage so that I may enjoy the pleasure of her company. Swearing under my breath, I pivot away from her and hurry down the stairs.

“You're dismissed,” I shout over my head. “Go back to the room, Olivia! Don't make me have to put a guard outside the door.”

For sard's sake. I need a bottle of brandy and a nap. But if I head back to the room with her, there's only one thing I'll want to do. My head is still swimming from the triggered memory of my childhood, hearing of that man's crimes and blowing his head off while seeing my father's face. Yeah, I'm not in the ‘fucking’ mood. Damn this Lancelot for sullyng everything. Damn my father for still being some kind of looming fixture in my life, regardless of his passing.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Olivia

Who is that woman in the mirror? The beast might be enticed to touch me tonight. I run my hands against the lightweight fabric as my insides flutter from the embarrassing thought. Why should I want him to touch me? It's suited me well that he's avoided me over the past couple of days. He's come in at night and without a word, stripped naked and gotten into bed.

Despite myself, I've suffered an unquenchable need watching him sleep next to me in the massive bed, at first wondering whether he would make a move to touch me, and soon realizing that he wants nothing more of me. Was it so terrible for him the last time that he now wishes not to look upon me again?

Though, that must not be it. I've seen his hardness before he hid it beneath the covers. I've stared at his muscled shoulders and his tempting back, glowing beneath the lantern lights. I've listened to his heavy breathing, knowing it took him just as long to fall asleep as it did me. In my aching need, I've even

contemplated scooting across the three feet of space between us and asking for his touch, for his kisses.

But I would betray myself in doing so, in throwing myself into the arms of that mad man, giving him more claim over me. On the contrary, if he were to give himself to me, I wouldn't refuse him, for he would be the one driven by an uncontrollable madness, and I would be the one basking in the knowledge and pleasure that he couldn't resist me. As I look at my breasts pushed up on my chest by the corset, spilling over the square neckline of my gown, I blush. Certainly, he couldn't ignore me in this.

“Olivia, I dare say you're suited for this look!” Gloria steps back with her eyes wide and a huge smile on her face, admiring her handiwork. “And your natural curls must be the envy of everyone at that party!” She sighs while fussing with the tendrils she pinned to frame my face and fall around the nape of my neck. “All those upturned noses who'd no doubt mock you in the streets before won't know what hit them.”

I gasp. “How'd you know they've mocked my hair?” I ask, touching the updo ever so gently. As if I'm afraid it'll fall apart again, poofing out and revealing the truth about my identity, that despite all the jewels and pearls in my hair, around my neck and dangling from my ear, I'm only a pauper who doesn't belong at a fancy ball.

She rolls her eyes. “Women like them always do, with their judging nostrils and their strained necks. You have the one thing their money can't buy: the natural curls they imitate,

beauty beyond their scope of understanding, golden skin, and the most delightful character. So, they'll pick at things about you to make them feel better about themselves. It happens to everyone, my dear, especially the ones they feel threatened by," she says, before turning to look at the mirror.

"I don't know if I believe all that." I blush. "But if what you say is true, why can't they all be content with their own beauty and the beauty of others?"

"Because no one is truly secure," she says, adjusting the waist of the white and gold dress so that it sits perfectly on my breastbone. "And it's all about competition. The floor will be swarmed with eligible bachelors and women competing for their attention. Now that you have a dowry, I have no doubt you'll be the subject of conversation tonight and have many of those bachelors vying for your hand. Of course, they might not get the chance to approach you with Mr. Molotov playing the guard." She giggles.

"Well, he doesn't..." I'm about to say he doesn't own me but technically, he does, and I bite my lip, unwilling to cater to the ugly emotion overriding my joy. I clear my throat. "Well, I have no interest in competition or games. I'm just excited to dance tonight," I admit, smiling. Sure, my stomach is in knots, looking in the mirror is like staring at someone else, a phantom of sorts, but as the light dress swishes across my body, and I press the sole of my feet in the even lighter slippers, how can I want anything else but to dance?

“Oh, you have to tell me all about it when you return.” Gloria’s eyes glow as she twirls on her feet. “I wish I could go dancing,” she says. Grinning, I take her hand and pull her into a waltz. She bursts out laughing. “Oh, Olivia. You’re so strong.”

“I know. It’s from all the hard work I do, lugging about wood and such,” I say in a gruff bass, and she snickers. “I must say that dress flatters you.”

“It does? Why thank ye. It’s of the highest quality lawn fabric, of course,” Gloria replies, ignoring the grey woollen maid’s dress and apron on her body. I grin as her attempt at a proper accent falters.

“Ah, a woman of wealth,” I return in the same heavy voice as before.

“Certainly, My Lord,” she responds, batting her eyelashes in exaggeration as we move across the room.

“Well, that settles it then, doesn’t it? You’re wealthy, I’m wealthy; that’s all that matters. We should get married now, I think. What do you think?” I ask.

“Oh, that sounds like an incredible idea. Oh, thank ye, Lord What’s-your-name, I should certainly be most fulfilled with you now that you are to be my husband even though I know nothing about you.” She smiles.

“Just wait until you see the ten estates I own, the hundreds of cattle, and my fat pockets. All your concerns about knowing

me will melt away. We'll live happily together," I say, rolling my eyes as I recall Heath.

Gloria grins, slapping my shoulder. "You're too much, Olivia. Come on, you'll mess up your dress. Although, it warms my heart to hear you laugh so freely. I haven't seen you this light since we met."

"Well, can you blame me?" I ask, and she gives a reassuring nod. "But tonight, I'm not Olivia Primrose, a prisoner of Adam Molotov. That's not who I see as I look in the mirror. This woman in the mirror deserves a name. I'll call her Jane." I smile at my reflection. "Yes, that's right. Jane is unattached, wealthy, and free. She isn't falling over herself to acquire a husband. In fact, she's perfectly satisfied with being considered a wallflower. Tonight, she's going to the ball to do nothing else but have fun. And Adam Molotov will just be an annoying little fly who keeps buzzing around her that she'd love no more than to swat away." I grin.

Gloria claps her hands over her mouth, trying to hide her laughter as if she's afraid he'll hear it even though he's nowhere near the room. Except, a knock startles us, and I clap my hands over my mouth as well, trying to prevent the fit of laughter from erupting through my fingers.

"Are you quite done yet? We should be leaving soon." Adam's voice booms from the door.

Gloria fusses with my dress again. "Aye, yes, sir. She's quite dressed," she shouts, patting me on the back to hurry me along.

“Okay, okay.” Gripping the skirts of my dress, I head to the door, pulling it open.

My heart stops beating at the sight of him. My throat starts to close. Oh, no. He looks delicious.

Everything fits him to perfection, cream-coloured trousers accentuating strong legs and a matching vest for his exquisite upper torso. The gold buttons across his chest match the gold detailing on the hem of my dress and in the stitching.

A fitted deep-red tailcoat sweeps the back of his knees and hugs his biceps. A white cloth is tied just around the turned-up collar of his shirt. The collar sweeps across his trimmed jawline, brushing across the edge of his modest sideburns. His hair is pulled out of his face with a small tie, and he looks every bit the picture of his wealth. Though everything is so fitted to his form, he’s not bursting out of his clothes. No, he wears them as if they were made specifically for him. *Well, Olivia, obviously they were.*

With his hair pulled back, it’s hard to keep my eyes off the symmetry of his face. If I were truly Jane and had never met the beast before, I’d be inclined to think that Adam Molotov was too good for me. That would be a shocking thought for Jane. But I suppose I am thankful I’m not Jane, because I know him. Never mind all the things he’s done to me. He’s the man, who in one week, murdered seven men before me. No, eight, including the man in the cellar.

He is rabid. Before witnessing those murderers, I’d have thought his madness lied only in sex, picking on the weak and

making empty threats. But now, I know, his madness extends much further. He needs to take blood, even more than he needs to have sex. He's sick. And yet.

“Are you ready to go?” he asks.

“Yes.” My lips tremble foolishly as I speak.

He extends his elbow toward me so that I may hook my arm in his. My heart thumps as my gloved arm brushes against the heat of him, seeping through all those layers of clothing. The nub between my legs quiver, and I dampen. I swallow past the pulsing in my throat and internally swear at myself. I must be quite sick, too.

Outside, waiting for us, is one of those large fancy carriages with the polished black wheels that I never thought I'd ever ride in. He extends his hand and helps me into it. He should wear the fancy clothing more often; it seems to have turned him into a gentleman. He might be a rogue and a rake but tonight, there's no hiding his origin. I find myself wondering as the carriage rocks with his entrance, what he might have been if he hadn't lost his mind.

He hadn't looked at me properly until now. He raises his head, and his eyes catch fire as they move over my face. He drags them further down like a soft caress. I shiver as they settle on the top of my breasts. The low-cut fabric doesn't even pretend to be willing to cover them up modestly. My heart races, and that sick part that must be inside me too, pulls my shoulders back and my chest out, tempting him.

He hisses before clearing his throat. There's a knock on the carriage door, and my cheeks flush from the wanton thoughts. Irritation swells in me at the interruption, and I curse myself as I look out the window. I must say, the sight of Lucian holding a delicate white and gold fan does a lot to chase the irritation away.

"Feeling a bit dainty, are we?" Adam says.

"Ha ha, you're quite the jester, aren't ye?" Lucian mocks. "Gloria sent me running with it. She'd suffer heart failure if I didn't make sure Olivia got this flimsy thing." He shakes it as though it might be vile to touch.

Adam grins, and I jolt. For the love of heaven and earth, why is he doing this to me? He grabs the fan from Lucian, before tapping the top of the carriage and looking out the window. That's it? No stolen touches? No lingering glances? Huffing, I turn my head to face the other window. The wheels grind the gravel as the carriage heads down the slanted path. Behind us, however, it's like a stampede of hooves and wheels.

"Um, I'm guessing we're not going to the ball alone?" I ask, craning my neck out the window.

He turns to look at me with a raised brow and a smirk. "I never go anywhere alone."

And there goes the end of our conversation the entire ride to the ball, during which time I've held my breath, suffocating. He jumps from the carriage when it comes to a stop and extends his hand. My heart gallops as I take it.

“Watch your step,” he says just as I’m about to step into a pile of horse crap.

I can’t help but grin. “That wouldn’t have been good,” I say.

He lifts me over the pile of crap, and my cheeks heat. Stubborn, unwavering pride swells within me, despite my best efforts, as we walk side by side toward the entrance of the large estate. Ridiculously, I’m giddy at the thought of everyone thinking we’re an item. As we step through the entrance and into the ballroom, however, he walks away and leaves me alone with the reminder that I’m nobody to him.

I try to appear unshaken by the brick that he just slammed into the pit of my stomach. Noticing a shadowed spot against the wall, I hurry toward it, eager to become a fixture. But on the way there, a host of women stop me, marvelling over my dress, wondering who might have made it, and whether they could have one made for them. I have no clue who made the dress, so I invent a name, a different one for every person who asks me and before long, I’m having fun telling stories.

“Oh, what’s your name, dear?” An older woman in an elegant soft pink and pale blue dress laughs as she approaches me. Her dress twinkles as if studded with diamonds. Her neck and ears are adorned in delicate but divine pink gems set in silver. The dress is of the highest fashion, with longer sleeves falling at her elbows and befitting her maturity.

“Olivia.” I smile, extending my hand to meet hers.

“My, Olivia, you are quite charming,” she beams. “Are you betrothed?” she asks.

My cheeks flush. “Me? Oh no.” I lower my eyes, studying my white-gloved hand.

“A girl from your standing and exquisite beauty must be swarmed with suitors then. I imagine there must be much to choose from.” She grins. “A difficult choice, indeed. No wonder you’re hiding away amongst us older women. Well, you must meet my guest.”

Ah, so this must be Mrs. Molotov. Gloria had informed me that we were attending his aunt’s event. The older man standing next to her bows. His grey sideburns wrap around the sides of his face, almost swallowing his head whole.

“Why, of course, Mrs Molotov.” I smile.

She returns my smile, and I hide my sigh of relief. *Thanks, Gloria, for helping me not mess that one up.* This is a private event, attended by invitation only. It would be odd to not know the hostess, and Adam has failed to make any introductions.

“You must be Mr. Molotov, I presume.” I extend my hand toward the older man, and Mrs. Molotov laughs.

“Oh no, my husband passed away many years ago.” She eyes me suspiciously for a moment, looking at me from head to toe. I should know that much about her, but my assumed wealth is enough to rid her of any concerns. “Nevertheless, this is Lord Lexington.” She smiles.

“Pleased to meet you, Ms...?” He bows.

“Ms. Pri... Prudence,” I stutter. My real name might arouse suspicion and confirm that I don’t belong here. “Pleased to

make your acquaintance.” I curtsy.

Mrs. Molotov scratches her chin while mouthing, ‘Prudence?’ as she walks away.

“Would you do me the honour of doing the country dance with me?” Lord Lexington asks.

I nod. As soon as we hit the dance floor, he boasts about his wealth and enquire about my dowry. I half-expect him to propose soon, and it’s so bizarre, I laugh aloud. He looks at me horrified as we separate from each other, stepping around the couple next to us.

Clearing my throat, I smile and try to think about what I can say to soothe his ego as we re-join, when I almost trip over myself as I’m ripped out of the line-up and spun around into Adam’s arms.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Olivia

Gulping, I stare into his familiar blue eyes. My blood floods the back of my throat, and the air grows stifling as he wraps his arms around my waist. Frowning, I grip his shoulders with sweaty palms. He's about to threaten me for dancing with someone else, I know it. What was I thinking? It's impolite to refuse a dance with a guest, introduced by the hostess. I've done nothing wrong, but it takes nothing at all to bring the beast out in Adam.

It's different when he disrespects me in the privacy of his home with people who know what he's like and those who might be like him. In his house, the madness takes on a sense of sick normalcy. But out here, in public? I fear losing any dignity I might have left if he subjects me to his temper for all these people of merit to witness.

Before captivity, it wouldn't have mattered much to me what people think of me, especially those in high society who have nothing more to occupy their time but mindless activities, boasting their worth, and gossip. But I've been beaten down so

much, my self-worth is in the slums. I can get no lower, and the thought of lowliness eats away at me, gnawing at my very soul. It's like a sinking pit, pulling me deeper and taking my life bit by bit.

Tonight, in this dress and these jewels, dancing in the company of people who think themselves better than everyone else and being allowed to walk amongst them as they regard me as one of their kind, it does something to my self-esteem. My stomach is in knots, and my knees tremble as I wonder whether he might ruin this fantasy for me.

I can't even think straight but in a slight moment of clarity, my fingers notice the softer jacket he's wearing and his hair sitting at his neck rather than his shoulders. Did he cut his hair and change his clothes? Perhaps his aunt thought him more pleasing with a cleaner look. Though, I can't imagine his aunt telling him what to do. And him obeying her? I'd give all my imaginary gold coins to see that.

If his aunt has that amount of power over his actions, she might be willing to help me convince him to let me go and absolve my father of his debt. Does she know that he's a criminal? How could she not? He has quite the reputation.

"Where have you been all night?" he asks.

I clear my throat and straighten my shoulders, about to remind him that he was the one who parted from me as though he didn't wish to be seen with me. What was I meant to do? Remain standing where he left me, wondering why on earth he brought me here? Well, I can guess why.

It isn't surprising in the least that to prevent me from escaping during the night while he attends this obligation, he'd go as far as to tailor an expensive dress and adorn me with fancy jewels, just so I can attend this ball and stay within his sight. Of course, the moment I dance with someone else, he intervenes. My nostrils flare as I press my hands against his chest, tempted to push away from him but knowing if I do, he'll surely embarrass me. Before I can respond, he speaks again.

"In fact, where have you been all my life?" he asks, brushing a finger across the dainty curls framing my face.

The slight tickle of the hair against my cheek rushes through the bottom of my spine, and I almost lean into his touch. What just happened? My brows drop, and my lips shake. I don't know how to respond to him. I'm not sure what he's asking me. But he's smiling, and it's far more pleasing than his bark and threats. I latch onto his gentleness like a starved child being handed bread.

My silly heart pounds, and my mind fiddles with the idea that he must have missed me. He must have been across the room thinking about that missed moment in the carriage and those missed nights in the bed, and he's overcome with the inability to resist me. He's wrapped around me in a way that's not befitting the light and vibrant country dance, and my body doesn't know how to handle itself. It freaks out from his warmth, reacting instinctively to the memory of the heat we've shared with each other.

“What do you mean?” I smile at him with trembling lips. My lips go dry, and I dart my tongue out to lick them before biting my lip and blushing in realization that it could have been perceived as an invitation.

“I mean,” he says, spinning me around and flashing that rare and dashing smile at me. “All night, I’ve watched different ladies flutter around the room, but they were like blades of grass that blew in the wind, all beautiful enough and like each other. Yet, you glow amongst them like a patch of white and gold flowers on a cool summer day.”

“All night?” I start and stop myself from reminding him that we just got here. Besides, his attempts at poetry are quite amusing. I’d like to hear more. “Oh, you flatter me.” I blush, lowering my eyes and grinning like a fool.

I can barely bring myself to look at him without feeling as if I’m about to catch fire. He grins in return, and my eyes shoot up, staring into his. He’s laughing with me? His own orbs twinkle, and it unsteadies me as I study him with furrowed brows, pursing my lips.

“That was quite an embarrassing attempt, wasn’t it?” He flinches.

I trip over my tongue, not wanting to embarrass him, lest he might become closed off and cold again. “Oh, no. No. Please. It was sweet. Though, I must ask, are you well?” Oh, blimey! There go my attempts to not offend him. Do I have to say everything that’s on my mind?

He laughs heartily, and my eyes widen some more. My mouth falls open at the echo of his delight. He laughs even harder. “Why, you look as if you’ve seen a ghost!” he says.

Should I be scared?

“I’m quite well. Thanks for asking.” His tone softens, and he raises my hand to his lips, kissing the back of it, slowly as his eyes linger on mine. “I assure you; my words are not mere flattery found in the bottom of a glass. You inspire their honesty.”

My skin warms. Okay, that’s it. My chest clenches, tightly, until it hurts. This moment is too good to be true. I won’t ruin it. I don’t know what’s changed but tonight, it doesn’t matter. I’ll say nothing to risk upsetting him if it means he’ll continue to sweeten my ears with his sugared tongue.

With our bodies swaying and pressed so closely together, it’s clear we’re no longer engaging in the appropriate dance. We only serve as an obstacle and a spectacle for the other dancers, so he takes my hand and leads me away from the dance floor into the privacy of the shadowy walls, before pulling me close to his body again. I gasp, and something about this new Adam makes me shy as I consider the possible thoughts of everyone in this room.

He chuckles, releasing me. “Forgive me. I’m so overcome by your beauty; I ache for you. I want you,” he whispers. “Tell me you’ll be mine.”

I can no longer hear the music, just the rhythm of my heart and the shortness of my breath. “I thought I already was,” I

breathe.

He grins and drops his gaze. “Now you’re the one who flatters me,” he says, propping his body up against the wall and raking his eyes over me. “Tell me, do you ache for me too?” he asks before shaking his head. “I’m sorry. Forgive me. That’s too forward.”

Too forward? Since when does he care? Is this some sort of game? If so, I’ll play it willingly. I might not be the only one in the mood to pretend to be someone else tonight. Though, if he’s pretending, he must be trying to escape something. I stroke my hand across his shoulder in comfort. A bold move, in public. But I’m only a perceived lady in this delusion. My reality is vastly different. I don’t have to worry about threatening my standing in society. His eyes darken from the touch, and he places a palm over my hand, holding it there. Something flutters and blooms within my chest.

“You know what I think of you, don’t you?” he asks.

Honestly, no. I’m a bit lost, especially now. His mood swings befuddle me. But I nod and smile.

“But I don’t know what you think of me,” he continues. I bristle, unexpectedly, at his words. It’s becoming harder to just smile and nod, especially when his words remind me of what he’s done and who he is.

I tilt my head and unconsciously raise my brows. “I think you do know what I think of you,” I say. Heaven knows I say what’s on my mind. Internally, I groan. *Please don’t cock this up, Olivia. Bite your tongue. Keep the peace.*

He shakes his head. "I don't," he says. "But I'd love to." I grimace. He chuckles. "Is it that bad? Don't tell me there's no chance for us and dash all my hopes," he says, placing a hand over his heart.

My knees grow weak, and I rest against the wall to prevent myself from appearing faint. "Do you want there to be a chance for us?" I ask. My insides tremble as I berate myself for even considering such a possibility. But until he asked me these words, I didn't know what I felt for him. Now, I do, and it's terrifying.

"Isn't that what I've been saying all night?" He grins, taking my hands in his. "But you must tell me what you think of me. Is there nothing about me you might like?"

My breath catches, and I gulp. Despite myself, there are plenty of things about him that I like but if this is a weird, cruel game, admitting that to him could mean offering him even more control over me. If he were to find out that I don't hate him completely, despite my best efforts, he might find a way to use my emotions to his advantage.

One night of pleasant conversation won't reverse all the pain he's inflicted on my father and me, all the terror he's caused us. It won't erase the image of him threatening a child's life before me. It won't change the fact that I witnessed him murdering eight people; I don't think that will ever leave me. So, while I might enjoy this change for the night, I won't be fooled into thinking he's changed forever. A chance for us

might be impossible but if by grace, I change my mind, it'll require a lot more effort from him.

However, he doesn't like to be ignored and telling him the truth might ruin the first night since I've been in captivity where I feel worthy. It might only be a few measly hours before we're back at his house, and he removes the suit, transforming into the unpredictable, temperamental beast again. So, I'd like to keep enjoying this moment before it's ripped away from me. To do so, I'll have to figure out a way to avoid answering him without infuriating him. Bringing the back of my hand to my flushed forehead, I close my eyes.

"I'm sorry. Have I upset you?" he asks.

My eyes flutter open to regard him. Let's see how far this charade goes. "Not at all. I'm just feeling a bit faint. I forgot to eat," I say.

"Of course," he gasps. "Might I fetch something for you?" he says.

My mouth almost falls open. Tonight, he'll serve me? Okay, this might not be a game. It must be a dream. There's no other logical explanation. "Yes, that would be lovely," I respond.

"Wait here," he says, and I watch with my mouth open as he runs over to the refreshments table to get me a glass of punch, spiced biscuits, and a slice of cake.

I press my fingers to the sides of my head. As refreshing as this change might be, it's also a bit frightening. In a way, it

feels as if I'm losing my head. Still, if this is what madness looks like, I might be inclined to want more of it.

“Supper will be served in a couple of hours. Hopefully, this will hold for now. Or I can head into the kitchen and fetch something more filling for you if you'd like,” he says.

I smile and reach for the small plate. “No, no, that won't be necessary. Thank you so much,” I say as he sighs in relief.

“I suppose you'd also like to rest your feet, go somewhere more private?” he asks.

If he keeps this whole gentlemanly charade up, and I get enough of this punch in my system to forget all about how strange this shift is, sure. I might just need a long, private moment between us.

Chapter Twenty-Six



Adam

“Gentlemen, I do apologize for interrupting what must be quite a riveting conversation about business and finance, topics that a lady, such as myself, has no reason getting involved in. But I do believe that as the host of tonight’s affair, I’ve been granted quite the rare honour to interrupt a conversation between men.” My aunt smiles sweetly, hooking her arm through my elbow.

“Of course, Mrs. Molotov,” Mr. Danville, a short fellow with reddish-blond hair, says with a bow. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your company?”

“Oh.” She grins. “It’s just that I require a moment of my nephew’s time,” she says, tugging on my elbow. “Do you mind accompanying me on a turn about the room?” Her forced smile strains against her teeth.

I sigh, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. She’s been one of the people I’ve been avoiding all evening.

“Why are you not on the dance floor?” she asks me as she walks past guests, smiling and nodding at them.

I scoff. “Is that a genuine question? You know I’m not a fan of this foolery.”

“Since when? You used to be fond of these things when you were a boy.” She looks up at me.

“Yes. Well, that was before I learned that all of this is nothing but a farce. I only came here today to see about business with those who have too much money and are looking for a reason to throw it all away,” I say.

She squeezes my arm, grunting. “I suggest you fix that tone and that attitude because the reason I invited you has just shown up, and I’m quite certain she’d love to join the dance party,” my aunt says before slowing down next to a redhead in a pink floral dress, jewels hanging from her ears and neck, and feathers in her hair.

“Ms. Beaumont!” my aunt gushes. “What a delight it is to see you! This is my nephew, Sir Adam Molotov, and he’d love nothing more than to escort you to the dance floor for the next number. Isn’t that right, dear?” She squeezes my arm.

No, what I’d like nothing more to do is break your arm and your fingers if you keep nudging me with them. The redhead smiles up at me, her dress glittering as the light in the room bounces off it. She’s pretty enough, but if I’m being completely honest with myself, I’ve not been able to think of anything other than Olivia in that white and gold dress. It’s why I step away from her so quickly.

She tempts me and threatens my ability to maintain control, over myself and her. Since the first time we slept together, I haven't been brave enough to allow myself to become lost in her again. It's terrifying. Knowing the power she holds between her legs, if I touch her and kiss her, I'll become putty in her hands. It's been agony sleeping next to her the past couple of nights, naked no less, torturing myself. I'd go to bed with hopes of dominating her, but as soon as my body hits the sheet, and the desperation consumes me, I know there can be no contact between us. I'll end up breaking my own rule to only fuck her if I'm in control.

Riding in the carriage with her, watching as the gentle light of the moon moves across her soft cleavage, I sweat. Catching my breath is a chore and with each step toward the party, I wish to take several more backwards, so we can skip the farce and satisfy what has been burning between us, building to the point of combustion, over the past few days. If I have any chance of functioning at all at this party, I must break away from her.

It's why I suggested that my aunt pair her with Lord Lexington, an older gentleman who might keep her entertained. And most importantly, a man who knows very well the extent of my wrath, as someone who has an outstanding debt for me. I trust that he won't try to rescue her should she attempt to confess her imprisonment to him. That had sounded like a brilliant plan since I believed I wouldn't be caught dead dancing and therefore, had no intentions of going to the ballroom.

“Remember, dear, her family is watching,” my aunt whispers through clenched teeth.

She’s convinced that marriage to the Beaumonts’ eligible daughter will solve the rivalry between our families, since I brought crime to the family doorsteps from my debt-collecting activities. She seems to have also managed to convince the Beaumonts of this solution, and their eyes are currently on us.

“I’m sure Ms. Beaumont would rather...” I start.

“I’d love to dance, Mr. Molotov.” She beams up at me.

Drat. Clenching my cheeks, I force a smile. “Very well.”

Insulting the Beaumonts’ daughter would be an insult to her entire family and while I don’t care about upsetting them, I think I’d prefer to avoid bloodshed in this grand house and amongst guests who could survive and expose me to the authorities. My men are only here tonight to protect me, and I don’t need to set off a fire in this place over something so trivial. No matter how much I might despise it.

The worst part about it is that I’m a good dancer. I know all the steps and all the ridiculous symphonies like the back of my hand; they’ve been embedded in us as children of high society. So, it’s not that I can’t dance; it’s that I loathe dancing. Even more, the person I’ve been avoiding all night will be all I can concentrate on if I enter that ballroom.

No, I have self-control. As long as I keep looking at Ms. Beaumont, I’ll be fine. She takes my elbow, and I lead her to the floor. My eyes drift up toward the sparkling chandelier.

Anything to avoid looking straight ahead. I've seen this ceiling a million times before, but anyone would think I had a passionate interest in architecture. The arrangement of violin, harp, and cello rings off the walls in a ballad. She curtseys before me, and I fix a smile before taking her hand. In and out, we dip, and it's easy enough to remain focused on her.

"I'm quite a fan of painting and skilled in pianoforte," she begins.

Fascinating. I nod. "Is that so?" I ask, trying.

"Yes." She blushes and lowers her head. "What about you? What are your proudest accomplishments?"

Hm. I've never thought of that. What have I been most proud of? Before I can answer, however, we're dipping out and exchanging partners, which brings a short-lived relief as I find myself struggling with who to look at. My heart flips several times, and my palms grow damp as I hurriedly try to focus on my new dance partners.

This is ridiculous. Olivia doesn't scare me. So, what if I happen to glance at her? Except, as I whip my head up for a fraction of a second, I find that she's not on the dance floor. Well, that's a relief I suppose. Except, it might not be. Where could she be?

Ms. Beaumont and I are brought together again by the dance. In and out, we dip once more, our bodies come close to each other before separating. "Do you not have any accomplishments you're most proud of?" she asks.

I drop my head to look at her, clearing my throat. “Yes, I suppose, what I’m most proud of is the business I’ve managed to build,” I say.

“A businessman,” she beams. “How wonderful. What is your business, may I ask?”

I crinkle my brows as my eyes wander around the ballroom. She must already know what it is that I do for business. Is she that sheltered by her family, or is this just some feigned attempt at interest in me? As I’m about to answer her, we join hands behind our backs and step into a spin. We whirl around, once, and in the blur of heads, I spot what looks like Olivia in the back, against a wall, laughing. Craning my neck, I almost miss the next step as we switch hands and spin again. On the second spin, I can see clearly that she’s standing there laughing with someone and sipping on a drink. And that someone is no Lord Lexington.

She’s damn near frolicking with none other than my twin brother Mikael. My blood runs hot. The room glows red. Spoiled, thieving, dratted nitwit who has had everything handed to him. He might get everything he wants, he might have taken the life I could have had all for himself, but that cocksucker won’t take Olivia from me. She’s MINE and mine alone. I own her, and he can go to hell.

The room appears empty as my focus narrows on them. My pumping blood drowns out the romantic symphony, my chest heaves, Ms. Beaumont fades into the background as Olivia and Mikael seem to grow. Sard it all to hell, the Beaumonts,

insulting Ms. Beaumont, my deceptive wretch of an aunt, possible violent retaliation... I don't give a rat's arse about any of it. Releasing Ms. Beaumont's arms, I stalk over to the happy couple.

My breathing grows louder the closer I get and as soon as he's within reach, I launch both arms outward, pulling him off the wall and punching him to the floor. Olivia's glass and dish crash. She screams, turning around to face me and as our eyes meet, she screams again, louder this time as she backs away, looking between me and Mikael.

"Y-y-y-you." She trembles, pointing at us. "There's two of you!" she gasps and gulps.

Mikael groans from the floor and eases himself up to his feet, grinning. "Brother," he says. "Pleasure to see you too." He checks his lip for blood. There's a slight dribble which he licks away.

"Who invited you?!" I yell, ridiculously, since it's obvious. But I'm not thinking straight. The only reason I agreed to show up to this damn thing was because my aunt promised me he wouldn't be here.

As if on cue, she comes pushing through the crowd. "What on earth is the matter?" she yells before setting eyes on us. "Oh, so you found each other. Can you two try to get along?!"

"You lied to me!" I accuse.

"Well, of course I did, or you wouldn't show up. Come on, you're twins. Surely, there must be something you share that's

special within you...” she says. I groan. “There must be,” she continues. “I was hoping you two would put aside that childish beef and resolve your differences once and for all.”

“I have no desire to resolve anything with this cocksucker,” I yell.

Mikael rolls his eyes. “So dramatic, brother,” he says.

This riles me up thicker and sets my body ablaze. “Olivia, get over here, right this minute!” I point at the spot next to me. She shudders and grimaces but does as she’s told.

“I didn’t know...” she starts.

“Leave the girl alone, Adam,” he mocks. “Look at the way she responds to you. She wants nothing to do with you. I dare say she was having a lot more fun with me. Weren’t you, princess?” he asks her.

I raise my fist at him again. He grins, and I pull back my arm, loading it with everything inside me as I ready myself to throw the heaviest punch I ever have. Olivia jumps in front of me, dodging the fist as it flies past her head. She clutches her chest and struggles to breathe, choking on her words as she speaks.

“Please. I’m sure he didn’t mean any harm. I thought it was you. Please. You’re making a spectacle of yourself,” she whispers.

My eyes almost bulge out of my head. “And who are you to stop me?!” I yell, closing in on her.

Her lips tremble as she looks up at me. Her damn cleavage rises and falls with her terror, and her voice rasps. “I’m s-sorry,” she says.

“First of all, if you think my brother is some saint, think again. He knew exactly who you were and why you’re here. He was just trying once again to take what’s mine!” I glare at him. She scowls at me, and I bite down on my lip, reaching for her hand. “You’re coming with me!” I say, pulling her away.

Mikael has become a small, insignificant problem compared to the way she just disrespected my authority and sought to embarrass me. A prisoner lecturing her captor? She has gone insane. The events of the night seem to have made her forget her place. She needs to be reminded who’s in charge. And I know just the way to do it.

“Where are you taking me?!” she gasps. Her body grows pink as everyone in the room stares at us while she’s pulled through the ballroom, stumbling over the hem of her dress.

“Somewhere private,” I bite out.

“What are you going to do to me?” Her voice shakes.

“Teach you a lesson!” I whip around to stare at her. She gulps.

“Please. I didn’t know I was doing anything wrong,” she starts. I scoff, remaining silent. She huffs and pulls at her wrists. “Well, at least let me walk like a normal person,” she says.

I stop, and she slams into me. “Olivia.” My voice is deep and booming. “Don’t push me,” I warn.

“Please. This is so embarrassing,” she whispers.

I whip around at her. “You know what would be more embarrassing?” I crook my brow. “If I were to throw you over my shoulder and carry you there myself, would you prefer that?” I ask. She glowers at me, releasing a breath and cutting her eyes away from mine, failing to answer. I chuckle to myself, shaking my head at the audacity. “Besides, when I’m done with you tonight, you won’t have any dignity left.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven



Olivia

My feet can't outrun my racing heart as I'm being pulled down the stairs like a horse and carriage. Grace would allow the ground to open beneath me and swallow me whole. In fact, I don't care what Adam does to me, as long as he digs a hole and buries me after. He can wrap his hands around my neck and choke me until I pass out. I have nothing left. I've hit rock bottom. The facade of dignity I imagined I had left has been ripped out from beneath my feet. I am truly nothing and no one anymore.

My cheeks, the back of my neck...hell, even the back of my trembling knees, they burn as if all the eyes that watch me are filled with flames cast upon me like the unforgiving pits of hell. Even more mortifying is the fact that his brother and his aunt both know who I am. Who else does? Have I only served as an object of mockery for the whole party this entire night? All the conversations and the compliments were nothing but a cruel ruse? They must all have been laughing at me, the

collective group of demons. Or it's just his family protecting his evil secrets.

Tears spring to my eyes as the people around me whisper and gasp, watching all my self-respect get tossed out the window. I hate him. I hate his family. He opens a door and throws me inside before pushing it up. He doesn't close it. He leaves it slightly ajar, as if whatever it is that he intends to do to me, he wants everyone standing outside these doors to hear it. My cheeks shake as my eyes flood with salt water, but I blink them back, glaring at him.

"Do whatever it is that you want to do to me but by the end of it, make sure that I'm..." My words are cut off as he grabs me by the neck and pulls me in for a rough kiss.

My eyes fly open, my stomach plummets, and my heart expands as a moan escapes me. This is not what I was expecting, and it's such a dratted relief that I don't stop to question it. I reach up to pull him closer to me, clutching to him like my life depends on it, but he throws my hands away from him.

"This damn cloth has been strangling me all night," he says, tugging at the fabric tied around his neck and throwing it to the floor.

"What's happening? What are you doing?" I ask. My voice wobbles.

"What does it look like?" he responds as he peels off his jacket. "I'm teaching you a lesson."

His words are threatening but his actions, they're rewarding. As he advances toward me, my fingers tingle with the need to feel his naked body.

"I don't understand." I pant, pulling the tie from his hair when he comes close enough.

"I'm going to fuck you, hard, against this couch." He pushes me backward and my heart skips a beat before my arse hits the couch. "Everyone saw us come in here together, alone. With the door locked, they'd already draw their own conclusions." He shrugs. "But well, with it open, they won't have a need." He smiles.

My breath catches and I look up at him with widened eyes before looking at the crack in the door. There are quite a few guests chattering outside the room. They've all come down here to get away from the noise of the music. They might be distracted now but it won't take much to attract their attention.

"No, you can't." I gasp.

He removes his shirt, and I lick my lips at the sight of his hard, golden chest. "Yes, I can." He grunts, reaching for my arm and tugging me against his half-naked body. This is compromising enough as it is. If anyone is seeing this, I'm already... I'm already, what? Ruined? *I have no status to ruin*, I remind myself. Still, I'll be scorned, and it already feels as if I'm trapped in an underground pool of water, sealed off at the top, trapping me inside while I drown. I can get no lower than this. So, what am I fighting for? My right to self-authority? I

can't find the strength. The heat from his skin sizzles through me, and I shiver against him.

"Please. Close the door," I whisper.

"And what good would that do? I want everyone at this party to know who you belong to. You're mine, Olivia Primrose, and no one else can have you," he grunts, gripping the back of my head and thrusting his tongue into my mouth until I imagine it moving between my legs. I clamp my legs shut in reaction and push away from him.

"No," I say.

"No?" he asks. "I can smell your arousal on your breath, floating off your skin, Olivia. You want me. Don't you?" he asks, unzipping my dress. A soft breeze brushes up against my back, and I tremble as the fabric slides over my shoulder and down my arms. I stop it, mid-fall, and attempt to pull it back up.

He chuckles while pulling the button of his trousers. "Surrender, Olivia. Accept your punishment." They fall around his ankles, and my eyes widen at his thickness. It's been so long since I've had it available to me. My breath shortens.

"What are you doing?! Don't you care that someone will see?!" I gesture toward him and look behind me at the door.

He reaches for my face and pulls it back, so I can look at him. "I don't care what they think of me. All that matters to me is that they know who owns you."

You don't own me, I want to yell, but I know the damning truth. He pulls the dress down my arms and lifts me out of it, sitting me on the couch and spreading my legs. "Adam..." I whisper, begging him to reconsider.

His beard scratches against the inside of my leg, and I shake like a leaf, gasping. "Adam..." I moan, begging him for more as my nipples tighten.

"You smell divine," he says before his warm, wet, and firm tongue touches me. I bite down on my lip, rubbing my ass against the soft, dainty, velvet upholstery, trying not to attract attention. But attention is exactly what Adam wants as he presses deeper against me, gripping my legs as he sucks on the nub of flesh until it's tender.

"Ohhhh." I shudder, losing all sense of where I am until I realize all too late, that I'm making too much noise. He pulls me forward, so I'm splayed wider for him. My knees point up at the ceiling as the bottom of my feet slip off the couch. He presses his finger into me while lapping at my well.

The room is filled with his grunts and the wet slaps of his tongue against my folds as he ravages my cunt. Man, I hate this man for doing this to me, right here and now when he knows I'm helpless against the magic he performs on my body. I hate him so much for reducing my value and publicly claiming me so that no man will ever want to touch me again. I'm so embarrassed by how blissful ripples crackle and pop throughout every inch of my body, that I need him to hurt me while he pleases me. I need it desperately.

Reaching for his head, I press his face flush against me, so I can feel the sharpness of his beard scrape against the surrounding flesh. Grabbing hold of his hair, I tug, knowing he hates it. As predicted, he stops, and my legs tremble with the need to climax. “Please,” I whisper.

He lifts his head off me, and I see my juices soaking through his beard before he wipes his face with his hand. He moves over me, cloaking me in his shadow and his splendid, naked form. I can’t breathe. “What did I tell you about doing that?” he grunts.

“Doing what?” I gasp, needing him to punish me as I writhe against the couch and slide my hand down toward my centre, touching myself.

He growls and rips my hand away as I cry out, “No. That’s mine.”

“That’s it,” I moan. “Squeeze me harder, slap me, choke me, hurt me,” I whine, thrashing about beneath his hold.

“What?” he growls, and my eyes open to regard his darkened, narrowed gaze.

“Please,” I whisper, pleading with my eyes, sobbing as I lift my head to kiss him, but he has me pinned against the couch by my arms, holding himself out of my reach.

“Don’t ask for what you can’t handle,” he warns, his jaw hardened.

“I can handle it,” I gasp, licking the air like an imbecile. I’ve never wanted to be hurt so badly in my entire life, and I

don't know what's come over me. He growls, gripping my neck and crashing his lips against mine. Desperately, I cling to his back, dizzied by my scent on his face. "Harder," I whisper against his lips.

"You filthy wench," he groans against my lips before settling himself between my legs.

I sob. "Yes." The word is strangled against my breath, and I open my mouth for more air.

"Is this what you want?" he asks.

"Yes, please. Harder," I groan as the room blurs.

He swears and releases me. "Any harder, and you'll be dead," he says.

Coughing and swallowing against the tightness and the air rushing back into my throat, I smile at him. "I don't mind passing out," I confess.

His eyes widen, and he bites his lip before lowering his mouth to my ear. His calloused hand moves up my chest, and I vibrate in anticipation. When he wraps it around my neck, I sigh.

"You're one surprising whore, aren't you?" he asks. "My whore," he whispers, biting hard on my earlobe until I yelp. He swipes his long, hard cock over my entrance, panting. "You want pain?"

"Yes," I gasp as my cunt quivers.

Adam tightens his grip on my throat and groans, before slamming the length of his thick cock inside me in one fell swoop. The room breaks apart in shimmering stars as I scream. He must have ripped my hole apart, but I can't help moving against him, hating him for holding himself still.

"How was that?" he asks, raking his teeth against my chin. "Too much pain for you?" he teases.

Heat floods the depth of my belly, and I tighten around him as tears burn through me. In a sudden shift, I can see what can easily be mistaken as regret and even concern in his eyes as he loosens his hold on my neck.

"No, no, don't stop," I plead.

"You're okay?" he blanches.

Confusion and a new ache engulf me as I stroke my hands across his chest. He tightens beneath my hand and attempts a scowl, but there's no hiding the emotion he displayed a few moments ago. "I'm okay," I whisper. "I promise you; I can take it. Punish me with all the anger you have pent up within you. Take it out on me."

"But I-I don't understand," he says.

I shake my head. "Neither do I, but I know I need it badly." Shaking, I move my hips against his cock, still inside me, soothing the pain and swimming in the pleasure. "You feel so good," I groan as my eyes roll back.

He groans, before pulling out of me and flipping me on my knees. Over the couch, my eyes meet with some onlookers,

and my insides take a dip as I learn something else about myself. He slaps my arse, hard, and it echoes off the paintings on the wall. A moan rumbles from the depths of my throat, and I arch my back for more. He kisses the inflamed spot, licking it and biting it before easing away and slapping me even harder, so I scream.

He swears behind me, burying his face into my folds and stroking my throbbing clit. My hips rock against the air, and the woman outside the door flushes as she fights the urge to look.

“Ohhh,” I moan louder, resting my cheek against the head of the couch while my undulating hips grind out of control. His tongue is hot within me, and I hug the back of the furniture, singing his name as I approach a tumbling climax. Just as the pressure hits my folds and presses into my quivering clit, he switches positions, chasing the climax away. I whine.

“Mmmm,” he groans, replacing his tongue with his fingers.

My eyes fly open, and a loud gasp escapes me as my trembling breath erupts in sobs. “Please. Yes. Yes. More. Please, I need to... I need more.”

“You need to, what?” He grins, but my mouth falls open, unable to answer him as he pulls his fingers against my walls. The woman at the door grips her chest before walking away. Her space is soon filled with another spectator.

Adam lowers over me, sweeping my tumbling hair away from my hot neck as he whispers in my ear, “Now, word will

spread throughout this entire house, and they'll all know you're..."

"Uuuuhh," I grunt as the insane strength of his hard member replaces his fingers.

"Mine." He kisses my cheek, and it's so uncharacteristically gentle that I crumble, crying aloud.

Warmth rips through me as words of endearment wander up to my tongue, words I'll never dare to utter aloud.

He grabs hold of my curls, pulling out the pins that offend him and throwing them across the floor. He wraps my hair around his hand and tugs my head back. My neck strains against the pull, and I smile as it becomes harder to swallow. His strokes are so powerful and coaxing, the pressure soon builds again before he releases my hair and slows his pace. I bite down on my hand, groaning.

"Please. No. Don't stop," I weep.

He pulls at the strings of my stays, tugging on my back as he loosens the ties. "Take this damn thing off," he mutters as he attempts to rip it off me. He only manages to loosen it enough for my breasts to tumble free, and he grabs hold of them, groaning. Pressing my back against his chest, he kneads sweet desire through me. My sore breasts stare back at the onlookers, defiantly, as he turns my head toward him and kisses me deeply.

His strokes resume their delicious torture as his tongue fucks my mouth. One hand squeezes my breast, and his other

hand travels past my stays, toward my centre. I shudder against him when his fingers find my slick nub. I moan into his mouth as explosions set off within my veins. I'm so flush against him that every inch of him fills me with each stroke. I can barely move against him, but I can feel everything as he presses me into him, pounding me. My blood roars and as he pants into my mouth, I come undone, screaming at last from the waves that rip through me, soaking him.

Chapter Twenty-Eight



Townes

“Are we getting any closer?” Heath grumbles next to me, swatting the air at bugs sputtering as they fly into his mouth. If he could manage to keep his mouth shut, he might keep from swallowing so many of them. I’m beginning to think he must like their flavour. He can’t seem to get enough. Deep down, I’m hoping he chokes on one, just for a moment of silence.

“We’ve been traveling three nights; I’ve spent a small fortune on stays at the inns we’ve encountered throughout. My tunic is soaked beneath my vest. I look like a commoner without my jacket and hat. These pests are making a right mess of my skin, and did we really have to leave the horse and carriage behind?” Heath moans.

It’s impressive how much this man talks. How have I never seen it before? Well, of course, I hadn’t been around to hear it. Poor Olivia. *If I’d known, sweet girl, I wouldn’t have forced you to endure his company.* Not even the nights locked away in the inn have brought me much peace. This man is intent on

making sure his voice is the only thing stuck in the ears of the people around him. I'd take one mosquito endlessly buzzing in my ear over the sound of his voice any day. *Please, gnat, fly, bee, anything. Do me the grace of shutting him up.*

“Mr. Primrose clearly isn't in his right mind. Why are we still following him?” Mario whispers to Heath. He works for him now since I had to release my servants from their duties.

“Yes. But Olivia has been missing for a month, which means she must be somewhere with someone. Right now, he's the only person we know, who might know where she is,” Heath grunts.

“I heard that. And for the last time, I'm perfectly sane! Although you seem intent on driving me mad. Besides, it's not far, now. We should be there soon.”

“You've been saying that for three days when it was only supposed to take us a few hours, according to you!” says Heath.

“Yes, well, we've obviously made some progress, haven't we?” I counter. “We haven't been here before.” I gesture.

I pull the hood of my black riding cloak over my head, hiding my scowl, as we venture through the wilderness. I must admit that I don't remember this piece of uncultivated land. I hadn't been awake on my journey to that monster's house and on the way back, my eye was swollen for most of it. One of his servants had to escort me out of the Molotov estate and into the nearby city. After that, I was left on my own, relying on the directions of others to return home to Colderidge.

In all honesty, trying to locate a place that this criminal has worked hard to keep hidden has proved difficult. However, it hasn't been made any easier by Heath's constant complaining. It's a bad idea to recruit him and Mario. If I had any opportunity to think, just a few minutes of silence, I might have recalled familiar spots and arrived at Molotov's home already. Nevertheless, I would've arrived alone, without money, and ended up back where we started or worse.

It would have been far better if instead of Heath and Mario, all of Colderidge had finally agreed to come together and help me save my daughter's life. But luck and good faith hasn't been on my side. If I were to approach the town again, I'd be captured and thrown into the madhouse. So, to keep a low profile, I hide in the cellar of a large woman who lives in the slums, in exchange for a companion.

To raise money, I leave in the darkness of night and disguise myself, pickpocketing off the rich. One of the people I foolishly happen to pickpocket is Heath, who grabs hold of me and threatens me with jail or the asylum. I beg him not to turn me in and to allow me to acquire enough money to rescue Olivia.

Maybe it's the reality of Olivia's prolonged absence that makes him finally see sense, but he decides that if I'm telling the truth, he wants to be her knight in shining armour. He asks how much money I'd managed to save already. It has only been a little over one thousand pounds. Then he tells me to take him to Olivia's location so he can help me pay the debt off. Of course, I accept that offer.

That's the reason I'm stuck with him and Mario. It's why I haven't pulled his teeth out yet. Well, that and the fact that if I tried, he could easily snap me in half. The man is far younger and two times my size. In some ways, he's a beast himself. We come across a dead end and two natural paths leading in opposite directions. All three of us pause there.

"Well?" Heath sighs, waving his hand at me.

I gulp. Okay, we're lost for sure. This place rings no bells whatsoever. "Erm..." I pause, glancing from left to right. "I think, uh, we turn here," I say, selecting a path at random, internally swearing at myself. My pride will be the death of me and the death of Olivia, for crying out loud. It's better to just admit to them that I'm lost. But the words strain against my unyielding lips. If only I had Chance with me. That horse knows his way around everywhere, but I haven't seen him since I went into hiding.

"You think?" Heath asks, pulling me to a stop and spinning me around. "Or you know?"

A surprising fact, Heath has muscles in his forehead. They don't usually show but right now, they're bulging. I scratch my head and turn my eyes away from him. He looks up at the trees as his veins bulge from his reddened skin.

"You don't know, do you?" he yells. "You've never known, have you? You've just been pretending this entire time?! What is the matter with you?! What have you done with Olivia, you lying bastard?" He grabs me by the collar and lifts me off the ground.

“I haven’t done anything. And I haven’t been lying. I just don’t exactly remember where to go,” I admit. “But if we find our way out of this wilderness, I’m sure we’ll get back on track again.” I grimace as my legs dangle.

He studies me, huffing before lowering me to the ground. “Well, then let’s get out of here,” he says.

I fix my hood over my head again, swearing in my mind, stomping back in the direction from which we came.

“Why are we still following him? The man is a fool. Leave him alone to wander out here in circles. Let’s head back before the wolves get us.” Mario’s breath shakes as he whispers.

“I can’t do that,” Heath grumbles. “He might be a fool, but he’s a fool whose blessing I’ll need to marry Olivia.”

I scoff, muttering beneath my breath, “You’ll never get my blessing to marry Olivia.”

“What did you just say, old man?” he shouts.

My pounding blood makes it impossible to think rationally, and I spin to face him, recklessly. “I said, you will never get my blessing. I don’t know what I was thinking before, but my Olivia has been punished enough. I won’t submit her to a life of imprisonment with you as well.”

Damn it. I should be amenable to him. The man can help me resolve the debt and get my daughter back. Curse my tongue and its selfish utterances! Despite how much I might despise him now, this isn’t about me. My daughter’s life is on the line, and he’s the only one who can save it. Stupid, foolish me.

“I beg your pardon? Do you think that I’ve been following you around like an imbecile, all out of the goodness of my heart? Do you think I’ve offered to give up half my life’s savings for nothing in return? You’re even sicker in the head than I thought. I will marry Olivia, with or without your blessing!” He punches me in the face, and I land on my arse.

My brain slows, dizzying me as I seem to slip into a whole separate reality for a second, forgetting where I am. But his breath in my face reminds me as he clutches me by the neck of my cloak. “In fact, when I find Olivia, I’ll be the one right by her side, holding her hand and stroking her back as she clutches to me for consolation, when she learns of her father’s death.”

“No, you won’t,” I say in a moment of bravery, gripping his large hands. He swats me away like a fly, slamming me backward into the ground.

When I come to, my head is heavy and pounding. My neck hurts as I try to lift it. My eyes struggle to focus on my surroundings, and my arm is being scraped against the grit of something wide. I gasp, forcing my eyes open, kicking out my feet as my wrists are tugged upon. Mario comes into focus before me, standing only in his jacket and trousers, missing his tunic.

“I dare say, this is a pretty impressive knot.” Heath’s voice sounds from behind me, and I pull at my wrists. Heath chuckles. “I think the wolves will be glad to see that we’ve left

them quite the meal. I'm guessing old meat might still be good meat to beasts."

He steps into view, brushing his hands off. Mario gulps.

"You monster!" I scream, slamming my wrists against the tree trunk. "Release me, now!"

"No." He shrugs, smiling. "What are you going to do about it if I don't? Scream? You've led us into the middle of nowhere, you ninny. There's no one out here to hear you but the wolves. The louder you scream, the more you'll expose your location. So go ahead, scream." He laughs.

My brows crook as I behold him. He can't get anywhere near my daughter. He's just as horrible as the beast.

"Come on, Mario. Let's get out of here before nightfall. Unlike this old fool and his lacking sense of direction, I can lead us back into the town to retrieve our carriage, like a real, capable man. A man Olivia can depend on," he says, turning on his booted heel and crunching through the fallen leaves.

Mario shakes, looking between Heath and me. "Please," I whisper to him. "You were once loyal to me as well. Don't leave me out here on my own. Untie me. Or at the very least, unsheath my knife and put it in my hand."

Mario pales, but he nods. He looks behind him at a departing Heath before tiptoeing across the fallen leaves. A stick cracks beneath his shoe, alerting Heath who spins around to regard him moving closer to me.

“Unless you’d like to join him out here, tied up around a neighbouring tree, I suggest you stop advancing toward him,” he says, making Mario jump and spin around.

“Oh, n-no no, I wasn’t...” he stutters. “I’m not... I’m coming,” he says, hurrying up behind Heath before turning to mouth an apology to me.

Drats! Heath is right about the yelling, but I can’t help myself. “Get back here! Untie me! Let me go, you ass wipe, cocksucker, shit for brains, nitwit!”

My heart speeds up to the point of suffocation as I watch them disappear through the trees and listen as their footsteps are no more. The wilderness becomes deafeningly quiet, and tears sting my eyes. My fate is sealed, but the need to protect Olivia has me slamming my bound wrists against the trunk, attempting to rub the cloth against the grit.

But so far, I only succeed in rubbing my skin raw. It burns, and I’m sure to have drawn some blood, but it’s the only way out that I can think of. I’m willing to cut my hands off if it means breaking free and hurrying toward Olivia. But I know that even if I manage to set myself loose, without the money, my baby girl is dead. Even more so when I fail to show up.

I can’t escape the image of her hanging or worse, being brutally murdered. My cries echo amongst the trees, for I have failed. If she’s to be put to death, I might as well be dead too.

Chapter Twenty-Nine



Olivia

Creaking the bedroom door open, I wander out in the hallway. I know I shouldn't leave the room, but I need to stretch my legs. There's a jittering inside me that I can't rid myself of if I don't get away from the constant view of the bed and bathing rooms, or the guards walking below the barred window in the green, kept gardens. Outside of the rooms, the air is already different, and I suck it deep into my lungs, before breaking into a light skip, pushing on doors, and peeking inside.

I can't help but delight in the idea of upsetting Adam. I've grown to enjoy his punishments. My neck craves his tight grip, my breasts beg to be squeezed, and my cunt leaks at the thought of his hand landing hard against my arse. A smile turns up on my face, and I slip downstairs. My heart quickens as I cruise along the carpeting, sighing at the different rooms. Some have light, sunny wallpaper; others have pastel blues. I'm sure these decorations weren't Adam's choosing, and I almost want to tease him for it, to rile him up some more.

My skin heats in anticipation of being caught by him with each door I swing open, but my hopes are dashed when he's nowhere to be found. Well, if he's out, I suppose this moment cannot be wasted. It can be used to finally explore the entirety of this grand castle. I'd go outside if I could and frolic in the grass, but now there are bars on every window. There are even versatile bars that open and close on the exiting doors.

I've counted at least twelve bedrooms so far, and that's just on the two upper floors. I note that there are even more bedrooms on the other floor, before coming across a locked door. Jiggling the knob a few times brings no surrender, but there is a rumbling of voices coming from inside. Slapping my hand over my mouth, I hurry past the room, not too far away, towards the end of the hallway.

Closing my eyes, I push on the dark-brown door, and it gives way. I scoot inside and lock it quickly, spinning around to behold what paradise must look like. Towers of shelves, filled with books, untouched for years. Oh! Wings take flight within my body as I take off toward them, gasping and sighing in awe when I find authors I'm familiar with. I grab a title I've not yet read and search the room for a corner where I might not be disturbed.

As I hurry behind a shelf, a book tumbles off it, hitting me in the head. The shelf itself seems to have a heartbeat as I rest my back against it. It pants and breathes, and I jump to my feet. What in the haunted mansion is happening here? Slowly, I tiptoe to the other side, holding my breath.

There I encounter a sight not meant for my own eyes. Two people I recognize but have never beheld in this way. Gloria and Lucian, naked and sweating. She clutches the heavy shelf, and her face is pressed up against the books. Her modest breasts jiggle as Lucian pounds her. Her little white cap hangs off the side of her head. Her dark hair is damp; a few wisps stick to her forehead and the nape of her neck. Her pale skin is flushed, and her lips pucker.

Lucian grunts, and his scar blends into the creasing of his skin as he bites his lip and grips her waist. He leans forward, licking up the sweat dripping down her spine, before kissing and murmuring her name, groaning how much he loves her. She moans, biting her lip and grinding her arse against him.

I yelp, before covering my mouth and spinning around. My skin heats, and I can hardly breathe. Oh, dear. I'll never be able to look at them the same again. Gloria's innocence has been washed clean away, and Lucian's aggression has morphed into sweetness. It's weird. Gloria gasps before giggles pour out of her, but what frightens me is the sound of Lucian laughing as well. I spin around, and he's laughing with her. She's looking at me, but he hasn't seen me yet. His head turns, and his gaze narrows.

"I'm sorry." I stagger backward. "I didn't mean... I didn't know there was anyone..."

"What are you doing in here?!" he demands, jumping in front of Gloria's body, shielding her but forgetting to shield himself.

I look up at the ceiling, craning my neck away as my feet remain frozen in place. Gloria grins again before her lips smack against his skin.

“Relax,” she soothes him. “Olivia. What are you doing out of your room?” Gloria asks in a much softer tone.

I swallow against my straining neck, and my racing pulse begs my eyes not to drop. “I needed to stretch my legs. I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have. I’ve just been...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Gloria says. “We didn’t know anyone would come in here. No one usually does.” She laughs. “You won’t say anything to Mr. Molotov, will you, Lucian? It’s not like you’ll pull something foolish and try to escape again, will you, Olivia?” A slight scolding is evident in her tone.

“Mm mm.” I shake my head and clear my throat. “Oh, no. No. I promise. I’d just like to read.” My voice cracks. “But I can leave if you guys need to... um... finish,” I say, almost choking on my spit.

“As if you haven’t seen far more than this. I know what you and Mr Molotov get up to.” Gloria grins. “Well, I don’t know exactly. Oh, Lucian, stop looking at me that way. I’ve never seen them with my own eyes, but I’m her lady maid for goodness’ sake. Besides, everyone knows what happened at that ball.”

“Gloria!” I gasp, still staring at the ceiling that moves upward into a sort of pyramid, with decorative glass, painted

in red and blue, at the very peak. Mild sunlight shines through it, casting a subtle glow on the room.

“Well, it’s true. Everyone does know,” Lucian mutters.

“Oh, my goodness.” I sigh.

Gloria laughs. “Look at you, you poor thing, acting the prude. Can you fasten my dress for me, Lou?” Her breath catches, and my eyes dip, involuntarily, to regard him placing a soft kiss in the crook of her neck. “We heard you enjoyed the attention.” She teases me, and I sigh, allowing my breath to escape me in a rush. *Oh, thank goodness. They’re both dressed.*

“Well, Lucian. It’s settled then, isn’t it?” She fixes his shirt and takes his hand, leading him away. “There’s nothing wrong with wanting to read, is there?” she asks.

“I guess not.” He smiles at her. His eyes are fixed onto hers, and I can admit that watching them makes my own heart race.

“Don’t worry, Olivia; you stay. We’ll find somewhere else to finish, won’t we?” She winks at him, and he grins.

“Yes, we will,” he whispers against her lips as he pulls her toward him. Gloria moans, throwing her arms around his neck, and I blush as he cups her bottom.

Oh, dear. Goodness gracious.

“Be careful and don’t get caught,” she breaks her kiss to say, panting, before they both hurry away.

I erupt in a fit of giggles, clearing my throat as I rest my hand over my racing heart. Well, that's something I thought I'd never see and never wanted to see. But witnessing them only makes me hungrier for Adam. I lick my lips and groan.

Ever since the ball, we've been at it, night after night, and he's been a lot gentler. His gentleness is also intoxicating. His tender kisses get me wet and bothered. Sometimes, I even forget that I'm his prisoner. But it's been awhile since his primal dominance has claimed me, demanding my submission, making me hurt. And I miss it.

Nevertheless, he's not around, and now he doesn't have to be my only means of pleasure. Oh, how I've longed for pleasure of the mind. Sinking to the floor, I immerse myself in the story of faraway lands and strong women, challenging the ignorance of men. It's been awhile since I've been able to escape. I'm indulging in my travels and experiences through the pages, forgetting the need to be quiet and laughing aloud until the door bangs open.

"Who's in here?" Adam's voice bounces off the shelves, shaking me up out of the still, trance-like silence of before.

Instinctively, I choke on my breath and scramble to my feet. His boots hammer the wooden, creaking floors beneath the red and gold carpet, and my heart pounds. I'm torn between revealing myself and hiding. Stifling a laugh, I choose the second option. Truth be told, the book has captured my fancy, and I'm not looking forward to being forced to put it down. The lust of before has been quenched by the thrill of fulfilling

fantasies of adventure and liberty. I'd be content if he left me alone in this heaven on earth to stuff myself full of as much knowledge as I can consume.

As he rounds each bookcase, I duck behind another, hoping he'll give up. But this man is persistent. He steps around mine, and I scurry into the nook next to it.

"Olivia," he barks. "I see the hem of your dress."

I sigh. *Drats.*

"What are you doing out of the room?" he asks as I step out before him, looking down at my slippers.

My belly churns, but my heartbeat pounds into my nipples. He stalks toward me, and I grip the book. Now, I'm not so sure what I want, because my cunt is doing that thing where it gets excited in his presence. My body grows weak at the thought of him yelling in my face before bending me over and claiming me. But my heart beats hard with the hope that he doesn't rob me of my literary escape.

Lifting my head to look at him, I lock into his darkened gaze. My breathing shortens, and my insides melt. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean any harm. I just love books," I start.

"And you knew there was a library here?" he asks, sarcasm dripping from his tone as he crooks his brow at me.

I clear my throat, and my cheeks burn. My chest rises and falls. My breasts try to break free of this day dress. I swallow before releasing a heavy breath. But I dig my heels into the ground, rubbing the hard cover for comfort. "Okay, I needed to

stretch my legs, and I found it when I decided to go for a walk. I'm sorry for leaving the room. But I'm so glad I found this library because I do love to read."

He reaches for the book, and I clutch it close to me. He drops his dark eyebrows and wiggles his fingers. I gulp, handing it over to him. He strokes the binding of the book and grins when he sees the title and the author.

"Ah, no wonder you're so stubborn. These are the things you love to read?" He waves it around.

I narrow my eyes on him. "If stubborn is what you call a woman stating her opinion and advocating for her freedom, then yes, I'm stubborn. And this is more than just a mere thing. This is world changing." I stick my chin up at him and point at the book.

He sighs, reaching out to stroke my chin, and I shiver, swallowing hard as he hands the joyous brick of pages back to me. My breath shakes when I pull it from his hands. "Thank you."

He nods. "Very well." He steps in closer to me. "If you love books so much, then you may stay."

I gasp, smiling. I can't help it. My cheeks hurt. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes." He brushes his knuckles across my cheek and down my neck, sweeping my loose curls over my shoulder.

I tremble. "You're not mad?" He smiles. Every time he does that now, I lose myself. A soft sigh escapes my lips.

“Do you infuriate me? Yes.” He nods before placing his hands on the wall and bookcase on either side of me, pinning me into the nook. His hard body presses against my tender frame, and my nipples expand, straining beneath my stays. I bite my lip. My entire body tingles. My blood flutters in my chest. It’s becoming harder to catch my breath. He grins when I lick my lips, and my breath rattles.

“Should I be upset? Probably.” He groans. “But I think we can work out an arrangement that satisfies both of us.”

He dips so that he can press his nose against my neck, burrow it into my hair, scrape his beard against my skin, and nibble on my collarbone. I’m parched as he presses his hardness into my thighs, teasing me with its shielded strokes against my dress.

“What...” My whole body moves with me as I try to catch a breath. “Arrangement...” I sigh, leaning into him and letting my forehead fall against his. “Is that?” I pant.

“You...” He trails his index finger down the centre of my neck. “Can stay here...” he whispers against my ear, disturbing the peach fuzz. “If I get something in return.”

I gasp and shudder as my cunt weeps. By barely touching me, he can bring me to climax, and I moan, biting my lip and clutching onto him, with my arms around his neck, shaking through my release. Panting, I look up at him when I can finally speak. Shaking my head, I grin. “You always want something in return,” I whisper against his lips.

Running my hand through his dirty-blond hair, I rake my eyes over his face. He's dangerous, not just for obvious reasons. But he's so stunning, one could suffer heart failure being this close to him. His dark-blue eyes twinkle, and his blushing hooked nose brushes against mine. His long, dark-blond lashes dance against my cheek.

He bites his own lip and grins. "Do I?" he asks as his eyes flutter close, and he leans into me.

Chapter Thirty



Adam

She moans as our lips meet. The book falls from her hand behind me when she presses her breasts into my chest. Pulling away, I grin. “Tsk, tsk, tsk. You said you wanted to read. So, read,” I say, turning to pick up the book.

“It can wait,” she groans, fussing with the ties of her dress. Pausing her, I shake my head and place the book in her hand.

“Leave the dress on,” I grunt. “I like you in red.”

Her head shoots up, and her eyes widen. “B-but my breasts. They ache for you. Please, I need my flesh against your flesh.” She pants, pressing her hands against the soft mounds beneath the fabric.

I groan and bite my lip against the rush that slams into my body. “Olivia,” I warn before spinning around and hurrying away from her to the door in the back.

“Adam?” she cries. My name on her lips is the sweetest sound I’ll ever hear. “Adam. Please. Don’t leave me like this.”

Opening the adjoining door leads me into my study. I sweep my hand across my desk, cleaning it of every obstruction before spinning around to see her standing at the doorway. She hugs the book close to her chest, stroking it the way I want to stroke her.

Since the ball and the non-verbal declaration to everyone, stating that she's mine, I've been able to relax. That night was like an explosion of control and power. Like medicine, it drowned out the words of my father. Now everyone who attended that event knows whose orders she answers to, proving him wrong. I'm not weak, and I'm not a fool. Every man who had their eyes on her can attest to that.

They know that since she belongs to me, should they ever approach her, they'd lose a limb or their lives. And best of all, my brother knows I gave her the best fuck of her life. She screamed it toward the end, and it echoed off the walls toward every inquisitive ear. My aunt wasn't pleased, however, to know that I sexed someone in the middle of her party. But well, that's what she deserves for lying to me and asking me to put my past behind me, failing to regard how my father's lifestyle and his punishments ruined me.

The sweet cherry on top must be that Olivia can't keep her hands off me since that night. On the carriage ride home, her pride is no more as she begs to suck my cock. No matter how much I've yelled at her and pushed her away, trying to restore order, since then, it seems to backfire in the best possible way.

She's aroused by the slightest touch when I raise my voice and when I lower it. I'm the only one on her mind, and I'm the only one she wants. She hasn't even asked me about my brother. It's as if he's already forgotten. It's such a rush, knowing how confident he is and proving to him that he doesn't get to have everything he wants.

Knowing how many obstacles I could blast away that night and how she looks at me with burning need and desire, it's been impossible to resist her. The best part is I don't have to. I'm not sweating from my palms or jumping out of my skin to prove that I'm the one in control anymore. She knows it, and she... likes it. Sex has become something I never could have imagined for myself.

She's panting and looking at me now with heavy lids and flushed cheeks, nibbling on her plump, pink bottom lip, clutching at the frame of the door. She wets her lips, and my cock knocks against my pants, requesting to be released. Her damp mouth paints a beautiful picture, likening it to the smooth inside of her plump, wet cunt.

"I could punish you by leaving you like this, couldn't I?" My voice is heavy and husky, like the rumbling of a beast. I swallow against my tightening chest gripping the desk beneath my arse. She shivers. "But if I did that, I'd only be punishing myself," I confess, pressing my hand against my cock, which expands so much, I'm afraid it will pop. "Come here," I groan.

She smiles and hurries over to me, throwing her arms around my neck. Her lips crash down on mine in desperate

hunger. She wraps her legs around my hips, and my throbbing cock is painfully aware that with a couple manoeuvres, I could be buried within her in less than a second. But the thought of her stubbornness, her excitement over something as simple as dusty books, and her lust for knowledge, turns me on.

Spinning her around, I lay her back on the desk, rubbing my clothed cock against her as she moans. “I want you to read Chapter One to me,” I say while kissing her neck and tugging her bodice beneath her breasts.

“What?” she asks, throwing her head back and moaning when I suck them into my mouth.

“I think the best way to learn is if you’re having fun, wouldn’t you agree?” I ask, kissing the dip between her breasts and lifting her dress over her knees.

The fluff between her legs is moistened with her juices, and it brings out the beast in me. “Read it to me, now. That’s an order,” I growl, dipping my head and kissing the inside of her legs. I’m between beast and saint as my knees knock against her intoxication. “You smell amazing,” I grumble more for myself, than her.

“Adam,” she moans, gripping my hair. I ease up, pulling her hands off me and pinning them next to her, groaning.

“Read the damn book, Olivia.”

She huffs and scowls at me now. My heart rejoices in irritating her. “Why?”

“Because I said so,” I order.

She sighs. “In a faraway land...” She drags on at first, rolling her eyes. I grin, kissing her neck and pulling my tongue down to lick her nipples. She moans but continues, “There was a woman by the name of...” She yelps as I pull her hips closer to my face.

She clears her throat, but her voice is hoarse. Kissing her belly beneath her stays, I knead her breasts before dropping to my knees. “Next to her, there lived a cold mmm...” she moans.

I lick up the inside of her leg, watching as her hips writhe. Smiling, I lick up the flavour between her folds, and she shivers. Shifting to my feet, I stand over her, watching her skin pinken, her body arch and her legs splay before me. I’m tempted to dip my length inside her pretty cunt, but I like teasing her. She avoids eye contact with me, keeping her eyes on the book, and I smile. I didn’t think she could get any sexier but an intellectual? Is it weird that I feel lucky to be in her presence? I shake my head at the thought as the reminder slams through me that she’s a prisoner.

My throat tightens as I remember that in a few days, I’ll need to keep the promise I made to her, her father, and my men. If I don’t follow through with that promise, everything I felt at that party will break apart into crumbs. I’ll learn that I’m a fool.

But do I mind being a fool for her? Crap. I don’t want to ever have to give this up. Sex can be had with anybody but sex with her? I’ll never have it again if she’s dead. But if I don’t

stick to my word, everything I've built will weaken. My threats won't mean anything.

She looks up from her book and regards me. I catch her eye, and she blinks away. Her brown eyes flip my heart in a somersault, and I groan. "What are you looking at?" I ask.

She raises her brow. "The book." She wiggles it at me, and a smile pulls at my face.

It's been a long time since I smiled this much with a woman. I never thought it would happen again but here I am, enjoying the company of someone I'm meant to kill in a few days or spare, depending on whether Townes shows up. It's madness.

Ever since she came into my life, I've not looked at another woman lustfully. When my balls tighten, and my cock aches, she's the only one I want to relieve it. Leaning over her, while deep in my thoughts, I unconsciously kiss the top of her knee. I jerk back but instead of backing away, I lean in some more, lowering myself on top of her.

Her voice tumbles against my head on her abdomen, and her words roll over me. I gasp as I'm hit with the truth; I don't think I want to have sex with anyone else. She's fun, stubborn, and she can handle me. She's strong minded too, on top of the kindness that made her attractive to me before. She's too good for me; a bell dings in my head. If she dies, I might as well become a monk. Being with anyone else would be pointless.

As she continues to read, she strokes her finger through my hair and down my back as her wet cunt presses against my

chest, drowning me in her arousal. What's happening to me? I think I'm losing my head. Either that, or I'm far too turned on, here and now, to consider the next few days. Especially something as crazy as her being the only woman who gets me going. It must be my stifling hormones messing with my head. The answer is to climax; it will restore my clarity.

Rising on my arms above her, I direct my thoughts away from the madness and focus on the fact that right now, she's all mine, and she's hungry for me. "I bet," I say, pulling her nipple between my teeth and watching as her face contorts. She moans and bites her lip. "You can't finish that chapter with my face between your legs."

She swallows and licks her lips before turning her twinkling eyes on me. "I forgot you were even in the room."

An unexpected laugh erupts from me. "Is that so?" I ask. "I find that impossible to believe." I lean over to whisper in her ear.

"Well, you better believe it. You're all talk and no action. You haven't been doing anything for the past few minutes, and you've murdered the mood," she says.

"Really." I kiss her shoulder.

"Yes, really." She pushes against my chest. "If you don't mind, I'd like to return to the room and finish reading the book. Can we pick this up later?"

Pushing her back against the table, I pin her in. "I'll make you a deal."

She blinks, rolling her eyes, and I shake my head, laughing.

“How far are you in the chapter?” I ask.

She sighs.

“Come on. Humour me.” I mock.

“I’m halfway through the chapter, which I’ve already read, mind you. So, I’d like to move past it at some point,” she says.

I nod. “Okay, I promise you that if you manage to get to the end of that chapter with my tongue against your clit, I’ll let you go up to the room, and I’ll relieve myself. I’ll even leave you alone for the night so you can finish the entire book,” I say, unbuttoning my pants and stroking myself when my cock springs out. She swallows, and her neck muscles tighten. “But if you fail and stop reading, I get to punish you.”

She gasps. “Challenge accepted,” she says, her voice hoarse.

“Ah,” I say, smiling and dipping to my knees while she resumes reading aloud. Spreading her lips, I lick the slick, hardened flesh before kissing and sucking on the succulent flaps. She moans, and her words become distorted. I stroke my cock, burying my face deeper, suffocating as I try to get my tongue as far as possible. She shakes against me, exploding within less than a minute, and I keep going as she clamps her legs around my head.

“Adam Molotov!” she screams, and I know my name isn’t in that book. I don’t want to stop feasting on her, but rules are rules.

I bite the inside of her leg, and she moans. Rising to look at her, the book is flung across the room behind her. I grin. “You didn’t even try.”

“I don’t care about the book right now, Adam,” she grumbles.

“Turn over.” I laugh, rubbing the outside of her thighs.

She tries to get up, but I can tell she’s dizzy. “What?” she asks, swaying and smiling.

“Are you okay?” I smile, brushing my hand across her hair.

“I feel amazing,” she beams, rolling over on her belly.

Grinning, I pull her up. “On your knees,” I say before gripping and shaking her arse.

“Yes, sir.” She turns to look at me, flipping her hair out of her face, and I swear.

“So, you failed the challenge. What do you suppose I should do with you?” I moan, kissing the round, fluffy cheeks.

“Hurt me,” she moans.

“Hmmm. Say no more,” I say, spitting on her arse and spreading the moisture. She grinds the air as I bite her flesh, before slapping her so hard, she buckles. Just as she catches her breath, I smack her again until she sobs. I do the same with the other cheek, testing her centre, and she’s soaking wet.

I’d risk my life for the sight and scent of her. My throat is desperately parched, and I open her up like a ripe fruit, devouring her sweet nectar. She rains in my mouth, filling me

up, and I suck every drop from her, shaking from the wave that slams into the head of my cock.

Enough of this damn gameplaying. I need to be inside her, now, or my heart might stop beating. Being so much taller than her puts me at an advantage. With her arched on top of the desk, her plump cunt lines up right where I want her. Dipping my fingers in, I stretch her a little bit, but our long nights have loosened her up just enough to fit around me perfectly.

Slipping into her is sweeter than wine. Every tension loosens, every bond breaks away, and blood moves more freely through my veins. At the same time, my pulse races too hard for me to keep up. It's like I'm teetering on the edge of death. My chest grows too tight, but nothing is more important than this ecstasy, not even breathing. Digging my nails into her ass, I slam her against me, tilting my head up at the ceiling and swearing as I remind myself not to burst first.

Blast. I pull myself out of her, hissing as the skin of my penis becomes too tender for contact. "Mmmm," I groan, kissing the centre of her back and licking the welts on her ass. "You feel amazing," I pant, allowing the tremors in my cock to slow.

"Adam," she moans, reaching behind her for my hand and pulling me forward to cup her breasts. I squeeze them, teasing her spine with my tongue. On second thought, to hell with this dress. Ripping it off, I move my hand across her belly, down to the nub of flesh.

She shudders. “Adam. It’s so sensitive.” She pants. As I rub it gently, she folds in on herself and almost scoots away from my touch. It makes me crazy as I grab my length and push into her again. “Oh, Adam,” she moans, tightening around me.

I press harder on the tender nub, thrusting in and out of her snug hole. “Sweet cunt,” she shouts, giddy on my cock, and I shiver, gripping her ass and matching her pace. My thighs slap against her ass, and our sex sweetens the room. My abdomen quivers, and stars appear before me as I drag her upward, tight against my body. One of my arms is wrapped around her waist; the other squeezes and tugs her nipples. Her soft whimpers pull me closer to the edge. Shutting my eyes, I bite down on her shoulder, panting.

“Adam, yes. Oh, mercy. Yes!” she screams, and I lose it. Together, we vibrate against each other. My seed ejects from me like a bullet into her body. She shudders, and I hold her close because if she moves a little bit against my cock right now, I’ll pass away. Plain and simple.

“Olivia,” I grunt. “Olivia,” I murmur against her sweaty hair. “I-I...” I don’t know what I’m trying to say. All I know is I feel full of something that wants to tumble from my lips, but I don’t know what it is.

Blimey. What the hell am I going to do in the next few days?

Chapter Thirty-One



Olivia

Last night, he made me promise I wouldn't run if he were to allow me freedom of the castle and the grounds. I'd responded with a rain of kisses over his face and his body, rewarding him by sucking his cock. After he enjoyed himself, however, he let me know his generosity was based on my short life expectancy.

Suffice to say that I'm not in the mood to entertain him today or ever again. He and his 'generosity' has allowed me conditional freedom for, potentially, my final days: freedom to roam with limits and freedom to choose if or when I'll allow him access to my body. Three days of limited liberation, what a gift.

Still, as measly of a gift it is, I long for the fresh air. Despite how much I've wanted to refuse his 'gift,' my reality is that I only have a few days left, and I don't want to waste it punishing myself. He's done enough of that for me. Removing my slippers, I wander out into the freshly cut grass, sighing

and wiggling my toes. A teardrop hits my foot, and I sniffle, swiping at my damp cheek. I can't cry. If I do, I'll fall apart.

Clearing my throat, I raise my head at the sun peeking through grey clouds. I hope my father managed to raise the money. I don't want to die. There's a weight on my chest, and I struggle to take a breath. Although, if he'd raised the money, surely, he wouldn't wait until the thirtieth day to come back for me. His absence must mean that something has gone wrong. I hope he hasn't gotten himself killed. My throat closes in, and I swallow a gulp of air.

I hope he's safe. And if he doesn't have the money, I hope he doesn't come back for me. He should run and save himself. I'll accept my bitter fate. Here comes the tears again, filling my trembling cheeks. Sighing, I slap the back of my hand against my face to pull the tears away. Shaking myself, I grunt, choking the tears back down and stomping through the grass. I'll focus on the morning birds, the scent of dew, and even the humidity. The estate is grand, grander than any I've seen.

I don't know how long I've been walking, but I've left the house far behind me. The stables and the farm catch my eye. As I wander over to the pig grunting in the mud and eating from its trough, I hear Adam's voice coming from the stables. He sounds upset, and it excites me to see the cause of his frustration. Putting on my matching blue slippers, I take my time wandering up to the stables while looking up at the sky, the forest beyond and anywhere else, as the guards take note of me.

Humming, I fake a smile and nod at them, remarking how much I love horses and would love to spend some time with them. They can't stop me because I've only been instructed to avoid entering one place. Though that place strikes my fancy, I haven't come across it yet. Still, this temporary freedom isn't the easiest adjustment.

The wooden doors of the stables have slits in them, which allow me to see without bringing attention to myself. The guard next to the door looks down at me with creased brows and pursed lips as I press my eyeball against it, scrunching my other eye. His eyes burn into my skin, and it's hard to shake, so I turn around and look at him. "What?" I ask.

He doesn't answer; he simply scowls at me and continues to stare. I roll my eyes at him and turn back to the door. Adam walks away from the horse, sweat rolling down the side of his face, and he mutters to himself with his hands on his hips. I smile as the brown mare before him kicks back her hooves. *Yes, go on. He deserves a good slap.*

When I grin, the guard beside me clears his throat. Ignoring him, I keep my eyes fixed on the door. Adam takes a few breaths before grabbing a handful of hay, stepping out from the side of the horse, and moving to stand a few feet in front of her face. He waves the hay at her.

"Look, I come in peace," he says. "What do you say? Can we be friends?" he asks.

Right. Bribery. Well, I suppose that's a step up from threats. I scoff, and the guard next to me shifts on his heels. I turn to

look at him, ready for him to see me roll my eyes in his direction, but there's a slight smirk teasing at his lips. I twist my lips in consideration. Okay, I'll leave the inquisitive guard alone.

Adam steps a little closer to the mare's mouth, and I hold my breath. As he extends the hay, I think to myself, *that's not a good idea*. And it's not, because as soon as he does that, she tries to bite his hand off. Oh, as entertaining as this is, it's painful to watch. Honestly, I'm stressed out for her.

Swinging open the door, I hurry over to them. He looks at me, straightens his shoulders, and clears his throat.

"You're making her nervous. Notice how her ears are pulled back against her neck."

"Yes, well, she's new. Got her this morning. She isn't accustomed to me, yet."

I nod, approaching the horse from the side and stroking her. "You're just nervous, aren't you, sweetheart? Is this beast of a man scaring you? I know, he scares me too," I whisper.

"How are you touching her? I haven't been able to get near her."

"It's a female energy type of thing. Or she can sense how bloody your hands are." I raise my neck at him before turning to look at the mare who has stopped flashing her teeth. "I wouldn't want bloody hands touching me, either. So, I understand you, girlie," I whisper.

He scoffs. “Last night, you didn’t have a problem with my hands,” he mutters.

My cheeks heat, and I spin around to look at him, narrowing my eyes. “Yes. Well, I was a fool,” I grunt, spinning on my heels and turning to leave.

“Olivia, please. Wait.” His voice strains.

“Wait for what?” I whip around at him. “My time is limited, remember?” As I storm off, I hear his boots pounding the ground before his hand is on my arm. He pulls me flush against his body and I despise the way my heart races. I avert from his eyes to avoid falling victim to those blue globes again. “Let me go,” I hiss.

“No, we need to talk.” He sweeps my hair out of my face, and I jerk away from him.

“No? I thought I was free to make my choices now, or will you add dishonesty to your long list of crimes,” I ask, glaring at him.

“I think dishonesty is already on the list.” He smirks, and I grunt. His hands loosen a bit before they fall to his side. He sucks in a breath and releases it. “You’re right. You’re free to make your choices. I’m just asking for a moment of your time, if you so please.”

“And why should I waste any of the time I have left fraternizing with my captor and soon to be executioner?” Breath forces itself in and out of me, and my chest heaves. “With a man who wants to murder me for a crime as

meaningless as an unpaid debt? A man who values his pride and his money over human life?” Tears well up in my eyes but damn them, I won't let them fall.

He lowers his head. “I don't want to murder you.” His breath shakes. “I just...”

Shaking my head, I turn away from him. “Please excuse me. I'm not interested in sticking around to hear your pathetic justifications.”

“Olivia,” he growls. “I could pick you up, throw you over my shoulder, and take you where I want to. But I'm not. I'm asking you for a moment of your time. Please,” he says.

“You might not be trying to physically control me, but mentally, you're trying to force me into doing what you want; that's who you are, Adam.” I scowl.

“Olivia, please. I don't beg, and I'm begging you. Surely that must mean something.”

“Yes, it means you'll go to whatever extent you must to get what you want.” I sigh. Why am I still standing here, arguing with him, when the door is so close, and I can pull myself away?

“Olivia, I know you're angry with me,” he starts.

“Well, look at you, scholar. That's the grandest understatement I've ever heard.” I fold my arms. He moves toward me, slowly, and I gulp. *Run, Olivia, run!* But my stupid heart reaches out, desperate to cling to him.

Now, the tears fall. He grunts and hurries toward me, swiping a thumb across my cheek. “Let me take you to my quiet place. Away from the guards, away from anyone else. We’ll take two horses. Not this one, that’s for sure.” He cocks his head at the mare now peacefully chomping away at some hay. I roll my eyes at the grin that wants to erupt from me. I’m insane. He’s insane. “And we’ll talk when we get there. Please?” he says.

My hands shake as I wrap myself tighter. *What am I thinking?* “Okay,” I say.



We’ve taken two horses, at my request. Being wrapped around him while being forced to endure the constant pressure between my thighs might have been too much to keep me steady, and I can’t afford to lose my head. Not yet. Though, I must make a note to ask him if beheading is one of his options for taking me out.

We’ve ridden deep into the woods. We’ve been riding so long, I wonder whether we’re leaving town. At the rush of soft lapping water, however, we pull to a stop.

“We’re here,” he says, jumping from his dark horse. He comes around to me with his hand out.

“I can dismount without your help,” I grumble.

He hisses but steps out of my way, before extending his hand once more. Blinking slowly, I look at his hand and back

at him.

He grunts, retracting the gesture. “It’s this way.”

He ducks beneath tree branches as I lift my skirts and follow him. The gushing yet gentle melody grows louder until we’re standing before a scene of grand, breathtaking, rolling mountains. Before the varying colours of green that seem to brush against the sky, I’m nothing more than an ant. It’s as if I’m not worthy enough, he’s not worthy enough, no one is worthy enough, to stand here and behold this much beauty.

The passing grey clouds and intercepting blue reflects off the still water, though the slapping rush of the subtle waves exposes the deep current that must be strong within it. This place exudes power, a force greater than all of us, and I find myself thinking that if this is what heaven looks like, I might be okay with dying. I can’t imagine anything more beautiful. If heaven surpasses this beauty, I might die a second death.

I’m not aware that my mouth is agape until I catch him staring at me with a smile, as if he’s the one who invented this place. Shutting my mouth and clearing my throat, I prop my hands on my hips. “So, why have you brought me here?” I ask. My eyes are fixed on the picture ahead.

“Come on, let’s sit,” he says, softly.

“I’m okay with standing, thanks.” I fold my arms.

From the corner of my eye, I see him jumping up on a large rock. He sighs. “My father was an ass wipe. Whenever his

voice gets too loud in my head, I like to disappear here. This place helps to put things into perspective.”

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I drop my gaze from the blissful view and turn toward him. “Well, you’re cut from the same cloth. The ass wipe son of an ass wipe.”

He shuts his eyes, groaning. His jaw clenches, and his skin reddens. He rolls his neck and takes a breath before opening his eyes. “I suppose I am.”

The eyes he turns on me, they’re strained, red, and glistening. My heart sinks. I know I’ve hurt him, and I hate that I care. This man has intentions of doing irreversible damage to me. But I can’t help walking toward him, over the smooth, damp stones, hardened against the sole of my feet, barely protected by dainty slippers. Silently, I sit on the smaller rock next to him.

“He’s turned me into someone I don’t want to be,” he says. “But whenever I think about changing, his voice comes back to shame me, and I’m helpless against it.”

“You’re not helpless,” I interrupt.

“What?” he says.

“You’re not helpless. Your father was responsible for the way you moved through the world as a child. Sure, we can’t remove blame where blame is due. He’s the one responsible for the way you’ve viewed people your whole life, but you’re not a child anymore, Adam. You don’t have to rely on your father for permission on how to live your life. You’re the adult

now, in charge of the little boy you once were, and you're treating him the exact way your father treated you. You have a choice. It's a hard choice but if you really want it, you can choose to be different. The only person responsible for who you are today, is you." I look him in his eyes, and they widen at me but well, he might kill me anyway, so I might as well speak my mind.

"How can you say that? You don't live inside my head? You don't see him every night when you close your eyes and every day when you're trying to focus on something else. You don't know what I've been through. You don't know how it hurts," he says.

It dawns on me that this is the first time he's ever expressed his feelings. Rather than alarming and abusing everyone with his rage, he's talking about it. My heart stops beating for a moment, and we stare at each other in silence.

"You're the first person I've ever said this to." He breaks eye contact to look at the soothing view before him.

I swallow. "Why have you chosen to tell me? Is it because you know I'll be taking it to my grave in a few days?"

His reddened eyes flashback at me. "Olivia."

My cheeks tremble, and I look away. My blood is boiling, and it's mostly in reaction to the way my heart warms for him. Here I am, giving him a speech about how he's betraying the child he used to be, while I sit here betraying myself.

“It was a bad idea to come here,” I say, jumping up from the rock and heading back toward the horse.

He jumps down from his post, yelping and hopping toward me. Even in pain, he’s fast as lightning, because he catches up to me. “Olivia, please don’t write me off yet.”

I scoff, “Look who’s talking about writing someone off.”

“Please. Let me explain everything,” he pleads, holding my arms.

Hurt and annoyed, I still choose to sit. He opens up to me about his father, his life, and how he became the debt-collecting beast. He fills in the blanks that only pieces of the story heard from different people weren’t enough to fill. By the end of it, I’m left even more betrayed by my thoughts as I stroke his hair, seeing him as nothing more than a lost boy trapped in an adult body, unsure where to go and who to turn to. The only thing I want to do is wrap him in my arms, and I have the silliest thought of all resounding through me; maybe—he’s not such a big, bad beast after all.

Chapter Thirty-Two



Adam

My lungs constrict, and my feet thud up the small flight of stairs, toward the west wing. My airways have narrowed to the point of forcing several coughs from me. Clutching my chest and slapping at it, I try to calm down, but I can't. The mad thing, it's happening again, and I need to be reminded why it must not.

Doors as tall as the giants of the past loom over me. They mock me, moaning as I push them open. No one else is allowed here but me, and I haven't been here in a while because I've had everything under control. Now, here I am, frozen in the entry, looking around at the cobwebbed room. With as many steady breaths as I can manage, I move over the dark-red carpet. The decoration of this room fails to reflect on the things it holds.

Across the floor lies bits and pieces of broken glass. Next to those are paintings of Agatha. The bitch who betrayed me. My body shakes as I stomp toward them, picking up a frame and looking at the rip in her face. However, in the corner, covered

in a dusty cream canvas, something else laughs at me. The thumping of my heart pushes each foot forward. This reflects the most painful proof of my stupidity.

I'd sent someone to retrieve all these things from the old castle, many years ago. Whenever I'd get close to a woman, and my heart would come close to yielding to trickery, I knew that these would slap me right where I needed it to. Gulping, I remove the canvas in one rush. Dust explodes like puffs of smoke, making it even harder to catch my breath. I wheeze, rushing to the window to pull it open and stick my head out of it.

The fresh air and sunlight steady me for a moment, but it illuminates the small, wooden cot beside me, and my breath is swept away again as I turn to look at it. There it is. The thing that reveals my weakness and the way I let myself be led away by foolish fantasy because of her, a lying cheat. My legs wobble on my way over to the pale soft yellow linen that rests on top of bedding as short as the length of my arm. As the fabric slips between my fingers, floods of tears wash my eyes.

Since Agatha and I were children, we spoke of having our own. The day we got this handmade cot delivered is still fresh in my mind. The image burns through me. Her smile, as we murmured baby names to each other, my ear on her flat stomach, speaking to our imaginary child. The passionate kiss we shared, wishing it were our wedding day already, so we could get started on conceiving, fighting the urge to yield to temptation.

I'm compounded by a wave of emotions. They slam into me with the force of a storm. My blood bubbles and rises, my stomach sinks and gnaws at me, and my soul fights with my body, trying to make an escape. But there's no way to run away from this. It is what has happened and what threatens to occur again.

I run my hand along the grit of the natural wood, the arch that would rest over the baby's head. All the while, my thoughts ruthlessly attack me. *Can you imagine if you'd never caught Agatha with Alfred? She would've conceived, and you might have never known whether the child was yours. Or it might have been obvious as soon as the child left the womb; the midwife would have seen it. The doctor... What would you have done then?*

I kick the curved legs of the cradle, relying on the pain rushing through my toes, to drown out my thoughts. But they don't stop. *Look at you. Now, it's happening again. Isn't it? You can't deny the truth. You've fallen for another. And she'll betray you, just like Agatha. One day, you won't be enough. She'll sleep with a servant. She'll even sleep with Lucian, the man you trust the most out of the rest. You saw how she smiled at him from the carriage. You're a fool, Adam Molotov. You never learn.*

Argh! Grabbing onto the side of the cot, I swing it into the wall. It's such excellent craftsmanship that only a few splinters shoot from it. Yelling at its stubbornness, I kick into it, but the solid wood won't yield. Blasted, dratted, foolish cot! There's a small closet with a natural finish in the corner, and I kick that

too. The doors swing open. Glass feeding bottles and ceramic feeding spoons crash to the ground. My heart delights at the destruction. On the shelves, there are too many baby-sized dressing gowns. I swipe my hand across them, knocking them to the floor before ripping them apart. As they rip, however, so does my soul. It's like I'm destroying something for the child I wish I had.

Hiccupping, a sob hammers at my chest. I promised myself that I'd never fall for another woman again. What's wrong with...

"Adam! What's wrong?" A voice echoes my thoughts, but I'm so lost in the blinding sinkhole, it's akin to hallucination. "Adam." The voice is followed by a touch, and my head expands as I swing around, throwing the hand away. Stumbling backwards when my eyes lock with hers, I crash in the downturned cot that finally shatters.

"Olivia?" She blurs before me, and it's hard to tell if she's a figment of my imagination. But the pain boring into my backside surely slips me back into reality. "Olivia!" I jump to my feet. My jaw shakes, and my organs disintegrate. The room seems to wrap itself in a shadow, cloaking me in its darkness.

She also comes to her feet, her mouth open as she looks around the room. She brushes off her skirts and her eyes focus on me. My eyes flash as it dawns on me that I caused her to fall. It shouldn't matter, and I don't think it ever has until this moment. The guilt that strangles me also cooks my blood.

"Adam," she gasps. "What is this place?"

She steps off toward the shattered painting, and I run forward. “Don’t touch that! What are you doing here, Olivia? I thought I told you never to come here!”

Exhaling loudly, I tower over her. She shakes, and her dilated pupils make her eyes appear black. “I don’t understand.” She reaches out to touch my arm. “We just had a... I thought you were...” she stutters.

Her warm touch stings me, and I shrug her hand away. She’s seen my shameful secret, and I raise my hand toward her neck. My fingers bend from the pressure gathering at my fingertips. It would be easy to squeeze that pity from her eyes before the last three days are up. As I said, dishonesty isn’t a problem for me and killing her now wouldn’t make much of a difference. But I can’t. Cocksucker! I can’t. She watches my hand as it shakes before her, as the vein in my wrist projects from the blood pounding at it. She seems to stop breathing, her neck tenses.

“Leave! Now!” I growl.

She gasps, stepping away from me slowly, before running as soon as she’s within a safe distance. At the door however, she stills. My back is turned toward her, and my shoulders rise and fall with each harrowing breath I pull through my lungs.

“I’m sorry that whoever she is hurt you that much. I hope one day, whether I’m around to see it, you’ll let go of the control she so clearly still has over your heart and actions.” Her voice trembles with a sob, before her feet scurry away.

Though she's already departed, I yell, "I said, leave!" Air slams into my lungs like a horse stepping into my chest, and I roar, grabbing the already fragmented picture frame and hauling it at the door. My armour blows up and for the first time in a long time, I sink to my knees as tears attempt to drown me. I can't even pick myself up to close the door and barricade my embarrassing breakdown. Sounds I don't recognize, throw themselves from my body and before I know it, I'm curled up in a ball on the dirty carpet, hugging myself.

Deciding to choose love? I think I'd rather be struck in the heart with a sword. In fact, I find myself begging in the confines of my thoughts, for death at this very moment, so that Olivia's fate won't rely on my actions. And so that I'll be saved from the aftermath of either decision. If she dies, a part of me will die too. I'll live forever swallowed in the loss of her, dying slowly with each passing day.

If she lives, I'll be tortured with the sort of madness for which there's no escape. If she doesn't love me back, I'll spend the rest of my days withering away, wondering where she might be and despising whoever has her heart. If she does love me back, I'll be consumed with the fear of betrayal, the taunting possibility of the revelation of an ugly truth. I can see no win for myself, whether she lives or dies.

Except that if she dies, I may convince myself that I'm capable of overcoming every weakness. Still, I find myself questioning strength as I remain temporarily crippled by fear.

Chapter Thirty-Three



Olivia

Seeing him like that, my heart inflates until it's too large for my chest. My body buzzes as I stumble into the bedroom. Gloria startles me as she tidies up. She's split in two as the room spins with the speed of a dreidel.

"Oh, dear!" She drops the dusting cloth and, on her way, over to me, there seems to be a shift or a snag in the earthly and spiritual dimensions. She zaps in and out like lightning. She's there, and she isn't until her touch jerks me. Her hand on my head does little to steady me as she lowers me to the bed. "What's happened? Are you overcome with thoughts of the next few days?"

"Yes... No." I blink, shaking my head at the brain cramp. The left side of my chest tightens, and I hear my heartbeat. Gloria moves from beside me and returns with a cup of water and a cool rag.

"Breathe. Oh, Olivia. I hate seeing you like this. If I could help you escape, I would," she whispers the last part.

“It’s not that,” I manage after taking a sip. “Well, it is that, but it’s not. I don’t know what’s happening to me. What’s wrong with me?” I look up at her as my eyes grow heavy with water.

“Oh, sweetheart. There’s nothing at all wrong with you.” She sits beside me, grabbing me into a hug. “It’s perfectly normal for one in your position.” Her body shakes. “Oh, Olivia. I don’t want to lose you. It breaks my heart that I can do nothing to stop him.”

I tremble into her hold. “But that’s just it, Gloria. I’m terrified of what will happen in the next few days, yet, why?” My tears soak through her apron. “Why do I care so much about what he feels? Why does my heart break for him? Why don’t I hate him more?”

She sniffles above my head. “What are you talking about, sweet one?”

Easing out of her hold, I use the cold cloth to wipe away my tears. “I just came upon him, and he was so distraught,” I say, unable to look at her as my shoulders slump.

“He was distraught over the thought of killing you?” Gloria asks, gasping as if for a man like him, such an idea is unfathomable.

“No, which is why this is insane. I don’t think he even thinks about me.” My heart hurts, and my shoulders tremble.

“Oh, Olivia. It’s because you’ve got such a sweet, compassionate heart. I feel like trading places with you. I wish

there were more I could do to help. I despise him!” she moans, and I hurry to stop her lips with my fingers, glancing toward the door.

“Please. I couldn’t bear it if you lost your life because of me,” I whisper.

“I don’t care...” She raises her voice.

“Gloria! Please!” I silence her. “Listen, I came upon him in the west wing...”

“Oh no.” Gloria raises her hands to her mouth. My eyes follow her movements without thinking. She stares at me unblinking, though her eyeballs tremble. She shakes her head. “And you’ve lived to tell the tale?”

Wrinkling my brows at her, I swallow. “Yes, well...” I sigh. “I guess he’s a man of his word and will wait for the day he’s assigned for my death.”

She drops her hands, slowly, and whispers. “Did you go into *the* room?”

I nod.

“What’s in there?” she asks.

“You don’t know?” My mouth falls open.

“No one knows,” she whispers. “You’re the first person who has ever survived wandering into the mouth of the lion.” Those words don’t move me since they don’t mean much in the bigger picture.

Recalling the shattered cot and feeding bottles, along with the ripped frames of the beautiful blonde, my body resumes its uncontrollable shaking. “How could someone be so cruel? He loved her. Truly loved her, didn’t he?”

“Ah, Agatha. Was it pictures of Agatha?” she gasps. “Her skeleton?” she whispers a silent prayer.

Despite myself, I laugh and snuffle, wiping my nose. “No. Didn’t you say he spared her life?” I ask.

“Yes. Well, that was years ago. Who knows what has happened since?” She shrugs.

“Did they have a child together?” I raise my eyes to hers.

Gloria pulls her brows in. “A child?” she whispers to herself before meeting my eyes again. “Not that I know of. No one has ever said anything about that. Why? Did you find a child’s skeleton? Oh, heaven...” She lifts her head to the ceiling, clutching her chest.

“Calm down. No. There were no skeletons as far as I could tell.” I rest my hand on her shoulder and nod at her. “There were baby things in there, broken apart, along with paintings of her likeness. That’s all.”

She sighs. “Thank you,” she whispers at the ceiling with her eyes closed.

“What happened that caused her to cheat on him? Was he a beast to her?” I ask, trying to make sense of it all.

“No. All accounts say that with her, he was the perfect gentleman. He went crazy after she cheated. They say he loved

her so much and was so gentle with her that even after all that, he couldn't even bring himself to kill her. In fact, Alfred was the first ever person he killed, and I suppose that sent him into a spiral of madness," she says.

I shake my head. "Then why would she betray him so? If he loved her, if they planned a life together, even envisioned something as precious as having children together, why would she throw it all away on their wedding day? Why accept his proposal in the first place? How could she be so cruel, knowing she didn't love him and hiding it from him?"

"I don't know." Gloria shrugs. "Like I told you before, she was his first love. He wanted everything with her, but she didn't seem to want the same."

"Maybe she seemed to realize that too late." His voice comes from the door. Both Gloria and I jump up from the bed. "It's okay," he says, holding out his hand to calm us.

"Sir, I was just..." Gloria starts. She looks at me with bulging, panicked eyes, asking me without words if he might have heard what she said about him. Shaking, I look between her and him, unsure about the answer, but hoping for the best.

"It's all right, Gloria. Can you give us a minute?" he asks.

"Certainly, sir." She bows but as she hurries from the room, I reach for her skirts, wishing I could leave with her. But she moves too swiftly out of my reach. After his earlier display, I'm not sure being in the same room with him is a good idea.

Eyeing the door, I gulp. "Adam..."

He looks awful. There are cobwebs on his shirt and pants, even bits of it hang from his hair, and I itch to remove them. The whites of his eyes have turned red and beneath them, his skin is puffy. Heavens, I'm such a mess as within me, the need to hold him battles the need to strangle him and make my escape.

"Olivia," he says my name softly, and I shiver. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. Or pushed you. That was wrong," he grunts.

"No, you shouldn't have," I say, backing away from him. "I was only trying to help you." *Although, I don't know why.*

He clears his throat and nods. "Gloria was right. I lost all my marbles after catching Alfred fucking my betrothed."

Kind of?

"To the outside world, I had everything. Everyone believed that I did, and so did I. But deep down, I had lost so much. There was always this emptiness within me, especially after my mother's death and my father's abuse." He sighs and moves toward the bed. I slither further away.

"Agatha and I met when my mother used to take us out on her promenades. We soon visited her home with her parents. After my mother died, those visits stopped. But I would sneak out and find my way over to her house, waiting for the moments she'd be in the garden with her governess. She'd make up an excuse to stay outside longer and sneak away to play with me. Her parents knew and out of sympathy, allowed me to stay, though I never went inside." A slight smile

attempts to show up on his face, but he swipes it away with his hand.

“I guess in some way, she helped keep my mother’s memory alive. She became like a flower in a field of thorns. Not only did we used to play together, but as we grew, we confided in each other. I trusted her with all my secrets, and she trusted me with hers. Soon, we trusted one another with our love, and we made promises that we reaffirmed together, up until the day of our wedding.” He groans.

“The betrayal was immense. The pain, even more so.” He looks up at me through strained lenses. I swallow, and my heart knocks against my chest.

He continues, “Losing her meant losing the only good part of my life I had left. It broke through every promise we’d made, shattering what resembled nothing more than a farce, a grand longstanding illusion. It released all my father’s ugly words like a swarm of bees. And with nothing more to lose, I snapped.” He snuffles and scowls as if angry at the tears I can see brimming his eyes.

A surge of anguish moves over me, gathering in my throat, and chokes me up. This is the most connected I’ve ever felt to him. It might not be wise, but I stop pulling away. I can’t help myself. For the first time, looking at him is like looking in a mirror. The last thing I want is to feel as if I had anything in common with this man. The beast that he is, I’ve always been secure that I never would.

“Oh, Adam,” I croak. “How did you lose your mother?” I ask, as the sensation of being stabbed repeatedly in the heart by tiny pins runs through me.

He shudders and takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I can’t bring myself to...” he starts but puts his hands on his upper thighs and looks up at the ceiling, clearing his throat.

His admission moves me to talk about something I hardly talk about. “I’m sorry for your losses,” I begin, as the unvisited wound inside me gapes open. “I didn’t know my mother. All I’ve ever known is my father. The pain of losing her seemed too great because he barely spoke of her. I’ll never know what she looked like, what she smelled like, what her hugs felt like or her kisses.” I sniffle.

“She died giving birth to me, and I’ve lived with the guilt of taking her from my father.” Gasping, my eyes fill with tears, and Adam moves over to me. I raise my hand at the sense of urgency which screams that I can’t let him near me. “My father is all I have left,” I say, wrapping myself in a hug. *And you’re the one who has taken him from me, who has punished him and threatened him. And me? I’m a traitor for thinking of you, for feeling what I feel toward you. You don’t deserve my affection.*

“Olivia,” Adam grunts. “I didn’t know,” he groans, reaching out to me and stopping himself as I recoil. “I’d like to continue our conversations over dinner. Will you join me?” he asks, straightening himself.

His face is pained, and I can tell he's struggling with all this emotion. However, his invitation to continue the conversation over food gives me hope. By sharing with each other, his broken and murdered heart will beat again, and he might be encouraged to spare my life. Or he's too shattered to think of anyone but himself. In which case, I'm not sure I can enjoy the food.

The traitorous side of me, however, knows that I'll enjoy hearing him open up more to me about his pains. Pain I should think he deserves, but I don't. This is a terrible idea. But so far, everything I've ever done since I've met him has been a terrible idea. Gulping, I agree to dinner like the imbecile I am. Because it'll require an internal battle to resist him, and I have too little time left to waste, fighting with myself.

Chapter Thirty-Four



Adam

“Carlson, I’d like you to prepare an intimate dinner in the garden for myself and Miss Primrose,” I say, looking away from him and straightening my shoulders.

“The garden, sir?” he asks.

“Yes. The garden. Is that so strange?” I look at him.

This man, always so stoic and unmoved by anything, seems to be flabbergasted. His mouth opens and closes three times in a row, and his jowls jiggle.

“Oh, no. Sir. Not at all. It’s just that you’ve never requested eating in the garden.”

Carlson has also never spoken this much.

“Yes. Well, I think Miss Primrose will appreciate the fresh air, and the evening is a bit warm tonight.” Pulling at the collar of my shirt, I clear my throat.

His single eye widens before he nods. “Aye, sir.”

At the risk of giving the old man a heart attack, I stop him on his way out of my study. “Oh! And how have the rose shrubs been faring?”

He turns around and smiles at me. He smiles now? What in the hell has gotten into him? “Well, sir, they’ve been faring well.”

“Good.” I nod. “Please prepare an arrangement for the table.”

Carlson turns and practically skips away, leaving me with my mouth hanging open. Well, ‘skip away’ is a bit of an exaggeration. He doesn’t skip. However, for his usual military gait, that quick pep in his step can certainly pass for one. He must have gotten good news today.

Unable to focus much on the accounts, courtesy of that strange experience, as well as what fate might hold for the coming days, I’ve removed myself from the desk. The clock ticking away above the door tells me it’s time to meet with the rest of the staff. Up and out, I go, toward the ballroom where the house staff await me. They’re all grinning when I come into the room and though they try to hold it in upon seeing me, they can’t help the happiness pouring out of them.

“Have I missed something?” I ask. “Seems all my staff are full of glee today which is quite different from the usual gloom and doom. What has made everyone so giddy? Have you been informed that I’m dying?” I crease my brows.

Gloria grins. “Oh, you’re quite the jester! No, sir. We’re just so happy for you!”

The other servants nod, smiling as brightly as a burning candle. “Happy for me?” I grimace. “Why ever for?”

“I think it’s taken everyone by surprise that you’ve requested roses for your romantic dinner with Miss Primrose.” Lucian strolls in with a teasing smile. “Something you want to tell us, mate?”

Oh, great. Carlson is a gossip too. I’ve learned more about this man in one night than I have in all the years we’ve known each other.

“It’s not a romantic dinner,” I grunt.

“Sure, it’s not.” Lucian grins, patting my shoulder.

Swatting his hand away, I turn to the rest of the staff. “It’s just that I believe that it would only be fair to Miss Primrose if she were to spend her next few days in a much more welcoming environment.” Why do I even feel the need to explain myself?

“Ooh. Miss Primrose,” Lucian whispers. Not feeding into his obvious attention seeking, I keep my neck straight. Everyone looks at me as if they’re witnessing a baby walk for the first time. A strange prickly sensation runs through me as my cheeks burn.

“Well, it’s only fair, isn’t it? Haven’t I always been fair?” I press.

Their heads fall in unison. One hesitant voice rises from the rest. “Aye, sir.”

“And that’s a no,” Lucian whispers and grins. He’s going to meet the back of my hand soon if he keeps going.

“Whatever. Just get it done,” I mutter.

“Aye, sir.” The female servants giggle, and the male servants smirk.

Deep down, my stomach does a flip, but that’s only because their foolish, juvenile behaviour is catching. Clearing my throat however, I clench my cheeks and flash them my firm jawline.

“Gloria. Make sure that Miss...” Choosing to avoid more of Lucian’s teasing, I adjust. “...Olivia gets to wear whatever she chooses, preferably not restricting, unless she wants to be restrained...” Oh, no. Wrong word. I cough. “...restricted. Unless she wants to be restricted.”

Lucian stifles a grin next to me as I turn to scowl at him, hoping my body didn’t react too obviously to the flashing image of restraining her by her wrists while doing...

“Ahem.” I clear my throat.

“You all right there, mate?” Lucian slaps my back, and I suppress a growl.

“The rest of you can take lanterns out to the garden so that we won’t have to eat in complete darkness. See to it that you find a spot that is flat enough to not cause the food trays to tip over on your way over to us. A small table for two people should do as well,” I inform them.

“Aye, sir.” The staff echoes in an excitable, broken-up chorus before hurrying away like happy Australian quokkas.

A few hours later, as I step in the separate bedroom to prepare for the night, I’m met with a vast choice of outfits.

“Are those inexpressibles?” I ask, lifting the thin garment that mock trousers and holding them close to my body. “I do think these would be quite revealing, don’t you?” I say to my manservant who’s biting his lip and lowering his head.

I’ve never worn inexpressibles, only because they’re terribly impractical. Olivia has already seen all my bits and well, I don’t need to walk around tempting the staff. The thought causes an unexpected flow of laughter to pour out of me, and my manservant gasps. Hearing myself laugh over something so silly strengthens an almost unstoppable eruption of laughter that has tears seeping from my eyes. My manservant turns away, but I can see his shoulders shaking as he struggles with holding back his own.

“Ahem.” I force myself to sober, wiping the tears from my face and turning to look in the mirror. Bad idea, my flushed face is even more hilarious, and I’m tempted to come undone once again. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” I say.

“Oh, sir. Please. Don’t apologize. You seem different, but it’s... nice,” he says, dipping his head.

Ugh. Nice. Shivers run through me. I’m not sure if I want to be perceived as nice. That won’t help business, but tonight isn’t about business. In fact, I’d prefer if business is the last

thing I must deal with. It's why I tried handling the accounts earlier, so that I won't have my thoughts focused elsewhere. Tonight, I want it to be all about her and me, enjoying the mere pleasure of her company.

"I think this will do." I hold up a deep-blue tailcoat. "With a deep-grey waistcoat. No cravat, please. I can't stand how those things strangle me."

"Aye, sir." My manservant nods.

Looking through the mirror on the bed, I eye the choices of bottoms. "Hm. Maybe those white buckskin breeches and knee-high boots," I say.

"Aye, sir." The servant smiles. "Excellent choice," he says under his breath.

Once dressed and out in the hallway, Gloria approaches me, who hands a single rose to me. "What is this? Put it with the rest of the arrangement," I say, walking past it.

She hurries up next to me. "Sir, if I may, I think it would be a sweet, romantic gesture to present Olivia with this rose." She smiles.

"Romantic gesture?" I start, ready to reject the assumption, but the thought of Olivia's face lighting up at the presentation of a single rose has my heart beating wildly. Clearing my throat, I retrieve it. "I suppose it would be a nice gesture. Romantic or otherwise."

Gloria beams, and I groan internally. The staff shouldn't make such a fuss. They're wrapping my stomach in knots,

cramping my belly. And all formality is thrown out the window. Focusing on their informality and simulating irritation helps me to go downstairs without soiling my breeches.

There, Olivia sits waiting for me, and she's breathtaking. She's wearing a red sleeveless gown, without a chemisette. Scandalous. Her curly brown hair falls down the length of her back and over her shoulders, wild, free, and perfect. When she spots me, she rises, and I can see from the way her nipples imprint on the light fabric that she's not wearing a corset. Just like that, my cock hardens. Especially with the way she's staring at me with her mouth rounded. We stand there wrapped up in each other, before blood rushes from my cock to my feet, pushing me forward.

"You look nice," she says, and her cheeks flush, though I'm not sure, but I think there might also be a tint of rouge on her cheeks.

"As do you, but aren't you cold?" I ask, brushing my fingers across her shoulder and down her arm.

She shivers. "My hair helps to keep me warm." She backs away.

Of course. The next few days and my bloody hands as she put it. I can't blame her for her reaction. This must be quite odd for her. Now, my fingers twitch with the hidden gift behind my back. The rose. It's crushed by my nervousness as I hand it to her.

"Erm..." I stutter, looking at the rose with wide eyes.

She looks from me to the rose and as she reaches out to touch it, she breaks out in laughter. “Hm. Thanks.” She fingers the rose’s broken neck and falling petals.

“It wasn’t like that... I don’t know...” I start.

“It’s okay. Thank you,” she says through a grin before gesturing to the seat. I nod, and we both sit.

The wine is served first, which is a great relief. It will help with the quietness between us. Olivia smiles politely at me before turning her head away. This wasn’t the idea I had for tonight. I had hoped it would’ve been filled with more deep conversations. But how can I expect her to want anything to do with me when she doesn’t know if I’ve decided about the upcoming days?

Leaning forward, I whisper, “The servants seem to have all gone mad.”

She stops sipping and smiles, biting her lip before allowing the laughter to escape her. “Yes. I think they may have gotten into the stronger punch,” she says.

I chuckle aloud, grateful that the wine has lightened the air between us. “Do you know they laid out inexpressibles for me?” I smile though my heart is thrusting itself against the cages of my chest, and I’m tapping my feet underneath the table.

She gasps. “Did they? Why didn’t you wear it?” She blushes, the tint on her cheeks glowing even brighter.

“Maybe I want to reserve my bits just for you.” I raise my brows, hiding my face with the wine glass.

“Hm.” She almost chokes on the wine, causing us to grin. “Please. They’ve all seen your bits already,” she manages, playing with the broken rose as the servants come upon us with the trays of food.

Our speech pauses during the meal, but peace is the furthest thing I feel as she sighs and moans with each bite of food that surprises her. I’m not sure if I’ve eaten much of anything at all, or if I’ve just been watching her mouth open and close, darting her tongue out to lick her succulent lips.

Toward the end of the meal, beautiful music floats out of the house toward us. Music that’s as beautiful as hearing her say my name.

She gasps. “Adam. What’s going on? What’s the meaning of this meal and the symphony?” She studies me curiously, blushing.

Unable to control my body’s reactions, I... blush as well. “I don’t know where the music has come from. I told you; the servants have gone mad. I didn’t hire a band,” I explain, leaning forward on my elbows and covering my face.

“Oh.” She chuckles, softly. “Well, we can’t let such lovely music go to waste. And they did go to all that trouble. What do you say? Would you like to dance?”

“Me?!” I gasp. “Oh no. I loathe dancing.”

“Well, that’s a shame. I like dancing very much.” She smiles. “Come on. One dance?”

Grunting, I grab the decanter of red wine and empty the contents in my glass. “Well, that didn’t help,” I say, drinking every drop.

She grins and downs the rest of her wine as well before getting up and clutching the table. “Woo.” She chortles. “I’m a bit dizzy.”

She stumbles over to me and wraps her arms around my shoulders. Vanilla and lavender bathes my senses. Groaning, I shut my eyes. Unlike our other nights together, I’m not certain how this one will end. I find myself, for the first time in a long time, unsure about getting exactly what I want. And it’s thrilling as I hang on to the hope that she’ll choose to share her body with me.

“Come on.” She rubs her soft cheek against my sharp beard. “Dance with me, you beast.”

Damn it. Growling, I stand in a rush, taking her hand. For her, I’ll dance to the end of the earth if she wants me to. I’ll do a thousand things I hate just to make her happy. She grins, clutching onto my arm, pressing her body closer so I can feel her breasts brush against me. They move unrestrictedly and are so soft against the thin dress fabric, it’s akin to her nakedness.

My cock and balls are so tight, I question my decision to wear buckskin breeches. They might not be as skin tight and revealing as inexpressibles, but they also don’t do much to

cover up an erection. I walk with my legs apart for a bit, trying to think about something unarousing and hoping for the best as we make our way toward the ballroom.

“Welcome, lovebirds!” Lucian widens his arms, and I have the instinctive urge to take off my boot and throw it at him. He’s playing a blasted harp, and a few of the other servants are on the cello and violin.

“When did you learn to play the damn harp?” I gasp.

He beams. “I’ve always known. Growing up around the lesser parts, we try to learn all kinds of tricks and trades to earn some money. Repairing a broken instrument and teaching ourselves to play by ear is just one of our many skills, ain’t that right, lads and ladies?” He looks over at his fellow musicians.

“Aye.” They smile and nod.

“That’s right,” Olivia echoes.

“Bear in mind we charge by the hour,” Lucian adds. Gloria grins from the corner, and so does Olivia on my arm.

“Oh, are you?” I ask him, glaring at him. But, at the sound of Olivia’s infectious laughter, I’m unable to do anything but smile.

“Very well. Then we mustn’t waste time.” She steps out and offers her hand.

“I suppose not,” I say, placing my giant hand on her delicate waist and enclosing her hand in mine.

Our bodies are swept away by the music, and it's as if we're floating on air. She stops grinning, and her eyes widen along with her pinkening cheeks. "Wow, you're an incredible dancer," she gasps.

The queasiness of earlier has fallen away. Our bodies and the music have become one. As we spin around together, even more laughter bubbles over from us. As the hour-long symphony ends, we find our heads spinning from a dance that only lasted a few minutes.

"You know what, Olivia Primrose? I'll let you in on a secret." I grin. "But you have to promise you won't share it with anyone else." I lower my voice to a whisper while leaning in closer to her.

She squints. "What is it?"

"I don't think I loathe dancing after all." I chuckle.

Olivia gasps, and my words are cut short by her soft hands cupping my cheeks and pulling me forward, laying the pillow of her lips against mine. Groaning, I pull her body onto me, revelling in the way her hands run through my hair. My fingers tease the back of her dress, but the decision isn't mine. My cock might be on the edge, near to explosion, but I'm surrendering to her control tonight. Even as the need to claim her tears at me. I'll let her decide what she does with her body. In addition to all the other things I've learned today, I think I might be excited by the uncertainty.

Chapter Thirty-Five



Townes

“Oh, thank you so much, Lulinda!” I hug the slightly plump, older woman. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t found me. May your blessings be plentiful.”

She hardly speaks any English, so she smiles and nods as I wave her goodbye. She had understood the word Colderidge and after many elaborate gesticulations, carried me to the nearest point, through the woods, in her rickety carriage.

Knowing too well the location of the house I used to live in, I head in that direction, hoping the new occupants won’t shoot me for trespassing on my walk through the garden. My feet are forced to a pause when a thud of hooves advances toward me. I tremble. I haven’t yet stepped onto their property, so technically, I haven’t trespassed. They can’t punish me for wandering through the woods unless they now own that too. In which case, I hold my breath.

My wrists are covered in scabs and filled with pus. My black cloak hides the blood running from my head, which is

now wrapped in cloth to allow the wound to heal. I cannot handle any more bruising. I just need to get to town. Left in the woods to die and living another day has made me realize that I've been spared for a reason. And that reason is Olivia. I need to save her. So, I'm done with hiding. I don't care what the town attempts. Surely, after they've heard what Heath has done and seen the proof with their eyes, they'll believe me.

Tree branches part, rustling their leaves, and out comes a wonderful surprise.

“Chance!” I gasp. He pulls to a halt before headbutting me and nickering. “All right, hold on there. Your head weighs as much as half my body, I think. You might be knocking me out.” I stumble, brushing his muzzle. Those words mean nothing to him, and he continues to brush his head against me. “All right. I missed you too, mate. Although, it would've been nice if you'd shown up earlier. Could've helped me get to Olivia,” I say, patting his side. “What do you say, mate, mind giving me a ride into town?” I ask.

He doesn't have a saddle on or reins, so I decide to make a grave decision. Tiptoeing through the garden, I don't stop to peek into the house to see whether it's occupied or still vacant. Instead, I hurry toward the stables, with hopes that there are no stable hands or worse, the new tenant in there. Peeking through the gaps in wood, I sigh when there's no one and round the width of it, toward the entrance. Ducking in, I note that it's exactly how I left it, which is great news as I manage to locate an extra saddle, stirrup, and reins.

Luck is on my side, and it encourages me as Chance and I ride into town. People gasp and point as I gallop past them. I don't slow down until reaching the town square. There, I project my scratchy voice as far as I can. Children dash off, whispering. Before long, their adults run along with the news. The town gathers, and two gentlemen step out from among them. They're accompanied by soldiers.

"Sir, I'm Dr. Radcliff, and this is Dr. Wynn. Now, I don't want you to be startled, but would you mind dismounting that horse?" the older gentleman asks.

Doctors. Great. Well, they move fast. Were they just hanging out in crevices, waiting for my arrival?

"Not until you hear me out," I shout. The soldiers train their rifles on me.

"Don't be frightened by the rifles, sir. This is just a precaution for our safety. We won't fire as long as you don't do anything that would harm us," Dr. Wynn, a younger man says. Well, he's around my age, so not young but certainly younger than his colleague with white-grey hair looking at me over his spectacles and stumbling over his words.

"Please. I don't have a lot of time to waste. I don't know how long I was tied up in the woods, but you must believe me. My daughter has been kidnapped. Lord Heath Everton agreed to accompany me on the journey and to pay the debt for her release. But once I informed him that despite his help, he wouldn't be getting my blessings to marry my daughter, he knocked me out and tied me up. He left me for dead!"

A deep laugh rumbles through the residents of Colderidge. “Well, isn’t that rich!” the voice says, and I know instantly who it is. I fear that his voice will live forever in my head, refusing to leave. Heath Everton himself, steps forward.

“This man is lying. He’s an imbecile.” He waves his hand toward me. “Look at him. Doesn’t he appear as one of the lunatics that wander the streets throughout the day and night, with nowhere to sleep? Nary a word can be trusted once it leaves his mouth,” he scoffs.

“And what do you have to say about this?” I ask, raising my wrists and dropping the hood of my dirty cloak. “Do you suppose I did this to myself?” I shake my hands at everyone.

The crowd gasps, and some of them squirm.

“Sir, you must get that wound looked at immediately,” Dr. Wynn says as his colleague peers through his spectacles.

“Well, that is ghastly, isn’t it?” Heath pulls out his handkerchief and presses it against his nose. “He must have been mugged and beaten by people looking to have a laugh,” he says.

The crowd turns to face him, scowling. My body shakes at the possibility of changing their minds about me. A smile turns up on my face, and Heath spots it. His eyes blaze like hell, and those forehead muscles bulge.

“You can’t believe this man? He’s insane! Tell me, do I strike you as someone who would leave a man for dead, solely because he refused to give me his blessings to marry his

daughter? Do I strike you as someone quite so desperate, when I have so many other lovely ladies at my dis... Ahem... I can propose to?" he asks, wandering over to a group of giggling hyenas dressed in silk, batting their eyes at him. He smiles at them, pinching the chin of one, and she chortles.

The crowd mutters among themselves. Their doubt is reappearing, and a weight slams into my chest, attempting to knock me breathless. "He's lying. He's so accustomed to getting what he wants, he can't accept rejection! He became furious and decided he'll get what he wants without me in the picture," I pant. "Ask his servant, Mario!" I say, as soon as I spot him, shrunken next to Heath, looking at the ground. "You were there, Mario! Tell them I'm not lying, please! For the sake of honour," I beg.

Mario doesn't even glance in my direction. The crowd waits too long, and the silence drags on before they fill it with their own speculations.

"Please," I groan. "I need you to believe me. My daughter doesn't have long left. If I don't make it back to where she is with the money, she'll die in two days. The beast has taken her captive, and he's vowed that he'll kill her if I don't bring the money to him in thirty days. Those thirty days are quickly ending, and I can't lose my daughter. Please. I beg of you, accompany me on the journey. My horse knows the way. He'll get us there. If you all can donate some of your wealth to rescuing her, I'll be forever in your debt."

“Ah!” Heath raises his finger. “And now there’s a beast. Do you believe me now? He’s an imbecile with a money-making scheme, and I’m outraged that he’s tried to disgrace my good name. He even tried to mug me once, and I exercised mercy on him, but he clearly needs help. Who knows what he did to his daughter? He might have even killed her, for all we know. Or he’s the one keeping her captive to trick us all into giving him money. He deserves to be locked away, in the asylum or imprisoned,” he yells.

Killed her? Me? I would never. This is outrageous and a complete waste of time. If I can’t have them willingly come with me, I’ll let them chase me there. “Come on, Chance,” I whisper. “Let’s go and get Olivia.”

My brilliant plan is given a swift death, however, as the crowd attempts to block Chance. He rises on his back legs, neighing out a warning.

The crowd yells, “He really is insane!” They gasp.

“Sir! I must insist that you gain control of that horse and dismount him willingly, or we will kill him!” one of the soldiers warns me.

My breath leaves me at that. They can’t kill Chance. I can’t lose my boy due to his loyalty and my stubbornness. Besides, if they kill him, they’ll still manage to capture me. I’m out of choices. With tears falling down my cheeks, I shout a command, and Chance obeys, lowering his front legs and holding still. “That’s a good boy,” I whisper, choking on emotion. “I failed.”

A gushing waterfall of tears blind by eyes. My body can't stop shaking, so much so, that I miss my step on the stirrup. By a stroke of luck, I regain my balance and lower myself to the ground. With my chest rattling, I gasp for air. "Please," I whisper, my voice dying. "Please, we must save her."

Like a cat being grabbed by its scruff, I'm hauled toward them by the neck of my cloak. The small ties strangle me, but the soldiers don't care.

"What have you done with your daughter, you old bastard?" Someone shouts from the crowd behind us. "Let him tell us what he's done!" they demand.

"Well?" The soldier looks at me.

Wheezing, I point at my throat. He rolls his eyes and grabs me by my arm instead. "Where you're headed, you'll wish you were dead. And unless you talk, you'll live out your last days there," he says as I cough. "You have until the mobile cage arrives." He shakes me. "Go on, tell them!"

With snot running out of my nose, I wail. "I'm telling you the truth. There's a man, he's called 'the beast...'" I start, but the soldier grabs me by the back of my neck.

"That's enough," he grunts.

Struggling, I continue to shout, "He's captured her because of a debt I owe. He won't release her until that debt is paid. And if it's not paid, he'll kill her. Please."

The soldier throws me to the ground before giving me the back of his hand. "I said, that's enough!"

Chapter Thirty-Six



Adam

Olivia moans against my lips. She tugs the collar of my jacket, pressing her body into me. Groaning, I let my hands move down the length of her back to cup her arse. She gasps, throws her arms around my neck, and climbs me. I grin, only to be reminded we're not alone by the collective whispering around us.

“Get out. All of you,” I grunt, without looking at the rest of the staff, as I lift Olivia on my hips. She also hasn't looked around at them as her lips leave mine and move along my jaw, toward my ear. Trembling, I glance around quickly to make sure that the coast is clear before slipping the strap of her garment over her shoulders. With one hand, I hold her around me as the other explores her breast. “Do you want me, Olivia?” I ask. “If you don't, we should stop now,” I growl.

She bites my earlobe before whispering, “Isn't it clear enough that I want you?” She gasps as I tug her nipple. “Adam...” she moans.

Biting my lip, I lower her to the ballroom floor. Her eyes are shut tightly as she pulls me forward with her, devouring me.

“I want to hear you say it.” Breaking the kiss, I move my mouth to her neck and down her chest, sucking her breast into my mouth. She nibbles on her bottom lip and throws her head back, but her eyes are still closed. Coming back up to lean over her, I brush my palm against her cheek. “Look at me, Olivia,” I whisper. She swallows as her eyes flutter open. I can feel her racing heart beneath her breast. “You’re in control here,” I remind her. “Whatever you want, I’m at your mercy.”

Her mouth falls open, and she reaches for my hair. She tugs it, pulling hard against my scalp. I groan, gasping and biting my lip. “Is this still off limits?” she asks.

“You want to cause me pain,” I say, pulling my head from her grip to look at her.

She nods.

I blink slowly and smile at her. “Very well.”

She moans and rolls me over on my back, straddling me. She’s a picture to behold with the straps of her red dress falling down her shoulders and her breasts exposed. She grinds her hips against me, smiling at me before raising her hand and slapping me as hard as she can across the face. I growl and bite my lip at the slight sting of it. Her hips speed up against the rough of my breeches, and she whimpers, lowering her face to mine and kissing me desperately.

“Did you like that?” I ask.

She pants. “My hand burns a little.” She breathes against my lips. “Yes, I think I like it.” She licks me and raises to remove her dress. “And you?” she asks, stepping out of the garment.

Her nakedness sucks the air out of me as I unbutton my breeches and lower them over my hips.

“What do you think?” I gesture to my throbbing cock. “I need you, Olivia. So bad it hurts,” I say, and I watch as her eyes grow glossy.

She licks her lips. “Does it really?” she asks.

I stroke myself. “It’s so tight, and my balls feel like they’re about to burst. Please. Soothe it with your mouth,” I beg.

She smiles. “No.” She shakes her head and moves to stand over me so I can look right up at her sweet cunt.

“Olivia,” I growl, raising up on my hands.

“No.” She steps on my shoulder and pushes me back against the floor before lowering herself on top of my head.

Mm. I can’t smell anything but the crack of her ass and the split of her sex. This is heaven. Her name is muffled as I growl it and grip her thighs, stroking her with my tongue. She slaps my hands away and presses her weight into me so that I begin to suffocate. But instead of panic or fear, I’m bathed in gratitude.

She moans and braces herself with her hands against my chest as I ravish her. Her ass shakes on my face, and her thighs grip my head. My brain pulses as my blood slows down, and

air becomes hard to grasp. Still, my cock throbs and when she crawls off my head, air rushes back into my lungs, filling my veins with ecstasy.

“Oh, my goodness, are you all right?” she asks as I wheeze.

Grinning, I reach for her face and pull her down to me. “I’d die for you,” I gasp.

She gasps as well and searches my eyes. Her nose reddens, and her orbs well with tears, but she closes her lids on them and leans into me, kissing me and panting in between. With my arm swung around her neck, we lie there kissing for what seems like blissful forever until she smiles and eases out of my hold. Crawling on her hands and knees, she moves between my legs. Licking her lips, she smiles and brushes her hair off her shoulders before lowering her mouth on top of me.

There are teeth, deliberately, and she maintains eye contact with me as she pulls it along the skin of my cock. There’s nothing to grip, so I rake my nails against the tiles, trembling and gasping as she pulls her mouth off me. I can hardly bask in the relief for too long before her teeth find my sacs, and she nips at them.

Groaning, I grip her hair to stop her, but that only makes her bite me harder until I release her. Swearing, I huff and puff while looking at the ceiling and begging. I hear her grin before her warm, soft, sweet, and miraculous wet tongue moves to soothe the sting. She pulls my length in her mouth again and this time, she avoids the teeth.

My whole body contorts as I gasp for air. “Mmmm.” I gulp. “You’ve become...” I pant. “Quite skilled at that.” I lick my lips before meeting her eyes. She’s been watching me this whole time, and a blasted force slams through me. “Olivia,” I groan.

“Olivia... Mm... Olivia, if y-y-you don’t stop now, I’m going to... I’m going to...”

She pulls her mouth off me. “You’re going to what?” she asks, wiping the sides of her mouth.

I scoot away from her because I can’t have her even breathe against me right now. She grins. “Where are you going?” she asks, grabbing my ankles.

Breathless, I laugh. “I was about to spill all of my seed if you kept going,” I breathe.

“Oh,” she gasps. “Well, we can’t have that,” she says, kissing my thighs.

I jerk and bite my lip. “Why not?”

She smiles. “Because I need you to fuck me.” She kisses right above my pubic bone.

“You need me?” I grin. She nods and licks her way up my abdomen. I grab her hair, tugging her head back before releasing her. “Sorry. Force of habit.”

She reaches for my hand and licks my palm. “Don’t apologize,” she says through heavy lids. “I like it, remember?”

Gulping against my racing heart, I grip her neck and pull her forward, shoving my tongue inside her mouth and feasting on her lips. She moans.

“I like it too,” I say.

She grins. “Don’t I know it.”

Smiling, I lick her lips. “But what if for the rest of tonight, none of us hurt each other?” I say, loosening my grip on her neck and kissing her cheek softly.

“No?” she asks. “Was it too much for you to handle?” She looks over my face and brushes her hand through my hair.

I laugh. “Too much? Never.”

She raises her brows before squinting and mocking me. I kiss her cheek again. “For the rest of the night, I’d like to show you how I feel for you.” I smile.

She pauses and stares at me. Her breathing grows heavy and short.

“If that’s okay with you,” I add, stroking her lips.

She swallows, and her brows shake. But she nods.

“Yes?” I ask, moving my hand right over her heart. It pounds against the pads of my fingers. Fear?

“Mm hm.” She nods again.

Slowly, I lean forward, studying her deep-brown eyes, watching as she lowers her lids. She breathes hard against my lips, and I take my time, brushing mine against hers. It sounds as if she hiccups and stops breathing but when I open my eyes,

hers are closed, and her head is tossed back in a sort of restrained bliss.

At the thought, I chuckle. “You know I had thoughts of restraining you by the wrists tonight? But maybe another night.”

She gasps, and I press my lips against hers, firm but soft, allowing our kiss to linger. She sighs, moaning and running her hand through my hair with the same softness I give to her. Still locked in by our mouths, I roll her onto her back, bracing her spine and head with my hands before pulling them away once I’m sure she won’t slam into the tiles beneath her. With her arms around my neck, she deepens the kiss, wrapping her legs around my hips. The tip of my cock grazes her wet slit, and I buckle.

“You’ve done the impossible. You–You’ve bewitched me.” I pant against her lips. In tears, I kiss her. “Your lips are soft and sweet like plump, ripe berries. They’ve awoken something in me that I never expected. You make me want to be a better man.” Pressing my forehead against hers, I shiver while easing into her.

She moans against my lips, and I dissolve. “Adam,” she sighs. “Oh, Adam. You make me crazy. You make me do crazy things,” she gasps, gripping my back and holding me close. The friction of our skin is maddening, and my body reacts by thrusting deeper and harder until I’m moved to whimpering.

“Olivia,” I pant her name.

“Adam,” she gasps in return, moaning sweetly against my ear.

I’m approaching the height of my climax when the ballroom door is flung open, and I’m hopping out of Olivia and protecting her with my body.

“Boss.” Lucian’s face is stern. The playfulness and informality of before, no longer present. “We have a problem.”

With my hard cock all out for his viewing pleasure, and Olivia’s naked body behind me, I growl. “Couldn’t it wait?”

Funny how it matters to me, now, who sees her body. *That’s what happens when you fall in...* No. It’s only because of that earlier thought I had of her smiling at Lucian and reading too much into it.

Her legs try to remove themselves from underneath my arms, to cover herself some more, but I’m all the coverage she needs. He’s already seen me naked and fucking, but her? No. I can’t afford to tempt him with her perfection. Also, if she thinks we’re done, she has another guess coming. I intend to have my release and bring her to hers. Whatever problem this is, it’s going to have to wait. As I said, business is off the table for tonight. Gripping my arms against her legs, I keep her locked into me.

Lucian turns sideways, shifting the collar of his shirt. “No, it couldn’t wait. You might... uh... want to get dressed for this.”

Hissing, I lower my head. “And you’re about to be knocked flat on your face if you don’t leave this room right now.” My

voice is deep and menacing.

“Okay. If you’re going to be stubborn about it. I thought you might want to know that Townes won’t be returning with your money,” he starts.

Olivia gasps behind me. My interest is piqued, sure, but I don’t want anything to ruin what’s happening between us tonight. However, I think that ship has already sailed. Her legs shiver against the side of my ribs.

Sighing, I scowl at Lucian. He’ll pay for this. “Why is that?” I ask, now that it’s clear Olivia can’t think about anything else but her father, and that’s quite the mood killer, to be fair.

“One of our men in Colderidge has just galloped on horseback toward us. They say he’s being held in jail tonight and will be transported to the asylum tomorrow. He’ll die there,” Lucian says.

Olivia shoves against my back and pulls her legs from beneath my arms. “No, no, no,” she says in a shaky breath. As I turn to look at her, she’s as pale as she can get, and she’s shivering.

“Olivia...” I start.

She throws her hand out at me. “No. You.” She points. “Stay away from me! You’re the reason... you’re the reason...” Hyperventilating, she clutches her chest and swallows hard before hurrying toward her dress. I take a

glance in Lucian's direction to make sure he's not watching her as I come to my feet.

"Olivia..." I try again, but her eyes are wild; they even shake a bit with the rest of her body. As she connects with mine, hers fill with tears.

She wraps her hands around her body and looks between me and Lucian. "Please. Someone must take me to him. Someone must!" Her eyes bulge, and she wraps herself even tighter as if she's shrinking away. She's like a cornered animal up for slaughter, and my heart bleeds with the confession I've been dreading to make.

Hurrying across the floor to her, I open my arms but as soon as I get close to her, she pounds my chest with her fists. "No! Let me go! Let me go!" I wrap her in my arms despite her fighting, and she slides down my body, sinking toward the floor, wailing. "Please, Adam. Let me go. Release my father from this debt. Release me from being your prisoner so I can get back to my father, please." She's dangling in my arms, sinking each time I scoop her up.

Dropping to my knees along with her, I cup her face. She's throwing her head from side to side, avoiding contact with my eyes and muttering unintelligible words as tears splash from her lips toward me. "Look at me, Olivia. Olivia, look at me!"

The words are shoved back inside my chest by the fear that once I confess this, she'll never have a reason to stay with me again. But at the sight of her crumbling to fragile little pieces, I can't think of protecting my ego, more than reassuring her.

It's like trying to push a donkey up a hill as I try to get past the block in my throat, but I force the words out. "You're already free, Olivia. I made this decision that day after you came upon me in the forbidden room."

She looks up at me as color rushes back to her cheeks. Still, she shakes her head as if there's water clogging her ears. "What?" She shivers.

Letting go of her, I step away from her though it kills me to do so. "You're free, Olivia. I can't keep you here if you don't want to stay." Temptation urges me to take the words back, throw her over my shoulders, and take her back to the bedroom, locking her in there. She'd get over her father's death eventually. I may even convince her to want me again but... sard it! Turning away from her, I growl at her before I change my mind. "You should go. Now."

Picking up my breeches, I pull them on because the draft has become uncomfortable, and it gives me something to occupy my mind. Before I can step off, I'm struck by her presence wrapped around me. She squeezes her arms around my abdomen and kisses my back.

"Thank you. Thank you," she says before running off and leaving me to storm upstairs, lock myself in the room, and give one of the servants the key with strict instructions not to let me out until morning when Olivia will already be long gone.

Chapter Thirty-Seven



Olivia

My head is spinning with what's just happened. As the night wind whips through my hair and night dew moistens my skin, I can't believe I'm free. It's like I'm living in a fantasy. The reins beneath my hands, pulling at my flesh, remind me I'm not.

Adam gave orders for me to be transported by carriage, though he gave those orders to his men, not me. I left him in the ballroom, and he didn't come outside to wish me farewell, which was a bit annoying since I had to be sending news to him through one of his men who kept running back and forth. Eventually, I was able to convince him that going by a single horse would be faster, and he agreed only if I allowed a few of his men to accompany me. It's not safe for a lady to be riding through the woods on her own. It was hard to agree to that as I wondered whether this might have been a trick. That he'd made me believe that I was free, only to have them kill me on the journey to Colderidge.

So far, there's no bullet in the back of my head, and I'm happier than ever that I agreed, especially with what almost happened to me when I was out in the woods on my own. The memory of not knowing my fate that night still burdens me. The horror of having those bastards pressing themselves against me, mocking me and laughing in my face still holds my breath captive. The image of those men being shot to death so matter of fact by Adam has never left. It flashes into my mind's eye even now. The feeling I got after being brought to safety by him, it's still present.

Shivering from the memory and being aware of the secrets the dark blanket of the night might hold, I press my feet gently into Lucky, the mare with whom I bonded. She and I are like kindred spirits. I knew I loved her when she challenged Adam.

She goes faster by my urging. Her galloping hooves are accompanied by the hooves of six horses carrying the armed men sent to protect me, and who also do an exceptional job at lighting my path with their lanterns.



We've been riding all night and as we arrive in Colderidge, the soft sunlight warms my face. My eyes aren't weighed down, and there isn't the slightest sense of tiredness in my bones. Determination is the only thing that consumes me as I ask for instructions to the jailhouse. Also, I'm still happy to report that there's no bullet in the back of my head. Although, the men who played my bodyguards for the night were certainly

grumpy by morning and left me alone as soon as we entered Colderidge to find an inn to lay their heads.

Women and men alike gawk at me and my attire as I race through the town with the wind attacking my brown mass of loose curly hair, leaving it frizzy, large, and tangled on top of my head. I hadn't gotten time to even don my stays, and my breasts have ached, bouncing and jerking against my chest the entire ride here. When I heard that my father was given a death sentence, brushing out my sex hair, braiding it, and donning a suitable riding habit wasn't high on my list of priorities, and it still isn't. They can keep their judgement. Some people have dire problems and if they try to disgrace me for what I'm wearing, I'll tell them just that.

Jumping off my horse, I run into the building where my father is being held. I've arrived just in time to see them shoving him, all beaten up, out the back door and toward the mobile jail cell for transport. "Papa!" I yell as my internal organs collapse. Forcing my feet forward, I launch myself at the contraption, banging on the bars.

"Olivia?" He spins around to look at me. "Olivia! My sweet child! You're alive! You're alive!" he sobs, clutching the bars as well and gripping my hands against it.

Nodding frantically, I smile as my tears wet the floor of his cage.

"What is today? Lunatic Mondays?" A guard throws his hands up in the air toward us.

“Ma’am, you have to get off that cell!” another guard yells, but I ignore him.

“What have they done to you?” I whisper, cupping my father’s face.

“Oh, my dear. This wasn’t these animals. It was Heath. He beat me up and left me for dead, that scoundrel. Then he made everyone believe that I was crazy. I’m so sorry that I ever thought he’d be a good match for you. He’s an animal! Oh, my sweet girl.” He strokes my cheek with calloused, dirty fingers.

“Heath did what?” I gasp. I knew he was a bit of an arse, but I didn’t know he was cruel. I’m going to kill him!

“Ma’am! If we must speak to you again, you’ll be joining him in this cell!” the guard shouts.

Spinning around to look at the guard, I narrow my eyes. “This is my father! For what reason are you holding him here?!”

The guard’s mouth falls open. His lips shake as he looks around at his fellow officers. “Well... uh... Are you his only daughter?” he stutters.

“Yes!” I yell.

“Oh... uh... um... well, we thought he had something to do with your disappearance, and we were ordered not to release him until he told us where you were, and we verified your safety,” he says with a nod.

“What? That’s absurd! Well, here I am!” I throw my hands up in the air.

They look me over from head to toe and curl their lips, no doubt judging me. “Yes. There you are.”

“Well? What are you waiting for? Release him,” I say.

“There’s also the matter of him spouting off madness that you were kidnapped by a beast...” he starts.

“Yes?” I ask.

“Well, it’s clear that he’s a lunatic. You were just out working in a brothel and drove your father mad.” The guards snicker.

Stalking toward them, my father yells out a warning to me. But I get close enough to them to stare them down. “I was kidnapped by a beast of a man, that’s true. And maybe if you’d have done your job instead of labelling an honest man crazy and arresting him, you’d have been able to find that out for yourselves. I’ve been held captive for the past month, and you could have spent your time arranging for a search team when you heard my father’s claims. Instead, you’ve sat here and snickered, leaving me for dead and assigning an additional death sentence to my father.”

“Olivia...” my father warns. His shackles rattle as he moves across the floor of his cell. The cheeks of the young guard, around the same age as me, reddens, and he flashes an uncertain glance between my father and me.

“No, Papa. They need to hear this. I’m just lucky my captor had a change of heart and released me. Or who knows what would have happened if it was left up to these guys? Even if

you were crazy as they say, it's still their job to investigate claims and not just go on the word of a 'perceived gentleman' who it's clear to see, is an even bigger nitwit. Is it not?" I ask the small group of officers without waiting for an answer. "Also, how dare you?! I've never even stepped inside a brothel. Even if I did, would that make my claims of kidnapping false anyway?"

The guard's jaw slackens, and he clears his throat. "I'm sorry to hear that you've been through that ma'am."

"That woman's got quite the mouth on her, doesn't she?" one of the guards scoffs.

"Yes, but she's right," the young guard mumbles.

Well, look at that. The imbecile has a heart. Thank goodness for that. Quickly, he removes the large key from his waist.

"Mr. Primrose, you have our sincere apologies," he mutters as I help my father down from the cage.

Papa and I don't answer him or give him another single moment of wasted attention as we embrace each other.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're alive!" My father kisses me on the cheeks and forehead. "How did you manage to escape?" he asks as we make our way outside.

"I didn't have to. He let me go." I squeeze Papa's arm as my own heart races. I haven't been able to think about what Adam's letting me go has meant. Still, my cheeks heat as my mind runs on his change of heart and what he'd said as I'd let my tipsiness give me an excuse to bathe in my desire for him.

He wanted to show me how he felt about me as we fucked all night. My blood rushes through me and gives me wings. If his heart swelled and his whole body warmed the way mine did as we held each other, and as he moved through me tenderly and passionately, does it mean what I think it does?

It must, as he's forsaken his pride to release my father from his debt and set me free. I know how seriously he takes lingering debt and people who think they can outsmart him. I've seen him kill people before me without batting an eye. I know he's cold and ruthless. This man has beaten my father to a pulp and imprisoned me. I should hate him and want to see him burn in hell.

Yet, I know he's risked his reputation, the thing that has meant so much to him for so long, to give me what I need. I acknowledge that he's finally done what he should've done in the beginning. He should've never hurt my father, never imprisoned me, or threatened my father and my life to bed me. I know I owe him nothing, and this 'gesture' was something he owed me and finally paid. It isn't logical to feel the way I do for him, but I can't help feeling like our slate has been cleaned.

My father, of course, is baffled by the thought of Adam casually releasing me without any strings, which makes sense. He's thinking logically. As he asks me questions, I try to dodge, and we round a corner. We run into a gathering of the entire town's population, ordinary and elite people alike. As usual, in a small town, news sparks the ears of residents, one

after another, setting their tongues ablaze. If there's one thing that can bring together the classes, it appears to be gossip.

Heath comes barrelling toward us, pulling me away from my father and sweeping me up in his arms, wrapping me tightly against him. "Olivia! You're alive! My sweet Olivia! I'm so happy you're alive. I was disquieted by your absence and not knowing whether you'd come back to me. If I knew where to look, I'd have come to get you. Oh, I don't know what I would've done if you'd never returned. But now that you're back, we'll make haste to spend the rest of our lives together. I never want to lose you again."

This delusional piece of horse crap. "Let me go, you pig!" I say, slapping him across the face and kneeing him in the crotch.

Wincing, he releases me before gathering up his ego off the asphalt and turning to face everyone. "She's clearly in shock." He laughs.

"In shock?! I've been telling you this since day one!" I say loud enough for all to hear. "But you've failed to listen because your idiocy is too loud for you to hear anything but your own thoughts. If anyone should be locked away in an asylum, it should be you and your empty brain. I will never marry a serpent like you, understood? Never. If you were the last person on earth, and I had to rely on you for survival, I would rather die. I disliked you before, but I despise you even more now that you let the town think that my father was insane, and you got him locked away."

Heath's rage overflows through the redness of his cheeks and the bulging of his veins.

Turning to everyone, I say, "My father was telling the truth, you bunch of nitwits!"

Heath grabs me by the jaw. "Look, it's clear that you've lived through some trauma. So, I'll let this slide. Going by the bruises on your neck, I can tell you've been raped and have no affection for the male sex, but with time, you'll come to see..."

Pulling my jaw from his grip, I pierce him with my gaze. "I wasn't raped. And don't you dare place one of your filthy swine fingers upon me again, or I'll make sure you regret it."

He laughs a little, a soft, quick giggle at that last part before his face transforms as if just hearing the first part. His brows narrow, his forehead seems to expand, and he bares his teeth. "You—You are a whore!" He looks at his hands as if they've been soiled. "Never touching you again won't be a problem, you filthy cunt rag. What did you do? Seduce your captor to make your escape? It would've been more honourable if you had died, keeping your virtue. You're nothing more than a slut, and you deserve to be thrown into the cell with your father! And the man who captured you, who stole what was mine deserves to be killed!"

"Hurrah! Lock them up! Lock them up!" the crowd yells.

"I was never yours!" I try to yell over the chanting crowd, but it's impossible to get past their shouts.

“We’ll search the ends of the earth for him and if the words of the whore’s imbecile father are to be trusted, then someone must know the whereabouts of the man called ‘the beast.’ He’ll be slain for messing with what’s mine!” Heath screams.

The men who already have their weapons on them raise their pistols and swords in solidarity. My stomach drops for Adam. I know he’s surrounded by guards and security. I’m aware he seems invincible. Yet, this wariness persists within me. Trying to get a word in over their loud chanting is a lost cause. Turning to my father, we make a silent agreement to escape. However, our efforts are quickly thwarted by the guards who snap shackles around our wrists.

The crowd erupts in cheers. Heath’s grin widens, and I shudder. I’ve just gotten my freedom back; I’m not about to lose it again. My kicking and shouts do nothing to help me as I’m dragged inside the jailhouse and thrown into a cell with Papa, all the while thinking, along with us being trapped, that Adam can’t die.

Chapter Thirty-Eight



Adam

It's fast approaching twenty-four hours since Olivia's left, and I can't even bring myself to eat. I don't want to see anyone. Anger consumes me, and I have no one to blame but myself. If only I'd chosen grace and charm when we had first met; things would have been different. Well, if I forget the consequences that brought us together in the first place. Surely, if I'd chosen grace, she'd have been long gone with her father since day one, and I'd have never known the scent and taste of her.

Gulping from the acid that attempts to disintegrate the organs working hard behind my chest to keep me alive, especially now, I groan. I don't think I've spoken a single word to anyone else; the only life worth living is the fantasy that exists in my head. At least there, I can keep her with me forever.

Before her, nothing really fit. There was always this longing, this gaping hole within me that needed to be filled, and I ran away from it. I silenced it. I murdered my needs and

desires, like I've murdered others. I've rebelled, I've caused people pain because of my own pain. I decided the world was a dratted ball of horse shit, and I treated it as such. People were nothing more than animals or objects. Feelings were curses put upon us to fulfil some cruel controversy. I was slowly dying inside and killing everything and everyone around me, both literally and figuratively. Inside me, there was a dull emptiness where organs made of metal clanked around the shell of a body.

She forced me out of that and now, she's gone forever. I've bled out before her, and there's no way to force everything back in the place they used to be. She's resuscitated my soul. She's made me believe in miracles, in something or someone greater than all of us who has mercy on even a beast like me. It makes sense, that for someone like me, I should be punished in this way. To be forced to live without her, because to find her and beg her to return to me, and to give me a second chance would mean falling back into old patterns and coercion. If I love her, then I must love her enough to let her go. Even if letting her go feels like death. I caused this on myself and though my chest tightens to admit this, I need to assume responsibility for my actions.

The drapes are pulled shut, and the room is pitch dark. Whether it's day or night, I can't tell, and I don't care. Outside the window, down below, there's a roar of voices, shouting something or another. My legs, arms, head, and body, they all feel too large to carry. The shouts pass through my thoughts like a vague memory. A knock on my door barely jolts me

before it bursts down. I suppose all the people I've angered have come for their revenge. It's only fair that I die for all I've done. Remaining still with my back turned and my eyes closed, I don't attempt to defend myself.

“Boss!” It's Lucian. I sigh. “Boss!” He tries again. If I don't answer, he'll understand the message I'm trying to send him. “Boss! Mate? Adam?” he says. “Look, get your arse out of this bed. There's a whole town of people outside the gates, holding torches, pistols, rifles, and swords, banging on the locks and climbing the gates to come in. They're shouting something about Olivia, justice, and coming for the beast. What do you want us to do? We can open fire on them, but we're outnumbered. Give us an order.”

My heart sinks. Olivia has sent the whole town after me? I should've expected this; what did I think would happen? This is proof of the way she feels about me. If she despises me this much, I deserve to get what's coming to me. I'm an animal, and I deserve to be slaughtered like one. I don't deserve to be happy or to live a life filled with love. I've made my bed, and I'm lying in it.

Lucian and all the other men already know the lookout points, the firing posts hidden around the mansion, they can fight to protect themselves. But they shouldn't fight to protect me. Whatever happens next is out of my hands. Whether I live or die isn't up to me, but a world without Olivia's love and filled with the memories of how I hurt her and the one she loves, is a world I'm all too happy to leave. If the people want justice, then they should get it.

“Cocksucker!” Lucian yells. “How can you expect to win Olivia back if you’re dead?” Lucian tries but when that doesn’t work, he swears on his way out of the room, slamming the door behind him.



Lucian

'Gunshots are muffled by the bodies that they fell. Slashing swords bounce off each other, ringing like bells. Grunts and howls, shouts and yells. This mansion has become a different type of hell.'

"You must go with the other servants, Gloria! I won't take no for an answer, and there's no time to argue!" I gasp, looking behind me as the front door breaks down.

"No, I won't leave you," Gloria cries. "Give me a gun. I'll fight." Picking her up, I hurry with her toward the back door. "No! Put me down! I'm not leaving without you!" she screams, digging her short nails into my arm.

"And I'm not risking your life," I say. "I love you, please but if you keep on struggling, you're going to hand them an advantage to shoot me when I'm not looking because I'm too focused on you. Please. Go. Toward the opposite side of the woods, so these blood-hungry animals won't see you. Release some horses from the stable. And please, for heaven's sake, don't get caught. Go to Lhyrenia and if I survive, I'll meet you there in three days. If a week's passed without my arrival..." Emotion chokes me. "Move on with your life."

She sobs and shakes her head as I block her path from re-entering the house. Her sweet, big eyes tempt me to go with her. Her trembling small red lips beg me for a kiss, and I grip her head, smashing mine against hers. It's frantic and painful. I

must pull her off my body when we're done and push her out the door, slamming it shut.

"Go, Gloria!" I groan, slamming my fist against the closed door. "Live. Please. Because I need to see your face again." Glancing through the barred window to make sure she's not still standing there, our eyes meet. "Please," I mouth. "Go."

Screams echo from behind me, and my heart is in my mouth. Gloria hiccups and wipes her eyes. Her whole body shakes as she mouths, 'I love you.' Her words give me the motivation to live and as I watch her hurry away, I pull out my two pistols and charge toward the action. Dipping behind columns, I can see some of our men being slain.

The people of Colderidge are ruthless. It's as if they've been given a reason to unleash all their pent-up anger. One of the male intruders carves out a heart senselessly before one of our men beheads. A woman releases a shrill cry, yelling, "My husband! My husband!" She turns to retaliate, pointing her gun at the guard responsible, but before she knows what's coming, I shoot her in the chest. I spot another intruder about to swing his sword at the same guard, and I shoot his wrist. His weapon clamours to the ground, and everyone turns in my direction. Blast!

There are only three shots available per pistol. I've already fired two, and I spot at least a dozen intruders and only five more of our men. I don't know how many of their own shots have been fired, and my chest aches. Taking a deep breath and counting, I bolt toward another column. A bullet ricochets off

the one I just left. Another crashes into the concrete pole shielding me.

I stand next to the staircase, guarding the path toward the blasted beast, the man they've come for and the man who won't get his dratted arse up and at least fight with some damn honour. But damn it, I'm loyal. And despite his selfish coldness directed toward me throughout the years, he's still my friend. Huffing, I push my head out and ready my gun to aim when a sword comes swinging toward my neck. My eyes widen as my life flashes before me. By a stroke of luck, metal piercing his back and boring through his chest stops the perpetrator. However, since it'll take too long for my rescuer to pull the weapon from his victim and defend himself, he doesn't see the gun pointed at his head.

"Duck!" I yell. His eyes widen, the shot fires and misses his head by a hair. I empty my pistol on the man behind him. "Cover me!" I order my rescuer. He braces his foot on the body on the ground and pulls his sword out in a hurry before spinning around and swinging.

From behind him, I raise my other pistol. I only have three shots left, and I must make it count. He ends up in a sword fight with one surprisingly skilled intruder who knocks his sword out of his hand. I fire, blasting our enemy in the face. However, another one of them, wielding swords, takes him out before me. There are only four of our men left, in addition to me and about six more trespassers. Better odds, I must admit, but still, we're outnumbered.

Scurrying as close as I can get, I whisper over the smashing of swords and explosions of pistols. “How many shots do you guys have left?” Three men say one, the other says none. Damn it. It would’ve been perfect if they all had one each, and I had two. There’d be a clean sweep of all six of them but with one unable to be relied upon, it could still give these cocksuckers an advantage.

After grouping together and shielding the one man without any bullets left, I yell, “Fire!” We all take aim and release our bullets, knocking a few of their men down. But before I can celebrate, there’s a dull ache in my stomach. The room shifts. The bodies on the floor double, blurring before me. My knees buckle, and my body slams into the floor.

Blinking in confusion, I shake off the dizziness and look down. Blood soaks my shirt. All I can see is Gloria’s face, and guilt tears at me, causing the most pain. *I told her I wanted to see her again, and now I’ve gone and died*, I think to myself. The room goes black for some time before I’m awakened.

In small, fleeting moments of consciousness, I hear voices calling for surrender. I don’t know where the voices are coming from. New attackers must have entered from outside, and more of our guards might have come through the back, I’m not sure. But the gunshots stop firing, though my ears still ring. And swords stop clamouring together. In fact, the only sound before complete silence is departing footsteps, fleeing the mansion.

The wound in my stomach burns through me like acid, rising through my chest so that I taste blood. Trying not to cough, I apply pressure to the wound with my hand before pulling off my shirt and breathlessly trying to tie the area. As my heavy head falls backward, and I pant, looking toward the ceiling wondering what my fate might be, a shadow looms over the room. Fire crackles and pops at the doorway. Smoke swarms the room, and heavy booted footsteps stomp toward the direction of the staircase. As I turn my head, hoping it might be the beast, finally, I see someone equally as large but not Adam at all. He has dark hair and bulging muscles in his thighs and even his back. They burst through his ripped shirt and ripple when he takes the stairs two at a time, heading toward Adam. Extending my arm in a useless fashion, I clutch at air. He's too far away from me to grab. And when I attempt to speak, my words fail me as I pass out once more.

Chapter Thirty-Nine



Olivia | Flashback

“Papa, I have a plan to get us out of here but I’m going to need your help,” I whisper.

“What? No. You’ll get us killed.” My father shushes me.

Shaking my head, I hold his shoulders. “I promise I won’t. Trust me.”

“Olivia, just wait until tomorrow. They only hold ‘whores’...” He grimaces. “I’m sorry honey,” he whispers. “They only hold them in prison for one night.”

“And what about you? They’ve been locked up for lying and trying to run a money scheme. You won’t be out by morning,” I say.

“Yes, well, they only have Heath’s word, claiming that. With any luck, by the time he gets to the beast, he’ll be dead,” he responds. “And all his words will leave everyone’s damn ears, finally.”

“And what if he doesn’t die? What if he kills... Papa? I can’t wait until tomorrow morning. I must stop him.” I shake

my head. My fingers tremble.

My father creases his brows. “What do you mean, stop him?”

“Papa... Adam,” I gulp. “I know this is going to sound absurd, and I hope you don’t despise me after I tell you this. I know what he did to you. I know what he did to me. But I— I’ve fallen in love with him, Papa. Over the last couple of weeks, he’s exposed his heart to me and despite myself, I love him. I don’t want to lose him. He can’t die. He just can’t. Not now.” My lips wobble, and tears gather in my eyes.

My father’s eyes widen in horror, at first. He stares at me in complete silence for a moment before dropping his gaze and shaking his head. “You’re right. I don’t understand it.”

“Papa, please. He saved my life from ruthless thugs who tried to take advantage of me...” I start.

“He took advantage of you!” He gestures to my neck.

I swallow. “I... gave myself to him. Papa, please. You don’t have to understand. Please just help me bust us out of here. We’ll hide you, and I’ll go after Adam. I’ll come back for you. I promise.”

“And what the hell are you going to do when you go after Adam? Fight Heath?” he asks.

“I don’t know!” I whisper aloud. “Look, this is crazy, all right? And if it is, there’s a chance I’ll wake up one day and realize I’ve been insane this whole time. Maybe I’ll leave then, but I won’t leave now. I must know what this is between us. I

can't live my life with these questions leaving a gaping hole inside me. I need closure. I need to reconcile these feelings within me. I need to go back to him and see if there's a chance at a happy future for us."

"Olivia, you're not thinking straight." My father shakes his head.

"Papa, if you try to prevent me from leaving, you're no better than these guards holding us captive, and you're no better than Adam imprisoning me," I say.

"I'm nothing like them! I LOVE you, and I want to keep you safe. I want to protect you. What if you don't wake up one day because he KILLS you, Olivia?!" My father digs his eyes into me.

"Papa, I know what I'm getting into. And it's a risk I'm choosing to take. This is my choice. I get to choose for myself what I want and the experiences I want to have. He's set me free, Papa. Please find it in your heart to do the same for me. Don't take away my freedom of choice." I wrap his hand in mine.

The pads of my fingers rest up against his wrist, and it beats wildly. "Papa, relax." I kiss his hand. "This is what I want. Please."

His eyes fill with tears as he stares into mine. He bites his lip, hisses, and swears, squeezing my hand and kissing it. "My stubborn, stubborn girl!" He grunts before releasing a shaky breath. He nods but averts his eyes. "I'll help you," he says.

“Thank you, Papa.” I pull him into a hug.

He grumbles and pushes away from me. “Yes. Just don’t die trying to do something stupid. And for heaven’s sake, don’t get me killed along with you.”

I smile. “No. This will work. Carriages of people and others on horseback have left in search of Adam. Listen, do you hear how quiet it is outside?” I ask. “Look around. For the past hour, there’s only been one guard pacing around outside the cell. I think that might be because some of them have left with the crowd.”

“How do you know that?” My father narrows his eyes at me.

“I don’t know.” I shrug my admission. “It’s just a guess and a feeling. Chances are if there are other guards out there, it’s not a lot. That one guard passes by here every fifteen minutes. If he’s the same one who appears again, I’ll know I’m right. We should be able to take him down and the others if we’re smart...” I’m talking fast.

“You mean, kill them?” he asks. “You’re willing to kill them?” he whispers.

I turn to look at him. I’ve forgotten how abnormal this all is, talking of killing people so casually. “Yes. If I must. Unless they let us walk out of here unharmed. Think of it like a duel of honour, Father. This is a matter of life and death,” I say.

“You’ve changed,” he gasps.

I simply nod. “Get ready.”

When the guard appears again, I hurry to the cell door and get his attention. “Do you think it would be possible to get some water in here?” I ask, wiping my hand against my chest. His eyes fall to my unrestricted breasts, shielded only by clinging fabric. “It’s hotter than a pig’s armpits.” I flip my hair to the side, off my neck to fan myself with my hands. “We could pass out from this heat. Couldn’t we, Papa?” I ask, over my shoulder.

“Yes. Please, only if it’s no bother,” he rasps.

Crooking my finger at the guard, I whisper in his ear so that my father won’t hear what I have to say, “I think you might even be able to help me satisfy another thirst.”

He grins, and I grin. His breath slaps me in the face like a hefty whiff of human waste.

“I do enjoy a man in uniform. Are you as strong a lover as you are a man?” I ask, breathing out slowly and almost choking on the inhale.

“Being blessed to be born a man makes being a strong lover a part of the territory. I don’t think you’d be able to handle a real man,” he groans, shifting his legs.

“Don’t you want to try me?” I ask, dropping my eyes to his crotch, and he chuckles.

“I’ll get you that water, and I’ll take you to a private cell.” He winks.

I bat my eyelashes at him. “Thank you.” I smile, before turning around and looking at my scowling father’s face.

“What was all that whispering about?” my father growls.

“Nothing of importance.” I wave. “Just get ready to disarm him,” I say.

He flares his nostrils. “This is a terrible idea,” he whispers aloud just as the guard strolls up to the cell with the water and a huge, smelly smile.

The large keys jingle as he pulls them from his belt and unlocks the cell door. My father and I exchange a look before I take the water from the guard’s hand and move in closer to his body. “I can’t wait another second,” I whisper.

“I was going to take you somewhere private to spare your father but if you don’t care, I don’t care either.” The guard grins, lifting my skirts.

My father snarls at me over his shoulders, and I drop my eyes to the small sword facing my father’s direction. Papa follows my gaze and nods, just in time for me to grab the pistol pressing into my thigh.

“Don’t yell or make a single sound,” my father says, holding the knife at his neck.

The guard reaches for his pistol, but I’m pointing it at him.

“No one has to get hurt if you let us walk out of here freely,” I whisper.

My father’s shaky hand presses the knife against the man’s neck. He sighs aloud when he hears that I might not have to kill anyone, and he might not, either.

“Are there more guards here? Don’t lie to me; we can just slit your throat and find out for ourselves. We’re giving you a chance here,” I say.

The guard spits at me, but my father tightens the blade against his skin, and I put my finger on the trigger. “Okay, fine.” He holds his hands out. “Yes.”

“How many?” I ask.

“Three,” he says.

“Are you lying?” I confirm.

“No,” he mutters.

“Where are they?” I press.

The man swallows and though his eyes are on fire, his body shakes as if he’s freezing. “There are two guarding the entrance to the building and one more at the entrance to the cells.”

“So, the back exit is free?” I ask. “That’s odd, isn’t it? If I find out you’re lying to me, I guarantee that even if we die, you’ll die first.”

“I’m not lying.” He grits his teeth.

“Okay, well, I guess we’re going out the back.” I step out ahead of them to make sure the coast is clear and then gesture to my father to walk with him. We take the guard with us, releasing him only when we’re clear into the woods.



Present

Dust blinds me, and leaves whip up in small tornadoes as Chance blazes through the woods with me on his back. My father had led us to where he believed Chance might be grazing. After riding with him to a plump woman's house, I took off as fast as I could.

The tracks made by wheels and hooves are still fresh in the dirt and wild grass. From beyond, there are blasts of bullets like fireworks. My blood gathers in my stomach, pounding madly. Leaning in and pressing my feet into Chance, I hurry him along even faster; we move like a blur through the wind.

I'm dizzy when I dismount him, by both the journey and the sight before me. Dead bodies and detached limbs are left for the wolves to feast on. I search the pile for Adam's body. I don't see his or Heath's, but I'm not sure if we're in the clear just yet. The large gate is broken and bent. I don't have a clue how they managed to get through this monster of a barrier. My mouth hangs open as I stagger toward the entrance of the mansion. A few of Adam's bloody men work hard to put out a fire. The heat and smoke blacken the doorway. Several spots around the house look like that. The men are so wary, they don't even see me pass them.

I trip over a rolling head when I step inside and grab my stomach, trying to keep anything from coming up. My heart stops beating when I hear a groan. Running toward the sound, I see a bleeding Lucian. I drop to my knees and grab his face, crying out his name. "Where's Gloria?" I ask.

“She—” He trembles. “She—escaped.” His eyes flutter shut, and I shake. “Where’s Adam?” I grip his head, but he’s already unconscious. I can’t feel the floor or my body as I search this room, with my heart in my mouth, earning a slight relief when I don’t find them among this other pile.

Looking between the hallway and the staircase, I notice drops of blood on the steps going up. Swallowing and taking a deep breath, I follow the trail. My lungs are tight. My brain is being deprived of oxygen. I’m lightheaded as I get to the top. The stairs keep going for what seems like forever, past all the floors and all the rooms to a door I didn’t even know existed.

Pushing my feet forward and shaking, I take tentative steps toward it. It’s slightly open, and there’s a bloody handprint around the knob. Grunts echo from behind it. With my breath rattling, I use my foot to nudge it wider, and I have the wind knocked out of me when I come upon Heath, crouched over my Adam, pounding his fist against his abdomen.

My tongue is dead in my mouth. I can’t speak. Frozen and dizzy, I stare as Adam bounds Heath’s wrists with his own hands, but before he can pull him forward, Heath kicks him in the side of his ribs. Adam folds in on himself, grimacing against the pain.

Wind rushes back into me, and I only hear my voice after I scream. “Adam!” Both men pause and turn to look at me. Adam coughs, and bloody spit leaves his mouth. My eyes grow heavy with water. “Adam! Fight back! Please! I love you!” I cry.

Heath swipes a bloody hand across his face, sniffing and laughing. “Love him? You love him? Then you’re a fool! You don’t know what love is!” Heath yells as Adam grips the ground next to him, wheezing. “I could’ve loved you. I certainly wouldn’t have locked you away in a cage like an animal. But you choose him, your weak, pathetic captor over me? Well, I’m going to let you watch me kill him,” he says. “And then I’m going to kill you too.” He smiles.

Adam groans. “No!” He grits his teeth against the pain, growling as Heath continues to do his favorite thing in the world—talk. “No!” Adam grabs him by the neck. His strong forearm bulges, tightening as Heath attempts to pull at it. Limping backward, he pulls Heath toward the edge of the roof. “You won’t lay a hand on her!” he grunts, throwing him over the edge, from many meters high. He wobbles a bit at the edge himself, and I run forward, pulling him away from it and wrapping my arms around him.

“Adam.” I kiss his head and his cheeks, patting my hand against him. He yelps and groans when I press my hand against his bruises. “I’m sorry.” I sniffle, sobbing and swiping away snot. “I’m so glad you’re alive,” I murmur against his head in the crook of my arm as I rock us back and forth. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if I’d lost you.”

He sighs and kisses my arm, hissing as he tries to come to his feet.

Chapter Forty



Adam

My weight is piled on her tiny shoulders as she allows me to use her as a brace. Catching a breath is like taking a bullet to the chest. My mouth still tastes like blood. I can't tell if I'm still coughing some up or if it's just the lingering flavour of before. She huffs and sweats, but she refuses to let me walk on my own. It's adorable, but I can't wait to relieve her of her burden.

Even though it feels like I'm dying, I pause just before we enter the stairway that leads into the house. I stop for two reasons. One to catch my breath because the journey to the bottom promises to be a long, challenging one. Two, because if I should collapse and die before we make it down, I can't leave this earth without hearing her say those three words again.

"Are you okay? Is the pain too much?" she asks as I pull to a stop. She runs her hands over my body, checking on my injuries, raising herself on her toes and stroking my face.

Grabbing her hands to keep them from shaking, I raise them to my lips.

“It hurts like I was caught in a stampede of horses, but I’ve been through worse, and I’ve survived.” I smile to reassure her before tugging lightly on her hand. She understands the gesture and moves closer to me. Running my hand across her face and smiling at her wild, tangled hair, I yearn to kiss her, but the pain is too great to lean in, and I’m too tall for her to reach up. “You said something moments ago that I never thought I’d hear you say. I’d love to hear you say it again.”

“What did I say?” she asks, leaning into my caress and using her shoulders to hold the weight of my arms.

“You said something about your affections toward me?” I clear my throat.

“Oh!” Her red, teary eyes open wide, and she smiles. “That I love you?” she asks.

Beaming from the warmth flooding my body, making the pain in the lower left side of my ribs ease momentarily, I nod. “Yes. That.” I gulp. “Did you mean it?”

Her eyes well up, and the tears overflow. She nods and kisses my wrist resting next to her face.

“So, you didn’t send all these people here to attack me and have a change of heart at the last minute?” I ask.

“No! Is that what you thought? Is that why you weren’t fighting back?” she gasps.

“Well, that and the bulky man was actually a good fighter, but don’t tell anyone I said that.” I chuckle before coughing from the pain.

She smiles a little for my benefit before curling her lips. “No, all these people came here because of that bastard who was convinced you stole me from him.”

“Well, I’d be pretty mad if someone took you away from me too.” I pinch her cheek, and it heats up as she smiles.

“Yes. But I never belonged to him in the first place. He was just delusional. Anyhow, I’d rather not spend another minute talking about Heath. He’d love that far too much,” she says with a heavy sigh and an eye roll, making me laugh and simultaneously cough again from the assault on my ribs.

“You’ve got to stop laughing,” she scolds me.

“You’ve got to stop making me laugh.” I groan as she turns her body into me and wraps my arm around her shoulders again.

“Come on, we’ve got to get you downstairs and to a doctor as soon as possible. Along with Lucian,” she says.

“Oof!” I yelp, after making a single step down the staircase. “Lucian? Is he gravely injured?” I ask, swearing at myself. I was too caught up in my own head and feelings to look out for him when he needed me to. But I also trusted his ability to take care of himself.

“He’s on the verge of death,” she admits, taking her time with me. It’s going to take a lifetime before we make it to him.

“How bad is it, Olivia?” I ask. “How many of my men are dead?”

“You don’t know?” she asks.

I shake my head, hanging it in shame. She looks at me, curiously.

“I was selfish. I couldn’t will myself to join the fight, but the noise was hard to ignore, so I moved to the roof to watch it all go down, waiting for them to find me and reach my ultimate end.” I shrug.

“Adam...” she murmurs before clearing her throat. “I saw a few of your men on the way in. Some of them were severely injured, but alive. Others managed to escape with only a scratch.”

“Good.” I nod. “I’d call out to them but...”

“Do you want me to do it?” she asks.

“Yes. In fact, run down to the ones who can manage and tell them to get Lucian to the medic immediately. Then if there are two men available after, tell them to get me. Please.” I sink to my arse, groaning and panting. “I don’t think I can make it all the way down there,” I admit.

She widens her eyes at me and shudders, before leaning forward and pressing a desperate kiss against my lips. Groaning, I reach up to hold her mouth against mine longer so I can drink her in and make this count as if this is our last kiss.

She pulls her lips from mine and grips my hair, tugging my forehead against hers. “Please. Adam. Fight,” she murmurs

before dashing downstairs.

I lean back on the hard steps digging into my back and stare up at the ceiling, which in this part of the building, is flat. Tears roll down the side of my face as I close my eyes and struggle for breath. Left on my own, I let my appearance of strength fall away. The darkness swallows me up.



My body jerks, rocking from the bustle of the carriage, forcing me awake. The pain is soothed by the warm bosoms my face is pressed up against. I know instantly by her scent that it's Olivia. She's running her fingers through my hair and rubbing my back. Her tears splash against my face as I nestle into her.

"Olivia..." I murmur.

"Adam!" she gasps. "Oh, thank goodness," she whispers against my hair. "Just a moment longer, my love. We're almost there!" Her lips come down fast on top of my head. "Hold on just a little while longer." She sobs.

Groaning, I lift my head to look up at her. She smiles at me, but her eyes are strained. The tears don't stop falling. I kiss the air lightly, communicating with her what I want, and she sniffles through a light laugh before joining her lips with mine.

"You smell amazing," I whisper as our lips part.

She shakes her head. "You're such a liar. I smell of sweat and stained sex." She grimaces.

"And vanilla and lavender," I say.

“You’re hallucinating. That’s certainly worn off.” She rakes her fingernails through my beard.

“Not entirely,” I say while smiling at her. “I still smell it here.” I press my nose between the dip of her clothed cleavage and nip at her breast.

She scoffs. “Even when you’re dying, you’re still a rake,” she jests.

She’s right. This feels like death. It’s excruciating being rocked from side to side as we pass through an uneven path, folded up like this, in a small carriage. But I can’t stare at her weeping a second longer. She doesn’t deserve this much pain.

“Your rake.” I groan. “Only yours. Always and forever. I love you too, Olivia.” I breathe.

She smiles and kisses me softly before her orbs leak once more. “I know.” She whispers, and her lips tremble. “I know.” Her chest shakes uncontrollably, and she struggles with suppressing gasping sobs.

“What is it?” I swallow past the gravel in my throat. “What’s wrong, my love?”

“Your skin.” She shivers and rubs my arm briskly. The motion causes sharp stabbing sensations to shoot through my ribs, but I’m too tired to do anything about it. “It’s become cold to the touch,” she shudders, “and damp.” She chokes before slapping the top of the carriage and yelling at them to hurry up.

“What?” I say, creasing my forehead. “That’s strange. I’m so warm and toasty, snuggled against you,” I lie. The cold hits me unexpectedly, like a shock to my entire body all at once. One moment I’m warm; the next I’m freezing. Yet, my body must be too spent to expend energy on shivering. “You know what we should do after this?” I say, trying to distract myself from the dropping temperature.

She clears her throat, but her voice is still a broken whisper. “What?” she asks.

“Leave that wretched mansion and its horrible memories behind; move somewhere, anywhere you want, where we can build a life together,” I mutter as my words slow, and it becomes harder to catch a breath.

I’m vaguely aware of her slapping my face. The action seems to work as my eyes open, and I look up at her blurred countenance smiling at me.

“Hold on to that image, Adam. I want many more years with you,” she pleads.

I smile up at her because it’s taking too much of my breath to speak anymore. At last, the carriage pulls to a stop, and the doors open.

“We’re here,” a voice says from behind me.

“Oh, thank goodness.” Olivia sighs. “Please. Hurry. We’re losing him. Please. Don’t let him die.”

I don’t know when I leave the carriage; all I know is that I awake in a room lit by candles. There’s groaning coming from

a body outside of my own and when I turn my head, in the far corner, I can see the hint of bedspreads and furniture legs. There's someone on that bed, but I can't make out who it is. To raise myself into a sitting position, I yowl as heat races through me and bangs against my bones as if it's trying to slice through my skin.

“Adam...” A gasp followed by a gentle touch stops me from spiralling out of control. “You've been cut and have bled out. There was a lot of internal bleeding, and the doctor thought it best to apply bloodletting to allow the blood to leave the body. He said that you wouldn't survive, but you're alive. You're alive!” She grins and sobs at the same time. “How do you feel?” she whispers.

My fingers come across the bandage wrapped around me, as I run my hands down my torso. “It hurts like hell.” I bite my lip and groan.

She jumps up from the armchair beside the bed and runs toward the door while I look at her departing back in confusion. Moments later, she returns with the doctor I recognize, who has been my private doctor and for my army of men throughout the years. His mouth falls open as he stares at me.

“Well, isn't this a wonder?!” he says. “I thought she might have been hallucinating when she came to me just now. But I've seen it for myself! You must be invincible after all, Adam Molotov.” He claps his hands together and hurries toward me with a wooden vessel, which he presses against my chest.

“I feel like hell,” I groan.

“Oh, that’s right. Your lady friend informed me that you were in severe pain.”

“My woman,” I mutter.

“What was that?” he asks, while pouring some medicine in a spoon.

“She’s my woman,” I groan. “My partner for life, if she’ll have me,” I grunt.

“You know I will. Now stop talking and let your body recover,” Olivia says.

I smirk at her over the doctor’s shoulders, and she folds her arms across her chest.

“Well, that’s something, isn’t it?” The doctor looks between us. “Many reasons to celebrate, I think.” He smiles and pushes a wooden spoon toward my mouth. “Here you go, you’re accustomed to some good old laudanum, aren’t you? Should help with the pain, knock you right out, and give your body time to recover.”

The bitter liquid makes me sputter and gag. It never gets any easier to take.

“I’ll see you again in the morning,” the doctor says, before heading toward the door. “I’ve got to say, Adam. Your recovery is remarkable.” He shakes his head in disbelief.

Olivia smiles at me and moves toward the armchair.

“Are you going to sit up in that all night?” I groan. “It looks awfully uncomfortable.”

“I’ll manage.” She leans over to kiss my hand and then my forehead. “As long as I’m with you, I’m thrilled.” She brushes her lips against my cheek.

“Hmmm,” I sigh. “Why don’t you climb up on this bed and give me some more of those?”

“Adam Molotov!” she gasps. “You’re in no position to...” she whispers.

“I don’t mean that, Ms. Filthy Mind.” I grin as the laudanum kick in. “I mean, lie in the bed next to me. Let me hold you.” I pat the space next to me.

She looks at me from head to toe. My lids grow heavier and harder to keep open as I pat the bed again.

“Well, it’s a large-enough bed,” she reasons. “But I can’t. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Well, don’t lie on the side where I’ve been cut. Come on. Your warm body next to mine will only help to speed up the recovery.” My words slur.

She grins. “There’s always an occasion for the sweetness of your tongue, isn’t there?”

I grin. “Oh, you have no idea.”

“Adam...” She giggles. That’s the last thing I hear before drifting off to sleep.

The next morning, I rouse, and my arm is limp. Looking over to my right, I see the reason lying there, and it makes the pins and needles worth it. Her warm cheek rests on my bare chest. Her hair is braided now, and strands that have worked themselves free brush against my nose. It smells of lavender and vanilla. I smile and stroke her head, placing a kiss in the centre of it.

The pain on my left side is still ridiculous but not as bad as last night. Turning my head toward the bed to the left, I catch fright. It's Lucian, and he's snoring. It's the pain or the gentleness of Olivia's body pressed against me that moves me to emotion, but tears of gratitude leak from my eyes.

"You're awake." A female voice startles me as the room door creaks open. I haven't heard it in years, and I whip my head around in fear that I might be hallucinating. Blond hair, snow-white skin, a face of symmetry, and a slender frame, dressed delicately in a modest and fashionable dress.

"Agatha," I gasp. "What in tarnation are you doing here?" I hold Olivia tighter to me, and she rouses.

"I heard what happened, and I needed to see that you were doing okay," she says.

I don't respond, but I keep my eyes trained on her. What does she want?

She clears her throat. "I see you've found love again. I'm happy for you, Adam. I'm glad she managed to fix what I broke."

Wincing, I look up at the ceiling, wondering what the point of this conversation might be, as Olivia sits up in the bed.

“You’re the woman in the painting,” Olivia gasps.

Agatha smiles. “Nice to meet you. I just came to wish Adam farewell,” she says.

“Farewell?” Olivia asks before turning to look at me. I shrug and shake my head.

“Yes. It’s my way of thanking you for sparing my life that day. I feel as though travelling to another country will allow you to move forward with your life without any bad memories,” she says to me.

I laugh, too hard for an injury like this one. “Look, Agatha. What happened, happened. It’s in the past. And I’ve moved on. I’m sure you have too. Stay in the country or don’t stay in the country. Neither decision will affect the quality of my life. But thanks for stopping by,” I respond, watching her and her ego walk out of my life, hopefully for good this time.

Epilogue



Olivia | One Year Later

My face is pressed against the bedroom wall of our new five-story castle, and the skirt of my wedding dress is flopped over my head, bouncing against the perfect updo; no doubt it's making a mess.

“Mmmm, yes.” I bite my lip as Adam grabs my hips, slamming into me from behind. My breasts are worked loose from my stays, falling out over the low square neckline of my bodice. My knees wobble, and my cunt walls contract, sucking onto his length, trying to keep it deep within me. “Mr. Molotov,” I whine, reaching around to rub his strong fingers gripping my skin. Liquid pressure slams into my lower abdomen, and my mouth falls open.

He groans, “Olivia...” His breath leaves him in pants. “Oh, Olivia. You're so damn tight.” His words grow shaky, and I shudder from his masculine grunts, knowing he's losing control of himself. “Olivia.” He jerks, slamming harder into me until I cry out, tightening around him and gushing against his length.

“Ohhhh.” He trembles against my arse. “Mmmm. Oh, damn! I’m going to breed your sweet juicy cunt,” he growls, just as erotic heat shoots deep inside me, and I slam my arse against him. “Fill you up with my seed.” He whimpers as excess slickness massages my walls.

The thought of starting our own little family excites me so much that I might be on the verge of climaxing again. “Oh, Adam. Don’t stop.” I reach back to pull him flush against me.

He shudders, and his body jerks recklessly against my naked bottom. “You like my seed inside you?” he says, and I grind my arse against him, circling my dripping wet folds around his cock as the tingles rise from deep within me, flooding my walls.

“Uh, yes. I love your seed...” I start, but the door swinging open rudely interrupts me.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” Gloria throws her hands up in the air as I readjust my dress and spin to face Adam with my breasts falling out. He grins, easily closing the flap on his trousers to conceal himself.

“I can’t leave you lovebirds alone for one minute! I told Lucian to keep an eye on you.” Gloria waves her finger at Adam. “Don’t you know it’s bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, much less fuck her?!” she yells.

Adam laughs aloud and pulls me by the waist toward him. “Well, when I caught a glance of her in this dress...” He emphasizes his excitement by gripping me tighter, and I throw my arms around his neck, giggling. “I just couldn’t help

waiting until she was alone, to get a taste of her.” He runs his hand over my exposed nipple, and I gasp.

“Stop,” I whisper. “You’ll get me all ready to go again.”

He snickers and drops his lips to my ears, nibbling the top of it. “Oh, will I? Does becoming Mrs Molotov turn you on the way it does, me?” he whispers, licking the inside of my ear.

Gripping the collar of his jacket, I stifle a moan.

“Oh, come on. How many tastes do you need?” Gloria huffs.

Adam and I break out in laughter, clutching one another before he kisses me on the cheek. “Do you need help with that?” he asks, staring at my breasts, and more laughter bursts out of me.

As I push them back inside my dress, he moves away, but I reach for his hand, tugging him back and holding him close.

“Oh, for crying out loud. You’re going to see each other in a minute.” Gloria taps her feet.

“Mmm, but I don’t want to be apart from you for even a second.” I cling to him.

“Me, either.” He smiles and lifts me.

“Anyone would think he was going off to war or something,” Gloria mutters.

Grinning, I turn to look at her. “Oh, Gloria. Don’t be jealous. I’m sure if you go to Lucian, he’ll happily fill you.” I

wink.

Adam groans and squeezes my arse, drawing my attention back to him.

“And mess up these expensive silks? You must be out of your mind,” Gloria says. “He knows as well as I that we’ll be seeing each other tonight, which is precisely why I need you two to hurry up and stop acting as if you’re never going to see each other again. We’ve all been waiting forever, and I have ‘matters’ to attend to later.” She blushes and smirks.

“Well, in that case. I guess we shouldn’t keep the guests waiting,” he says, walking with me toward the door.

“No. No.” Gloria slaps Adam’s hands. “As her bridesmaid, it’s my job to not have her walk out there looking like a mess,” she says. “You. Put her down and go to Lucian. Let him perform his best man duties to get you looking presentable again.” She sighs and holds her head.

Adam and I exchange looks before he lowers me to the floor. “Yes, ma’am.” He salutes Gloria who shakes her head, smiling. “I’ll see you at the altar,” he whispers to me, pausing at the door. “I love you.” He pinches my chin, and my stomach flutters.

“I love you too, Adam Molotov.” I beam, raising on my toes to kiss him. He brushes his hand against my cheek before pulling me into him. He groans, and I moan as we lose ourselves in each other.

Gloria lets out a heavy sigh behind us. “Oh, why do I even bother?!”



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About Carmen Black

With a penchant for a nice glass of red and a good steamy story, Carmen Black can usually be found either writing at her computer or snuggled under a blanket as she binges one of her favorite TV series. Either way, her four-legged fur babies, Crash and Chloe, are always by her side as she crafts wicked tales of unconventional love.