

LOVING YOUR LIES

PIPER

SHELLY

1

WRONG TURN

I FACED A moral dilemma.

Take it...don't take it...take it...don't take it?

The soft cotton of the purple sweater in my hand tempted me sorely. It wasn't covered with holes or stains, but perfectly intact, like nothing I'd worn since I was five years old. I could even rub the hoodie on my cheek, and the threads wouldn't scratch my skin like the nasty gray hand-me-down pullover I currently wore.

Only the price tag stood between this perfect sweater and me.

I searched the Friday afternoon crowd at Camden Market. The place brimmed with people. Everyone was busy scanning clothes, jewelry, shiny little knickknacks, or small toys. The stand-owner had her back to me as she talked to a customer. If I wanted to nick the sweater, then it had to be now or never.

Take it?

"What're you waiting for, Montiniere?" Debby purred in my ear. "Take it or leave it. But make it fast, because I've just had my hand in her till." Her blonde brows waggled.

Debby Westwood was not my friend. At least, not in the sense of *Hey girl, let's have a pajama party and tell each other our weirdest secrets*. I used to hang out with her. Her *the-entire-world-can-kiss-my-arse* attitude totally impressed me. She'd become my idol from the moment she rammed into me on Earls Court a few months ago. She'd been on the run from the fuzz for the theft of a pair of crocodile stilettos. Jeez, I should've known consorting with a criminal would only get me into shit.

Debby wasn't a resident of London's Youth center like me but spent her life on the streets. As for me, my warden, Miss Mulligan, allowed outings from the Westminster Children's Home only on Tuesdays and Fridays. And I was lucky, because anyone under the age of seventeen wasn't granted even that.

Praise my seventeenth birthday! I was ecstatic when I no longer had to attend group excursions. London was way more fun alone. No teachers, no rules, no nothing.

Just me. And this pretty purple sweater.

My grip tightened on the fabric. *Thump-thump-thump*. The sound of my heartbeat boomed in my ear, faster and faster as I got closer to taking what I wanted, though I knew it was wrong. My throat went dry. I had difficulty swallowing. The sound of my backpack being unzipped raised the hair on my arms. "What're you doing?" I couldn't believe Debby's boldness. I swung around to face her.

She flashed a mischievous grin. "Helping you." Covering me from the view of the stand-owner, she stuffed the sweater halfway into my bag. "Look at you. Your rags even scare dogs away. You're lucky I spend time with you."

I glanced down at my ripped jeans and tattered boots. Heat flooded my face. Even though Debby didn't have a permanent roof over her head, she dressed like the queen of Oxford Street. If her slacks or shirts got dirty, she simply discarded them and stole new, brand name ones.

When I first met her, it didn't take the girl long to convince me there was more than enough stuff for everyone. Debby's *Shoplifting 101* philosophy: The exaggerated prices people paid for high heels and leather jackets made good on the few pieces we palmed from time to time.

Like this sweater.

I kept my eyes on the freaky-looking stand-owner, dressed in striped tights and a straw hat, and waited another heartbeat before I shoved the sweater all the way into my backpack. She must have heard my heart pounding, because she turned around at that moment.

After staring for a second, she glanced down at my backpack. "What in the world—"

My gaze snapped to my bag, too.

Crap! A sleeve peeked out. An instant later, she pulled a whistle on a chain from underneath her collar, and her cheeks bloated like two tomatoes on a vine when she set London's entire South End on alarm.

"Go! Go! Go!" I pushed Debby forward as I dashed away from the clothes stand.

"Thief! Stop!" The shrill voice echoed down the street followed by another alarming whistle. Heads turned our way. From the corner of my eye, I spotted two men in uniform stepping away from a kiosk and scanning the crowd. Of course, they were searching for us. My

adrenaline kicked in, tensing every one of my muscles like an overstrung rubber band.

“This way!” Debby tugged on my backpack, almost tipping me sideways. She pulled me behind another stand with yellowed books and silver cutlery. There were more stands ahead, and shoppers turned annoyed eyes on us when we pushed through the crowd.

“Jona, we need to split up. They can’t catch us both.” Debby was breathing hard. “You go left, and I’ll keep straight.”

I turned to the left. A bloody dead end.

“You want me to play bait for the cops? Are you nuts? They’ll get me!”

“You’re not eighteen yet. They can’t nail you for anything.” Her hand curled around my upper arm. She shoved me forward as she scanned for the policemen. “Your teacher will save your arse. She does every time.”

“No! She threatened to let me rot in prison if I ever steal again.”

“Don’t be such a wimp.” Debby’s shoulder collided with mine, shoving me sharply to the side. My lungs stopped sucking in air. Mouth open, I pivoted to face Debby. Her evil grin was the last thing I saw as she vanished into the crowd.

“The brats have run this way,” a gravelly voice reached me.

I peeked over my shoulder. *Bloody hell.* They were fast on my heels. Their blue caps bobbed out from the crowd and moved steadily forward. I was perfect bait for them.

Not today.

Debby had kept straight on, so I angled to the right. Surely, there would be some chance of my getting out of this open market. The pounding in my ears shut out the murmur of the shoppers. My

gaze darted over the crowd. Bobbing heads moved like waves. Dammit! Which way would get me out of here?

I stopped, trying to catch my breath, then pivoted. There was no thinning of the crowd, but the blue police caps came on, angling my way at a speed that should've been impossible in the packed market.

Beads of sweat dotted my face and the back of my neck. Miss Mulligan would kill me if I got involved with the police again.

I used my hand as a shield against the gleaming afternoon sun. A dowdy overweight matron with an oversized green hat shoved me aside. I lost my balance, nearly knocked over a toddler with huge brown eyes, sucking on a lollipop. Instead, I collided with an old lady whose shrill cry not only pained my ears, but also gave me away.

"Sorry, ma'am," I muttered, noticing her hunched back and the scarf wrapped about her gray hair. Her glasses sat askew across her nose, and one of her crutches had dropped to the ground. Quickly, I bent to pick it up for her.

"Are you all right? I didn't mean to hurt you." I ducked my head and adjusted the glasses with shaking fingers. My feet already bounced in the direction of escape.

"Get off, you nasty child!" The lady dropped the crutch to swat my hands away from her face. "Don't any of you kids have eyes in your useless heads?"

That got me moving. I dropped to my hands and knees and crawled away, doing my best to dodge the oncoming pedestrians. A heavy boot with rubber treads landed on my fingers. I bit my tongue to keep from crying out in pain. Maybe crawling wasn't the best way

to move through a crowd as thick as Miss Weatherby's vanilla pudding. I jumped to my feet.

"Move!" The same gravelly voice I'd heard earlier parted the crowd like the Red Sea.

"Riley, I got her!" said a very angry bobby.

The man leaped forward, lunging for my arm. My heart pounded. I spun on my heel, ready to dash away to safety, but instead bounced right into the solid, uniform-clad chest of my captor's partner. He was smaller, and stout, but his grip on my shoulders was iron.

Fear had ice settling in my veins. "Let go!" I kicked his shin and wrenched free from his clammy grip.

The man yelped and hobbled on his good leg. People surrounded us like this was a stupid carnival, only they all had the same judging look in their eyes. Heck, they'd caged me in. My stomach slid to my feet. No chance of escape.

Oh dear Lord, I was in deep shit.

The tall officer ripped my raggedy backpack from my shoulders before he shoved me to the pavement. He dug his knee into my spine.

Brilliant. Just the position I always wanted to be in.

I thought my shoulders would pop out of their sockets when he wrenched my hands behind me. Cold metal closed around my wrists. The ominous click of the cuffs resonated in my ears, sending a red haze of hysteria through my head. *Oh please, not again.*

Debb's first rule when caught shoplifting: deny everything.

Swallowing hard, I gathered what was left of my courage. "Leave me alone!" The words were muffled with my cheek grinding painfully against the pavement. "I did nothing wrong!"

My long hair caught in his hand as the officer yanked me up. I winced. This was going to end nastily. I needed a Plan B. Fast.

The officer named Riley rummaged through my backpack. Then he laughed harshly. “Of course you didn’t do anything, kid. Let me guess, you’re a kleptomaniac, and you’ve a medical certificate for legal pilfering in London?”

Making fun of me?

Debby had also taught me not to show fear in these moments. And she’d taught me well. I stuck out my chin. These jerks wouldn’t get the best of me. “Take off the shackles and I’ll fucking *klepto* your balls!”

“Watch your tongue, Missy. You’re in no position to threaten a police officer.” Riley gave me a hard stare. “Is this your backpack?”

I returned his glare with a snarl and exhaled loudly. “Nope. Never seen it before.”

“Ah, that’s funny. Because in it there is an identification card from the Westminster Children’s Home, which coincidentally holds your picture.” He held up the ID, grinning broadly. If he moved his hand an inch closer, he could’ve shoved the small yellow card up my nose.

“I lost my wallet last week. Someone obviously found it.” I fought to keep my expression neutral.

“Of course. And that person forced this bag on you then. Oh, and the sales lady stuffed this—” He pulled out the purple sweater and dangled it in front of me. “—into the backpack as you walked by her shop, right?”

I stared him straight in the eye and cocked a brow. “Shit happens.”

The tall man behind me grabbed my shoulder and shook me. “That’s enough. You’re coming with us.”

He pushed me forward. I cast a sneer over my shoulder. “How could I ever resist when you beg so nicely, Officer?”

The muscle on Riley’s jaw ticked, but he restrained from speaking. His grip on my arm tightened as he led me out of the market. Shaken, I walked alongside the officers with my gaze on the ground to avoid the curious stares of pedestrians. Their stares tormented me more than the steel cuffs cutting into my wrists.

Across the street from the patrol car, Debby-*the-bitch*-Westwood lurked in the doorway of a dirty gray house, with a snide gleam in her eyes. I stopped short, my anger heating my blood. “I hope you’re happy now!” I jerked my arm free from the officer and marched forward.

But Debby disappeared even before the bobby grabbed me again and pulled me back to the car. “This one’s mental,” he whispered to Riley.

Bearing down on my molars until my jaw hurt, I scowled at the two men.

The taller officer shoved me into the backseat and slammed the door shut. My body shook as the truth of my situation washed over me.

The officers climbed into the front seat. My gaze hardened once more as Riley inched the car into London’s traffic. “I always wonder what drives kids like you to steal.” The tall one curled his lips as he glowered at me through the cage partition. “Doesn’t the system provide you with all the luxury you need?”

I gathered my saliva to make a good spit at him. But that wouldn't exactly help my situation, so I struggled to swallow my anger along with the phlegm. He wasn't the only one in London who rated homeless children as lower than dirt.

"I get a kick out of riding in police cars," I replied, my tone dripping saccharin sweetness. "It's always the highlight of my week." The steel around my wrists dug uncomfortably into my back. I shifted a few times, ending up propped against the door with my legs pulled to my chest and my dirty boots resting on the worn-out beige cushions of the backseat. The heat of early August had warmed the cabin like a sauna. In the stuffy air, tickles of sweat rolled down the valley between my breasts.

At a traffic light, my gaze drifted past a bus and skated over a black woman inside. She carried a baby, trying to cool the kid down with puffs of her breath. A sigh escaped me. She'd never let her child down and send her off to an orphanage to fend for herself. Her child would grow up in a cozy home, with a loving mother, far away from the kind of mess I was stuck in. *Always falling into a pile of crap.* I cleared my throat, trying hard to stop it from constricting.

Riley pulled up in front of a narrow, familiar brick building. Seconds later, he opened the car door for me. I decided my butt had grown roots as I scowled at his blotchy face. It seemed the heat troubled him even more than me.

"What? Does the *Skillful Dodger* need an invitation to get out of the car?"

"What? Is Mr. Donut actually referring to Dickens?" I pulled a wry face then scooted over to clumsily climb out. "You better read the book again, moron."

I bumped my head against the door frame. Pain exploded in my skull, followed by a shower of stars dancing behind my eyelids.

Just another bright spot in my crappy day.

“That serves you right,” Riley snorted between hiccups of giggles.

“Lord, let him choke on his laughter,” I mumbled, my gaze raised skyward. With my wrists crossed in the small of my back, I tugged up my hand-me-down jeans that always sat loosely on my hips.

The taller officer marched into the building, holding the door open like a gentleman. If only I had my hands free to open the door on my own and then slam it in his goddamn face.

Riley fought to keep up with my quick stride, but I beat him to the stairs.

“Don’t worry, I can find the way myself.” I climbed the steps to the first floor where the main office was located. Unfortunately, I had to wait for one of the oafs to open the door.

As Riley and his partner arrived on the first floor, my exaggerated sigh drew their attention. One flight of stairs had Riley gasping like a puppy.

The taller cop planted a hand on my shoulder. “No need to hurry, lass. You’ll face justice soon enough.”

I shrugged his hand off. “I’ve got news for you, Riley and Riley’s partner. I’m only seventeen. That means I’m not old enough to face legal punishment for a minor crime—like borrowing a sweater.” I gave them a wide grin, which didn’t come as easily as I had hoped with Miss Mulligan’s warning ringing in my ears.

“Borrow?” Riley puffed. There was amusement in his tone, but his pissed face confirmed I would be walking out of here. I turned my face away and exhaled, relieved.

Riley twisted the doorknob then walked into the office first. Shoulders squared and back straight, I followed him into the room with the high, arched ceiling. The sun shining through the narrow but tall windows blinded my eyes for a second, while the stench of sweat and police dogs bit my nose.

A handful of cops lingered behind beige desks, sipping from huge coffee mugs and chatting to each other. No one glanced at us, so I avoided the German shepherd sprawled out on the floor and strode down the aisle between two straight lines of desks directly to the reception.

Hip against the counter, I gazed down at the black-haired guy with designer stubble. His bright eyes stood out against the dark blue of his uniform.

“Hi, Quinn. How you doing? Sorry, I’d shake your hand, but I’m afraid that right now—” I twisted and raised one shoulder, displaying my shackled wrists. “—I’m slightly indisposed.”

Quinn rubbed his hands over his suntanned face. The moan came through muffled and somewhat choked. “Shit, Jona, please tell me you were part of a sick party gag and now you’re here to get trick cuffs removed.” He peeked through the slits between his fingers.

A sheepish smile crept to my face. “You might want to take a second guess.”

He lowered his hands and folded them on the desk. “Why can’t you keep your butt out of trouble? Kids your age are supposed to hang out in parks, not at police stations.”

Quinn was a nice guy. Big eyes, styled hair and muscular body, I guessed he was no more than ten years older than me. Maximum. Once, I asked him for his real age, but he just told me he was “old enough to know better.”

Unlike my relationship with Debby, I did consider Quinn a real friend, even though he worked for the police. And not just because he'd made a stop at McDonald's to buy me a sandwich when he'd volunteered to take me back to the orphanage after his shift. He was someone who saw me, the teenager, and not the criminal.

During the good year we had known each other, he had never passed on a chance to try to talk sense into my rebellious head. And today was no different. His nostrils flared as he heaved a hopeless sigh. “What did you do this time?”

Riley punched his fist on the countertop, the purple sweater clenched between his chunky fingers. “*Jim Hawkins* here went fishing at Camden Market.”

I rolled my eyes. “Jack. It's Jack Hawkins. Someone should smack a copy of *Oliver Twist* over your head.” I'd have volunteered if I had a book within reach that was thick enough to leave a dent in his bonehead. And, of course, if I wasn't currently shackled. I cast Quinn a meaningful glance. “Why are you surrounding yourself with idiots?”

Riley started forward with fire in his eyes, but Quinn held him back by his arm. “Thanks for bringing her in, but I better deal with her now.”

The stout officer snarled, but finally trudged away throwing off steam that would make Thomas the Tank Engine proud.

Once Riley and his partner disappeared, Quinn regarded me with wry sympathy. “You know, Abe will have your head for this.” He paused as I gulped.

Stealing a Nintendo from T&B Electronics eleven months ago had gotten me the first chance to see a courtroom from the inside and make the acquaintance of Judge Abraham Smith. I liked to call the balding judge a special friend, even though “a plague” became his choice description for me.

Minor offenses cultivated our friendship *extraordinaire* ever since. Although Miss Mulligan continuously saved my butt, the last time I saw Abe, he had sworn he’d lock me away for the next five hundred years if I showed up in his office again. I’d half-expected steam to come out of his ears. He’d sent me out of his office with a glare as sharp as Superman’s laser vision. I wasn’t too keen on meeting him again anytime soon.

Quinn stood up and placed his palm on my shoulder. Unlike the other officer’s hand, I allowed Quinn’s to stay. “Let’s fill out the forms, kiddo, and then we’ll call Miss Mulligan. I can’t get off right now, so your warden needs to come here and pick you up.”

My stomach dropped. I could picture the freckled beanpole freaking out when she heard about me being at the police station—again. My eighteenth birthday was only seven weeks away. Six weeks and five days to be exact. She wouldn’t make her threat real and turn me over to the hands of law so close to my release from the orphanage, would she?



A couple hours later, Miss Mulligan led me through the wide double doors of the institution. My eyes focused on the gray linoleum floor, but the whispers and contemptuous stares of my fellow inmates didn't escape me.

"Go to your room," Miss Mulligan ordered. The effort it took for her to control her temper reflected on her red face. "I'll make a call to Judge Smith now and deal with you later."

Calling Abe? Thank Goodness, she was on my side after all. I knew her tactics from the past. First, she called the court and tried to reason with the officials, promising to make up for the damage or in this particular case, the stolen sweater. Then she'd take me to a hearing where I would show my good will and act very, very sorry. In the end, I might get away with being locked in my room for a couple of weeks and probably no TV.

Acceptable.

The warden came to my room on the third floor that evening to inform me the dreaded audience with my friend Abe was set for next Tuesday—and to tell me she would be the happiest person in the world the day that I turned eighteen and left the orphanage for good.

No reason not to believe her.

The four days between my capture and the meeting at court I spent in my sparsely furnished room with dirty white walls. Curled up on the worn metal cot, I stuck my nose deep in a book, my feet shoved under the thin blanket. The weak bulb of the lamp placed on the stool that served as my nightstand provided hardly enough light to decipher the letters on the pages at nights, but that didn't stop me.

I read the story of Peter Pan and how he taught his friend Wendy to fly above a sleeping London. Bloody hell, I should leave

my window open and beg for someone like him to come through and carry me out in his arms. But then again, with my problem of vertigo, I wouldn't have made it past the windowsill.

On Tuesday morning, I dressed in the best pair of black jeans I owned, fixed the hole over the right knee with a safety pin and scrubbed my scuffed boots. A dark gray hooded sweater with ragged cuffs that ended two inches above my wrists had to do on top.

Miss Mulligan, dressed in an abominable pink suit, escorted me in a taxi to the court. I was to meet Abe in the smaller, almost private office where minor cases were handled behind the big hall.

As I strolled down the hallway next to my warden, the distinct scent of lavender and cherry blossom floated in the air. The smell set off an ice-cold trickle at my nape, waking memories of painful days long ago. I knew only one person who used to wear this particular perfume.

I stopped dead in my tracks and pivoted wildly, scanning around me as Miss Mulligan sent me a puzzled glance. Breathing deep, I inspected the hallway up and down. But the one person I searched for was nowhere in sight.

A slow breath wheezed from my lungs. Must've been mistaken.

A guard stood watch in front of Judge Smith's office. He let us in when we showed him my nice and official invitation. He frowned at my hands shoved deep into my pockets, but I ignored him and followed Miss Mulligan through the door.

Wide windows on two walls brightened the beige-carpeted office. A small number of people gathered on one side of the room close to the door, some sat next to the judge's big desk. I caught a

glimpse of Quinn's encouraging eyes and felt a cloud of calm settle in my chest for a moment. Then my gaze zeroed in on Abe.

He looked up from a stack of papers on his desk as soon as I crossed the threshold. His disapproving eyes sent shivers down my back, but even as my warden slowed her pace, I walked straight up to him.

'Never show weakness or fear.' Debby's advice rang in my ears.

"Jona Montiniere, it is." Abe adjusted his small round spectacles and gave me a quick once over.

Squaring my shoulders, I lifted my chin and put on my best let's-talk-shop grin. "Hello, Abe. Is business doing well?"

The judge ground his teeth. "You keep me busy enough," he grumbled through his beard.

I always wondered how it happened that men lost the luxury of hair on their heads, while stubble still sprouted wildly on their faces. This was not the best moment to bring up the prickly topic, though. Not with Abe already gathering momentum.

He scanned his papers again, shoving the glasses further up his nose. "This is the twenty-third time in less than one year that I have you standing here." At the word twenty-third an awed whistle came from the seats. I cut a quick glance to Quinn, who cocked a brow.

"Is there anything you can say in your defense?" the judge demanded.

I pouted, Quinn only shrugged.

Next to him sat Riley, who stuffed the last bite of a doughnut with pink icing into his mouth. It brought a grin to my lips, and I turned back to Abe.

“I’m a kleptomaniac and have a medical certificate for legal pilfering in London.”

Riley coughed, slamming a hand to his chest, but it was the deep chuckle from the back of the room that drew my full attention. First, I only glanced over my shoulder. But glistening sunlight blinded me and I pivoted around sharply.

For an immeasurable moment, nothing but bright white fog absorbed and swallowed everything within reach. Awestruck, I didn’t even squint. Slowly, a tall figure emerged from this glowing mist. A long, white cloak floated around the person’s legs while the sleeves, long and wide, covered the masculine hands almost completely. Fathomless blue eyes appeared next, followed by a smile that could have melted glaciers in the Arctic.

Had to be a reflection of light streaming through the south window. An illusion caused by today’s stress and tension. But it didn’t disappear.

Every single pair of eyes in the room locked onto me with confused stares. Their gawks prickled my skin all over. Only the illuminated person lowered his gaze. He retreated a couple of steps to the shadowed line along the back wall. As soon as he did so, the fog around him disappeared and I could make out the fine features of a young man. A casual pair of blue jeans and a black leather jacket replaced what I was sure had been a white cloak.

Obviously, they had to add “*Delusional*” to my medical certificate.

His clean-shaven face revealed a strong jaw topped by a sensual mouth. When the corners slightly lifted, my heart banged against my ribcage, fluttering like a sparrow caught in a cage. Strands of tousled

golden hair fell over his forehead, reminding me of warm honey. Even with the mystic light gone, the guy who remained was godlike.

Bloody hell, what brought a god to my hearing? It was a freaking sweater!

As he arched one delicate eyebrow, I snapped my mouth shut before drool could drip from the corners. Heat rushed through my veins and filled my face.

“Miss Montiniere, will you please pay attention?” Abe’s words sounded far away.

But those sapphire eyes held me captive. And I never wanted to leave this personal prison of ours.

Slowly, a bony arm looped around the god’s bent elbow.

Cherry blossoms? Why did the room suddenly smell of lavender and this distinctive note of spring in bloom? The mix of floral scents pulled me back to the present. How long since I had smelled it the last time? That must be something close to five years. I let my gaze trace the skinny arm and wander farther up.

Horrorstruck, I gaped into the face of the one person I never wanted to see again.

Z

SHACKLED

JUDGE ABE'S SQUARE office, with all the people shoved inside, started to spin around me. I felt like someone had stuffed me into a too-small box and was pushing the top closed against my head.

"Who let that bitch in?" Muscles quivering, I glowered at Charlene Montiniere.

"Watch your tongue, Miss Montiniere," the judge warned. "This is a court of law."

"The fuck I will," I spat. My eyes staked her. "This woman dumped me at an orphanage when I was a kid. She didn't even look back." Fear tightened my throat. How was the hag going to ruin my life this time?

Charlene gaped at me. The skin sagged into bags beneath her sunken eyes. Her matted red-orange hair had once been the exact match to my own long auburn tresses. She wore a stark shade of red lipstick that clashed with her pale, bony face. In short, she looked like she'd been through hell.

Good, I hoped the bitch had suffered just as much as I had. She could crawl back into whatever rat hole she'd emerged from. And she'd better not even think about saying anything to me. She'd lost that right when I was five.

My hatred-filled glare silenced her. One of her shaky hands rose slowly, as if she wanted to touch me from the eight-foot distance that stretched between us.

"Drop dead, Charlene," I growled.

"Jona Montiniere, I insist on you behaving in an appropriate manner, so we can continue this hearing," Abe Smith roared. "I understand your mistrust against your mother, but once you listen to the reasons, you might change your mind."

No way in hell.

The alarm signal in my head was flashing bright red. Another minute in the same room with my mother would've been an eternity too long. I spun around to face the old man behind his monstrous desk and gave him a mocking military salute. "Goodbye, Abe. I'm outta here."

The roar to call me to order was futile. Consequences? Not my concern. I strode toward the door, my only goal, fresh air and a good deal of distance between me and that bitch.

People shouted my name, some addressing me as Miss Montiniere, some using only my first name as if we were friends.

"Kiddo, don't be ridiculous. Stay where you are!" I heard Quinn call out.

Not happening.

His desperation wouldn't stop me from leaving. But a set of chunky arms around my waist could. Riley was the first to capture

me. The delight of victory shone in his eyes as he pressed my back against the wall. “You’re going nowhere, little Miss, apart from jail.”

Don’t panic. Hysteria never got me anywhere, and there was a very real place I needed to get. Out of here.

Fists clenched, my nails bit into my palms. “Take your bloody paws off me!”

The high-pitched squeak Riley gave nearly shattered my eardrums when I bit into the hand he’d clasped on my left shoulder. The donut residue I could taste on it made my stomach roll.

He jerked his arm back. “Damn brat, you’re gonna pay for this!”

Over his shoulder, I spotted both Quinn and Riley’s partner rushing toward me, but the stumbling Riley bounced into Quinn, and my only friend at the police staggered sideways. He caught his balance by grabbing Miss Mulligan’s arm. The warden squealed something hysterical and slapped his hands away.

With all the confusion in the room, I saw my chance of escape. However, my freedom was short lived. The moment I started for the exit, Riley’s tall partner caught my wrist and swung me around. The momentum tossed me against the edge of a small, dark brown desk in the back corner of the room.

In self-defense, I leaned back on the desk and pulled my legs to my chest as the policeman came for me. My hard kick hit his chest, and the soles of my boots popped a wheeze out of the cop. The deputy careened backward, doubled over. When he caught his breath, he cursed in a tongue that would’ve made Debby Westwood, the uncrowned queen of swearing, go green with envy.

I shoved away from the desk, but my chance of flight was gone as the door flung open and two guards stormed in. Whether it was

Riley's screams, Miss Mulligan's screeches, or a secret button under Abe's desk that alerted the guards, I never knew. But they had my shoulders pinned to the floor before my next breath. All air escaped from my lungs. A flash of pain soared through my upper body.

"No!" two men in the room shouted at once. I recognized one of them as belonging to Quinn. His voice was edged with sheer horror. In this moment, I was grateful he didn't abandon me like so many others.

Whoever the other worried guy was, I couldn't tell.

One guard pulled handcuffs from his belt. He fastened them around my wrists in front of me. Neither my kicking nor shrieking could prevent the awful click when the locks snapped into place.

"Get off her, you idiots. She's only a kid." Quinn elbowed his way through to me. "Are you all right, kiddo?"

The pain in my chest and back eased. I could finally draw in air. "Wow, what a fight." It didn't feel like anything was seriously injured or broken, so I pressed my lips together and gave Quinn a halfhearted nod. "I'm fine."

I had to be. *No weakness. Ever.*

He wrapped his fingers around my upper arms, pulling me to a wobbly stand. "In God's name, Jona," he whispered. "I beg you, behave."

A deep growl preceded my answer. "As you wish, *Sir.*" What other choice did I have with the cuffs on?

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of my mother's companion. The fair-haired god studied me with narrowed eyes. *Trying to figure me out?* That made me very uncomfortable.

With a gentle tug, Quinn led me up to Abe's desk. I turned my head to hold the blond stranger's stare for another moment. His arm wrapped in a supporting way around my mother's shoulders. *A god in his early twenties and Charlene?* Where in the world would a bony bitch like her find a lover so close to my age—and this gorgeous to boot?

"Jona Montiniere!" The murmurs in the room ebbed with Abe's thundering. My head snapped toward him. Nerves steeling for what was to follow, I quickly rebuilt my mental wall of protection. He had risen from his chair and braced himself on the desk, glaring at me over the rims of his spectacles. "This time, you stepped over the line. Contempt of court. Assaulting an officer."

"What? They assaulted me first!" My shout echoed in the room no less angry than his. "Riley here should be sued for child abuse."

"Enough!" Abe roared. "Shut your mouth and sit down."

"Sit down?" My dramatic glance behind me was enough to point out there was nothing but the floor to sit on.

Abe rubbed his temples. "For heaven's sake, someone fetch a chair for the girl." The words left his mouth in a broken sigh.

One of the guards hurried to shove a chair into the back of my knees, and I plopped down on the uncomfortable wooden seat. Quinn stood beside me, arms folded over his chest like a bouncer of a night club. Ooh, my own personal pit bull. This eased at least some of the suppressed fear in my gut. I could lift my chin again. The move always ignited the pig-rude manners I'd gleaned from Debby.

The judge calmed himself with a few heavy breaths and sat down, too. His black robe with its puffy sleeves made him look more like a watchful owl than a person of authority. When he lowered his

gaze to the papers in front of him, I took the chance to poke Quinn's thigh with my elbow.

"What?" he hissed.

Hands lifted, I displayed the torturing shackles and grinned sweetly. "Remove these?"

Quinn cut a glance to the exit, then studied me for a second, his brows furrowing into a line. "I don't think so."

Huh? And I thought he was my friend. My best *you-evil-bastard* scowl only coaxed out his lopsided grin before he tousled my hair.

When Judge Abe cleared his throat, all eyes returned to him. "Miss Montiniere, I've followed your criminal progress for nearly a year now. As I was informed, you will be released from the Westminster Children's Home in less than seven weeks." He pulled his glasses off his nose and placed them carefully on the stack of papers. "This gives rise to serious concern. With a criminal past like yours, I doubt not a second that you'll be out on a robbing tour of London as soon as your eighteenth birthday arrives."

Criminal past? Hello? I only nicked from the rich to give it to the poor. In this particular case, the poor was me. "Shouldn't a person in your position exercise his office without prejudice?" I had hardly spoken the words when Quinn's fingers dug painfully into my shoulder.

The judge let my statement go by unnoticed. He only drew a deep, slow breath. "To prevent the worst, I should let you stay under house arrest in the orphanage and delay an official accusation for your latest theft until you turn eighteen. In that case, I would have full authority to send you to prison."

Holy shit.

He paused to smile, and I wished the watchdog at my side would unshackle my hands so I could scratch the judge's glassy eyes out. "But as it is, I'm pleased to welcome your mother in this room today. We had an unofficial meeting this morning, and I'm glad—"

"You were the traitor who called her to this meeting!" I jumped from my seat, cutting his sentence short. A siren went off in my head, tuning out common sense.

"Sit, Jona," Quinn barked through clenched teeth. His palm on my shoulder pushed down hard. I whined, but gave in to his strength.

"And I'm glad," Abe continued as if no one had interrupted him in the first place. "She told me about a relative of yours in France who offered to give you a home and a place to stay for as long as you wish. Your aunt and her husband own vineyards there, and you will do charity hours on the grounds every day until you come of age."

The judge had gone nuts. This was the only reasonable explanation for such nonsense coming out of his mouth. "You're going to ship me off to the continent? Like a slave? You can't do that! It's illegal." It had to be. *Right?*

Abe quirked one brow, not answering my assumption. "Since serious health issues made your mother dependent on other people's help, she currently lives with her sister in France. We see this as a great opportunity for you to get to know your biological family and maybe tighten the bonds anew."

Tighten them anew? How could they be tightened if they didn't exist in the first place? Nothing existed in this life that could form or tighten anything between me and my mother. Let alone a bond. *No contact with that bitch and her pet, thanks.* And where the hell did this

said aunt come from? I'd never heard of any relatives in Britain, France, or elsewhere.

If I jumped up in protest again, Quinn would only have pushed me back into my seat. Instead, I raised my right arm, like a good little girl, to draw the judge's attention. Annoyingly, with the cuffs on, my left hand lifted, too.

"Please, take me to prison instead." My request came out dry and emotionless. Dead earnest.

From above, Quinn glared daggers at me. I cut a glance at him, but then studied Abe's old eyes again, awaiting his final adjudication with an empty pit in my stomach growing fast.

"I do believe you graduated from high school last spring?"

Not knowing what Abe's question could have to do with my punishment, I nodded. My marks in math had been lousy, but at least I did it.

"And currently you aren't taking any summer classes in Miss Mulligan's Children's Home?"

"No."

"Then you are going to live with your family." The bang of his little wooden hammer slamming onto the small round plate sealed the matter. "Now get out of my courtroom and don't come back."

I was so screwed.

When they started making plans over my head, and voices mixed to a painful blur, Quinn let me wait outside the room. I had to promise not to run off or pick up a fight with an officer again before he opened the door for me. I restrained from giving him the finger and slipped out.

Elbows propped on my bent knees, I sat on the floor in the hallway with my back resting against the windowed wall. The chain of the cuffs rattled mockingly. With them on, I wouldn't get far on an escape for fresh air. I might as well surrender to my horrendous fate.

Utterly miserable and confused about my new future, and no less annoyed by the glances of passing officials, my head dipped back, my gaze focusing on the blank ceiling. Out of habit when I was by myself—and stuck knee-deep in shit—I started humming a song I didn't know the name of. It always had a strangely soothing effect on me. Odds were I had made up the melody myself over the years. But I'd hummed, whistled or tapped the rhythm with my fingers so often the tune wouldn't get out of my head ever.

The door to Abe's room opening opposite me didn't disrupt my low singing. But when my mother's blond friend came out and leaned one shoulder casually against the column in the middle of the hallway, the hum died in my throat.

"Hi," he said with a compassionate look that made me wish the traitor, Quinn, had taken off those damn handcuffs so I wouldn't look like a complete idiot.

Lips pressed together, my fingers waggled in a feeble greeting. The mere sight of him sent a quiver of excitement to my stomach.

"That was quite an interesting...*situation* in there."

With an evil grin, I hoped to send the message '*Mind your own crap, buddy,*' but out loud, I said sweetly, "Glad you enjoyed the show."

"I didn't really." He wrinkled his nose. "Getting involved with Laurel and Hardy in there wasn't your best idea. Even a smart girl like you might get hurt in a fight with those two."

Yeah, sure. My eyes narrowed to slits. But his words warmed my heart in an unfamiliar way.

The young man nodded his chin at my tied hands. “They seem rather uncomfortable.”

And they bloody well were, but I shrugged it off like it was nothing unusual. “The latest fashion. You heard the judge, I wear them quite often.”

A teasing smile played around his lips that spiked my blood pressure. “Shall we take them off?” he said.

He must be kidding. “Unless you’ve got teeth like a hacksaw, I don’t see how that would work.”

Grin widening, he crossed the hall to me, pulling out a key-ring from his pocket. He squatted, leveled his eyes with mine, and shook the ring in front of my face. The friendly jingle of metal filled the high hallway.

My mouth sagged open. “Where did you get these from?”

“Chief Madison.”

“You stole them from Quinn?” I pulled my hands reflexively out of his reach.

“Of course not.” The blond god gave me a pointed look. “I asked for them.”

Why would this guy ask my officer friend to release me? Frowning, I concentrated on the safety pin in my jeans. “Quinn wouldn’t unshackle me when I asked him to.”

His intense blue eyes locked with mine. “I had to solemnly swear to keep an eye on you. Now hold still.” Cool fingers curled around my wrist to fix my hand while he unlocked the first cuff. Sparks tingled on my skin, my hand trembled slightly.

Why would he give his word to an officer, to free me? Why even care? He'd do well to stay behind that door, holding my horrible mother's hand instead of setting mine free. With a click, the other cuff came off. I flexed my hands and rubbed my burning wrists. The shackles had left bright red lines on my skin.

"Better?" He tilted his head and arched one beautiful brow.

My head bobbed, but I found no breath to answer.

"Okay then." He used my knees to push himself up and stretched to his full height.

He probably expected a *thanks* following his selflessness. My gaze focused on the ripped hems of his jeans, my lips remained sealed.

When he turned on his heel and marched off to the left, I glanced up. "And now you're going where?" The words shot out before I could stop myself.

"Bathroom break." His arched brows dared me to object.

My lower lip threatened to pop from between my teeth as I chewed on it. *Don't speak!* "But you're supposed to keep an eye on me."

After studying me for a couple of seconds, his expression softened even more. "You're not going to get me into trouble."

A balloon of warmth exploded in my chest. I let him take another stride away from me. Two. Three. Four. "How can you be so sure?" *Shut the hell up, Jona.* "After everything you know about me, I'll probably be gone when you get back."

A shrug of one shoulder and his beguiling smile struck me silent. "I trust you." A moment later he disappeared around the corner.

My chin rested on my chest with no intentions of snapping my mouth shut. *Trust me, my arse!* He must be nuts if he thought I could be trusted. With a snort, I rose from the linoleum floor and strode in the direction of the exit. But I bounced into a solid wall of bad conscience.

“Dammit.” I kicked the wall to my right. The rubber-sole of my boot left a black mark on the white surface. I shouldn’t even have to think about it, so why in the world did I hesitate? And for a stranger?

The exit had never looked better, and yet invisible shackles prevented any further step in its direction. Breathing became increasingly harder, and anger burned like a flame through me. I didn’t understand this stranger’s inexplicable hold over me. I shouldn’t waste another thought on him. After all, I didn’t ask him to remove the handcuffs.

But he took them off anyway. And he trusted me.

Argh. A growl rumbled out of my throat. I shot a pissed glance heavenward and raked clawed fingers through my hair. With a helpless sigh, I returned to the spot where he’d found me. Standing with my back against the middle column and arms crossed tightly over my chest, I awaited his return.

Only seconds later, footfalls announced his approach in the hall behind my back. The steps slowed, and a hardly audible sigh of dismay drifted around the column to me. I grinned to myself, savoring this sweet, however short moment of victory. Then I shoved away from the post.

Relief washed over his face at the sight of me, the corners of his mouth tilting up. “It’s good to see you again.”

Blimey, and just how nice it is to look at your beautiful face. But I steeled my expression and ground my teeth. I spun on my heel, trudged back toward Abe's office, intending to hire Quinn as my bodyguard to keep this goddamn Good Samaritan at arm's length.

"Damn you to hell," I muttered as I went.

He laughed behind me. "Oh joy."



I zipped my backpack shut over my three t-shirts, my only other pair of trousers, and the few precious books I owned. A glance out of the window showed the sun setting over the low rooftops. This would be my last night in an institution I had called home for over twelve years.

Bloody old Abe couldn't have punished me in a worse way. He should have sent me to prison. Could hardly be worse than the orphanage. But, to banish me from the country and condemn me to live in the same house as my mother was unspeakable cruelty.

"It's not even two months," Quinn had said after the hearing. "You're a tough girl, you'll survive."

Actually, he was the only person I was going to miss.

A knock rattled the door of my small room. That would be him. The judge and Miss Mulligan had thought it a good idea that I spend an evening out with my mother and her lover before attempting a journey to a foreign country with them. Charlene had beamed while her friend covered his smirk with a cough. Quinn accompanying me tonight was the one condition on which I agreed to go.

I pulled the door open and stared. For at least three whole seconds. Quinn in casual wear. Without his uniform, he looked even younger, while his dark gray t-shirt and bleached jeans fit him perfectly.

My black zip up sweatshirt and ripped jeans suddenly didn't seem like such a nice thing to wear anymore. Maybe I shouldn't have removed the safety pin from the hole in the knee after all.

Quinn offered me his elbow. "Are you ready, kiddo?"

"Ready to face the dragon and get burned? Never. Let's go." I laced my arm through his and pulled the door closed behind me.

"It can't be all bad."

"You have no idea."

Downstairs, Quinn held the door open for me and led me to his black BMW parked around the block. We both climbed in, and he pulled away from the curb. After a while of staring silently out of the window, my train of thought broke with Quinn's not-so-subtle cough. I tilted my head his way.

He briefly glanced at me then faced forward again. "You know, I was quite surprised to see your mother today. Didn't you say she died in a car crash when you were little?"

"If only." Arms crossed over my chest, I concentrated on the car in front of us, wishing Quinn would crash into it at the next intersection. That would give us an excuse not to show up. We passed the intersection without incident. Damn Quinn for being a safe driver.

I needed a strategy. Quick. Before we arrived at the pub and there was no way for me to escape confronting Charlene. When the uncomfortable buzz in my stomach increased, I cleared my throat,

giving Quinn a sweet smile as he tilted his head. His eyes darted back and forth between me and the windshield.

“What is it, Jona?”

I leveraged my best puppy look. “Is there a chance you don’t know the way and we end up in the city watching a film instead of meeting them?”

He laughed. “No, kiddo. Abe would have my arse for kidnapping you.”

Okay, that was a major fail. Plan B. “Do you like me, Quinn?”

Head tilted, he placed his palm on my forearm, squeezing slightly while he steered the car with one hand for a moment. “Sure, I do.”

“Would you marry me?”

“What?” he choked and jerked his hand back so fast it bumped against the steering wheel.

“If you married me, no one could force me to go back to this morally corrupt woman they call my mother.” I lifted my chin. “I would be an independent adult then.” *Sort of.*

“Oh, is that it?” A relaxed chuckle rocked his chest while he steered the car around Kings Cross. “Well, I’m afraid Bethany wouldn’t like that.”

I frowned, running my fingers up and down the smooth seat belt across my chest. “Who’s Bethany?”

“My girlfriend.”

“I didn’t know you had a girlfriend.”

“It’s a brand new thing.”

He beamed. It was nice to see my only friend happy about having a woman. But it was a shame that she spoiled my brilliant plan B.

Lips pouted, I craved his attention again.

His eyebrow arched. “What are you thinking about *now?*” The question sounded damn close to a warning. Amazing thing, his intuition when it came down to me.

“You and Beth could adopt me.” Sickly sweet innocence dripped from my voice.

Quinn waited a second before he covered my hand with his. “You’re too old to be adopted, sweeting.”

“Yeah. And Bethany wouldn’t be happy with a brat like me, would she?”

His fingers closed around mine. “I never saw you like that, you know.”

“I do know. And that’s why I like you so much. You’re the only one who ever cared.”

Surprised about the truth in my words, my gaze dropped to our joined hands. This was the first time in years I had an open conversation with anyone. Honesty usually stood locked somewhere deep down in the dungeons of my heart. But with Quinn being close like a brother, that door cracked open. If only a little.

“Soon you’ll have an entire family to care for you. And that boy seemed really concerned about you as well.”

“I don’t see what’s positive about living with a dragon and her child-lover.”

Because he needed to shift gears, Quinn withdrew his hand. “Oh, he’s not her lover.”

“How do you know?”

“I had a chat with him. Apparently, he’s some sort of caretaker. Very nice guy.”

If Quinn said so, I had no reason not to believe it. But the sudden rush of happiness I felt when he spoke of the guy was a riddle to me.

“Don’t worry,” he added with a mischievous grin, “I only told him good things about you.”

As if there was anything good to say about me. *Let me think...that would include my name, and...yeah, that was about it.* But speaking of names. “Did he tell you his name?”

“Yes.”

I waited. Nothing. “And?”

Quinn smirked. “Are you interested in the lad?” I poked my elbow into his ribs, which made him laugh out loud. “Careful, kiddo. I’m driving.”

“I’m not interested in *him*,” I snapped. “I’d just like to know who I’ll have to deal with for the next six weeks.”

“Ah, right. Must be exciting to meet relatives in France. What’s your aunt’s name, anyway?”

“No idea. I never met her. And who cares?”

“Gotcha! I thought you would like to know *anyone* you’ll have to deal with.” He chuckled, and I didn’t like it. “You know, the guy’s only a few years older than you. If you’re nice to him, who knows, maybe *he’ll* want to marry you in the end.”

He deserved a slap for his teasing.

Scowling at him, I ground my teeth. “Did he tell you that he left me alone in the hallway today after he released me from the handcuffs?”

Quinn frowned at the red light stopping us for a moment. “Did he? Really?”

“Yes, he went to the bathroom. So what does that tell us about him?”

“That he trusted you?”

“No!” Interesting that Quinn came up with the same words as the blond guy. “It only shows how irresponsible he is. Leaving a criminal alone.”

“And what an evil criminal you are.” Damn him for the playful glint in his eyes.

Two minutes later, my heart sank to my gut as Quinn parked the car in front of a pub called *Antonio’s* and cut the engine. A few deep breaths couldn’t ease my tension. Quinn studied my face for a moment then opened his mouth.

I cut him off and pointed my finger at his face. “If you’re going to say, *Just grin and bear it!* I’ll punch your nose.”

His laugh echoed inside the cabin. He ruffled my hair and brushed my cheek. “Keep the fight up, tiger. I know you can do this.” Then he climbed out of the car.

Finger at the ready, I resisted the urge to push the button to lock the doors from the inside as soon as he’d slam the door shut. Damn, I shouldn’t have declined when Debby offered to show me how to short-circuit a car.

“Are you coming?”

“Yeah, don’t worry, policeman. I’m hot on your heels.”

Quinn waited until I was out of the BMW before he shut his door. The man knew me too damn well. The push of a button on his key activated the central locking system with a flash of the turn lights. I waited for him to circle the car then hung on to his arm.

“Did you bring your gun?” I whispered with my head turned to his shoulder as pedestrians walked by.

“What do you need a gun for?”

“You never know. They come in handy at times. Have you ever shot a dragon?”

“*Jona.*” His jesting growl came with a bump of his hip against mine.

I tripped over my Martens’ untied laces and stumbled. When Quinn grabbed me, giggles erupted from my chest.

“By the way,” Quinn said softly. “His name is Julian.”

“Julian.” The name rolled off my tongue.

I glanced up from my laces to the pub entrance and found myself staring into the angelic blue eyes of a French god.

3

KICKS

DAMN! WHY DID I have to speak Julian's name at entirely the wrong moment? The hem of my hoodie caught in my death grip as I bit my wayward tongue.

Even in the dimly lit street, I must have glowed like an overripe strawberry with the heat shooting across my face. Quinn got the full blast of my glare for steering me into this embarrassing situation. I'd eat my hat if Julian didn't believe we'd been talking about him. It sure seemed to lift his ego high above London's roofs.

He'd slung his jacket over his shoulder, hooking it with one finger. The white of his shirt accentuated his deep blue eyes. He stared at me with a knowing smile. A crooked one. I died a thousand little deaths.

Holy crap, could someone dig a hole for me to get lost in?

I slapped myself mentally. What was wrong with me? So far a smile had never made me lose control and forget myself. Actually, I was quite immune to any boy's charm.

After a couple of motionless seconds, Quinn nudged me in the back. He held his hand out to Julian. “Jules. How’re you doing?”

Jules? Did I miss something?

Julian slammed his hand into Quinn’s. Memories of his cool fingers around my wrist mocked me from the back of my mind. Suddenly, all I could think of was to hold out my hand to this stranger and beg for the pleasure of his touch. His fingers, long and masculine, seemed like they could coax a soft purr of surrender from even the most terrifying of lions.

Bloody hell, what was I thinking?

Hand stretched toward me, Julian tilted his head. “Hi, Jona. Everything all right?”

Not given to sympathize with the enemy, I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my torn jeans. “Save your pleasantries. Just because you freed me this morning, doesn’t make us friends.”

He leaned a little closer, voice dropped to a whisper. “Still pissed you couldn’t bring yourself to run off this morning because of me?”

Pardon? I fisted my hands to my hips and took a step backward. “I’ll have you know that I didn’t leave the building for Quinn’s sake. He trusted you with watching me. And you failed majorly. I wouldn’t cause my friend trouble because of *your* carelessness.”

Those warm blue eyes leveled with mine. Damn, they kicked me off my train of thought. “At least you care for *someone*.”

Hands clapped, Quinn’s voice carried to my ears, but his words made no sense to me. Julian’s intense stare captured me. His gorgeous eyes knew no barrier. They penetrate my innermost core until I felt naked before him, with all the dark bits of my soul spread out for him to see, unable to hold the protective shield up any longer.

I so hated it.

Neither of us broke the stare. The cool night's breeze lifted the hair at my nape off my neck.

Slowly, on his left cheek, a slight dimple appeared. A lopsided grin followed. "What do you say, shall we go in?"

I watched his lips part as he spoke and soaked in the chime of his voice. But it took a moment for me to understand. We were alone. Quinn and the dragon had already gone inside. Lips pressed together, I tore my gaze from him and stalked through the door of the restaurant. A low chuckle drifted to me as he followed on my heels. The fiend knew he had distracted me.

The smell of spicy food and beer hung thick in the low vault-like pub. One foot placed on the iron bar under the counter, Quinn was talking to the waiter. My mother flanked his left side, her elbow resting on the countertop, and I caught the first real glimpse of her this evening.

A bobby pin fixed her pulled-back limp hair, the faded red contrasting with the black of her silk blouse. A mud brown skirt, not quite reaching her knees, enhanced her narrow hips and high heels brought the top of her head in level with Quinn's eyes. Her left foot slipped out of its shoe at the heel, suggesting she felt anything but comfortable in them. So who the hell was she trying to impress?

Shaking my head, I joined Quinn on his right. He leaned slightly my way. "Glad, you made it in. For a moment there, I thought you wouldn't be coming."

"Oh, and miss out on all the fun? How could I not?" I rolled my eyes, but the barkeeper was the only one who noticed it, and the corners of his mouth twitched.

I moved my gaze to Quinn. “Why are we standing here?”

“Waiting to get a table.”

I pivoted and glanced around. “Why, there’s a nice table over there. We can take that one.”

Quinn followed the direction of my pointed finger then gave me a hard stare. “This is a table for twelve. I’m sure we can get something more private.”

“You want privacy?” My intended loud tone caught my mother’s and Julian’s attention. They lifted their eyes to me. “I’d say we better get rid of the annoying company then.”

The off-duty officer slipped his hand under my hair, placed warm fingers on my neck. His squeeze was none too gentle. “You’re too sweet today, little wench,” he said through a wide grin and gritted teeth.

“I’m doing my best.”

“I don’t doubt it for a second.”

A waiter came from the back of the pub and led us to a niche with a small table. Square. Quinn and my mother lowered at opposite sides. Julian went around the table, giving me a suggestive glance over the candle-lit top before he eased down. This left me to sit between my mother and Quinn.

Just bloody brilliant. I coughed innocently and shoved my chair toward Quinn’s side as far as possible. Only when I had made myself comfortable and silence fell upon the small group of us did Quinn lean in with a puzzled frown.

“Maybe you’d like to sit on my lap?”

Yeah, too funny.

My mother's continued silence didn't bother me, but her focused way of watching me got my goat. Her profile loomed in the corner of my eyes at any time. Disgusted, I propped my elbow on the table, my chin cupped in my hand. A perfect girly grin displayed on my face in spite of the annoyance that slang its noose around my neck. I turned toward Quinn to avoid the dragon's stare.

"So, you two are really close friends, right?" Julian's attempt to break the ice.

I would've much rather reached out to *break* my mother's neck.

Quinn bobbed his head, but I was equally quick with a reply. "He's my lover." I jerked my chin in Charlene's direction. "She yours?"

My mother's shocked inhale and how she clapped her hands to her mouth amused me—not quite so much, the kick against my shin coming from Quinn's end. The poor man threatened to choke on his cough.

"Ah, fuck." My startled laugh tore my unholy curse to shreds.

Utterly untroubled by my assumption, Julian folded his arms on the table, slowly leaning most of the weight of his upper body on his elbows. His hard gaze pinned me. "You'd never believe just how close we are."

Holy crap, why did everything he said sound like the mischievous purr of a leopard?

I opened my mouth for a snappy retort, but nothing whatsoever came out. Dumbstruck, for the first time in years.

The waiter coming for our order was my rescue from this irritating situation. The dragon asked for water. That fit, for she

could extinguish the fire in her gorge with it. Julian took a glass of O.J. and Quinn ordered alcohol-free beer.

“And what’ll it be for you, Miss?”

I lifted my gaze to the man dressed in a white shirt and black pants. “Hm, I think I’ll take a tequila for starters. Or best, make it a double. The night is long. There’s still a lot to endure.”

The cutlery on the table shook when Quinn kicked my shin under the long cloth again. After a short low cry, I ground my teeth.

The waiter raised his brow, and Quinn ordered a glass of Coke on my behalf.

“Are you all right?” Julian demanded. My repeated yelps when I got kicked must have worried him.

“Perfectly fine. I wonder, though, what shabby kind of restaurant this is.” Giving Quinn a sideways glare, I swallowed hard at my friend’s betraying behavior. “Seems like a rat found its way under our table.”

When everyone was set with their drinks, Quinn leaned forward, addressing my mother. “So, France, it is—where exactly are you going to take our little princess?” His soft tone held a hint of regret as he cut a brief glance my way. I could be sure he’d miss me as much as I was going to miss him.

“My sister’s house is situated at the *Provence*. A place called *Fontvieille*.”

I’ve heard the word Provence before, but the last bit was a cryptic lull to me. Anyway, Charlene’s rambling didn’t interest me at all. The folding of my napkin into a neat fan distracted me easily enough. Squeezed in the middle, it looked like a pleated bow. And when folded, it was the perfect resemblance of a white cloak

reflecting the light from above. Such as I had seen in the courtroom this morning.

The memory made me suck in a lungful of air. I swallowed. My gaze wandered across the table and over the edge to where Julian was leaning back in his chair with his fingers laced over his stomach. My eyes traced the line of buttons on his white shirt up to the collar. His strong jaw line came into view, followed by the sensual shape of his upper lip. Then I was staring into his midnight-blue eyes.

And he stared straight back at me.

A jolt of surprise straightened my spine, but he remained in his relaxed position, not moving a muscle. Was he reading me? The unnerving tension between us grew quickly, though he didn't seem affected at all.

"...The wine they produce earns them enough to fund a high standard of life." My mother's ramblings drifted to me. "Yet my sister and her husband don't have children of their own to share it with. They're all the more delighted by the idea of having their niece in the house for a while."

Quinn folded his hands on the table. "I was wondering, Miss Montiniere—"

"Oh, but please, call me Charlene." She gave him a quick smile.

"Yes, Quinn, please. You *must* call her Charlene." Sugar dusted my voice. "A fitting name for a merciless dragon, don't you think?"

Pain shot through my right leg. If Quinn kept kicking me like this, my shin would be all shades of green and blue before the evening was over. This time I returned the hit, but missed his leg by an inch. My boot only scraped his jeans. "I can't believe how annoying the rats are in this restaurant."

“And I really can’t believe that you left all your manners back home,” he replied, like me, speaking through clenched teeth.

“I beg you, Quinn, don’t be mad at my daughter. I deserve her wrath and distrust.” My mother’s gaze moved to mine. “Don’t I, Jona?”

Sick to my stomach, I gave her an evil scowl. “I’d rather you didn’t speak to me at all, *Charlene*.”

Her glossed lips thinned to a line, and the corners subtly pointed south. She wouldn’t honestly have expected I’d call her *mom* after she messed up my childhood so royally?

The dim bulbs in the restaurant cast her bony face in a mystic light. For an instant, I thought a ghost of the past stared at me through her deep brown eyes, the only color about her face that had remained as intense as I remembered it over the years. Distracted by her longing stare, I almost failed to notice the forward move of her hand. Just before it could land on mine, I jerked my arm back and tucked both hands in my lap. The tablecloth hid them from her touch.

She reached for her glass of water, traced the brim with her slim finger, then took a sip. “I’ll be honest with you. There won’t be an endless chance for us to talk. I’m ill. Seriously ill. With no hope for a cure. Julian sa—” She cleared her throat, stroking the stem of her glass. “The doctors don’t even give me until the end of the year.”

“Alas, this is the first good news of the evening.”

From across the table, strong legs circled around my crossed ankles, lifting my legs in haste. The quick move dragged me lower into my chair, and I clasped the table with a startled hold. This time, Quinn’s kick missed my shin.

“That one was predictable,” Julian said, his eyes as dark as shards of obsidian. He lowered my feet to the floor then withdrew his legs and left me wondering whether he was referring to the kick from my friend or my cold retort.

Everyone fell silent. Shooting a glance at Quinn, I realized my mother’s illness wasn’t a surprise to him. She must have talked to him this morning in the court after my spectacular failure at fleeing her presence. Probably twirling him around her little finger with his pity for the helpless. And he so fell for it. *Stupid policeman.*

Her days were numbered, so what? All the better, I would say.

“You see, Jona.” With her mentioning my name, my mother drew my eyes away from Quinn. “I don’t want to *leave* without taking the chance of making up for the hard life you’ve had.”

“You want my forgiveness?” A tight laugh erupted from my throat, though I didn’t at all feel like laughing right now.

“I beg you to accept your aunt’s offer to live in her house. Because she can provide you with all the decent comforts of life that I never could. She’ll see to you having a good start into your adult future.” Her lower lip trembled. “And for me, I only wish you could forgive my weakness in the past.”

“Then I’m afraid you’ll go down with your only wish denied.” A growl of menace made it up my throat. “I’ll do as the judge ordered and spend the remaining six weeks till my birthday in shackles on the vineyards of an aunt I don’t know. Not quite the time to form a suitable future. As soon as the punishment is over, I’ll return to London and make my living here. Without you. As I’ve done during the past twelve years.”

“With the police fast on your heels and Abe Smith holding a cell free for you at any time?”

It wasn't so much Quinn's bantering that bothered me at this moment as it was Julian's low chuckle when his eyes met mine.

“I'll have you know that my skills stretch further than just snitching a nice bundle of clothes from under the nose of this peacock of a shop owner.” Pride of unknown extent filled my chest and squared my shoulders. “I'm not a half-wit as you all may think. And if it means I'll have to wash dishes in a pub like this ten hours a day to fund my future, then I dare say it's the lesser evil compared to the hell I'm going to be sent to tomorrow.”

Tears stung my eyes. Finally coming after half a lifetime, they couldn't simply be blinked away. My abrupt rise from the table knocked the chair backward, and it landed on the floor with the piercing sound of wood clattering to stone-tiles. If the dragon and her friend decided to finish their drinks of victory over me, I needn't be part of their celebration.

I made a dash for the exit. The curious faces that followed me from every table in the room lanced my heart.

Cool outside air slapped my face. The door slowly closed behind me.

Run, my mind screamed. But where should I go? The brave speech inside was naught but a betrayal to myself. Hardly able to do the math of a senior high school student, I didn't think London had much to offer for me. No one would hire me for an honorable job just because I was able to recite Jane Austen by heart.

The sleeves of my sweater soaked up my tears before they could roll down my cheeks. The solid wall at my back provided mild

comfort. I tilted my face toward the night sky. It couldn't possibly be my destiny to end up in one of Abe's iron curtained cells one day.

The door of the pub opened and out stepped a tall figure. Through the mist of moisture pooling in my eyes, it took me a second to recognize Quinn.

"Oh, there you are," he said softly as he leaned against the wall the same way I did. "I almost feared I'd have to spend the night on the streets searching for you."

After a few blinks, my gaze moved to his eyes and back to the sky. "There's no place for me to go. No one wants to have me."

He took my hand. "I just met someone who does. And I've heard of a handful more people who'd be delighted to welcome you to their home. Kiddo, look past your pride for once and see the great chance they're offering."

"Why are you so willing to shove me down the lion's gorge? You heard all her false words," I spat. "The only thing this woman wants is peace for her soul before she kicks the bucket."

"And is this really such a bad thing?"

I jerked my hand out of his. "Blimey, Quinn, whose side are you on?"

"Yours, Jona. Can't you see?" Without warning he pulled me into an embrace that knocked the air out of my lungs. "I hoped for a twist like this ever since you first strode up to my desk at the office and planted your sweet little butt on my stack of case files. You were the cheekiest brat I'd ever come across, but I saw the hurt in your frightened eyes when you tried to mock us both with your snappy talk."

He brushed strands of hair out of my face. “Why don’t you give your mother and her family a chance to meet the great girl I know must be hiding somewhere deep in there?” The hint of a grin appeared on his lips while his finger stabbed the spot between my collarbones.

If there was any great bit of me, then I would make a double effort not to let my goddamn mother get anywhere within reach of it. “Want to know why I told everyone my mother died in a car crash?” I sniffed.

Quinn’s eyes held mine as he nodded.

“Because I was ashamed of anyone to know the truth. That she abandoned me for the sake of her violent lover who whacked the shit out of me every night anew. She gave me away. She chose her sick boyfriend over her own child.” My throat constricted as the words wrenched out. “I couldn’t bear peoples’ disdainful glances any longer. Their whispered taunts behind cupped hands about what a miserable daughter I must’ve been that my own mother refused to keep me.” With the back of my hand, I wiped my nose and twisted away from Quinn’s hold. A moth circled around the beam of light from the streetlamp. I watched it land on the bulb then flutter away. “So I invented her honorable death.”

Strong arms closed around my shoulders and turned me back. Quinn pressed me to his chest. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t.” The cotton of his t-shirt muffled my words. “Your disgust would’ve been the least bearable of all.”

4

OFF TO THE CONTINENT

THE LAST NIGHT in the orphanage appeared as the longest in my life. After Quinn returned to the pub to give our excuses to my mother and her weird attendant, he drove me back to the place I still called home. Not until he promised to come and see me off at the airport the next morning did I let go of my only friend's arm.

Fear of the coming weeks clamped like a fist in my stomach and kept me from falling asleep till the early morning hours.

I had seen all kinds of emotional farewells on the small TV in the common room, but none of those applied to my leave-taking that day. Apart from Quinn, Debby would've been the only person worth a goodbye—if she hadn't sold me to the devil the other day and brought about my unholy punishment.

At seven forty-five, I returned to my room after my last shower in the common bathing area. Pulling back my wet hair, I fixed it with an old rubber band I'd found in the pocket of my jeans when they were handed down to me. As I slipped through the door, I yelped as my heart shot to my throat at the sight of Julian sitting on my bed.

Elbows braced on his knees, he leaned forward. His blond hair gleamed like minted gold in the sun streaming in through the window. “Not quite the welcome I had hoped for.”

Frantically, I scanned the room for the other intruder, but the dragon was nowhere to be found. “What’re you doing here?”

“Summoning you. Your mother is settling your check-out with the headmistress.” The bedsprings squeaked when he rose from my cot, then he glanced around the room.

Crap, not what I wanted him to do, especially when he focused on the cobwebs in the corner above his head.

“Isn’t this a lovely place?” he murmured.

I let a casual shrug roll off my shoulders. Like I could be bothered with such trivialities. No way would I let the fiend know how much his words offended me. “Cobwebs, dust, it’s still home.”

“After the dramatic end of last evening, I wasn’t at all sure if I’d find you here today.”

“What a terrible shock for you to find my room empty then. Especially, after all the trust you put in me at the court.” My sardonic voice filled the air. I picked up the book from my night stand and withdrew my only pen, which had served as a bookmark last night. I dropped the pen into my backpack. “I’m sure you and the dragon wouldn’t have hesitated a minute to search the city for me.”

Quite nonchalantly, Julian stepped into my space. Biting the inside of my lip, I stubbornly remained where I stood when he lowered his lips to my ear. “With that tongue of yours we wouldn’t have had any trouble finding you.” Warm breath brushed my hair as he spoke.

Sighing, I inhaled his scent. His skin smelled of wild wind and ocean, and that melted my armor. A memory surfaced in my mind of the one day last spring when Miss Mulligan took us to the sea and I waded through the gentle waves rolling to the shore. Closing my eyes, I could still feel the wet sand between my toes.

“Are you ready to go?” His question came from behind me.

I opened my eyes again, blinking against the bright light from outside. It seemed even the sun chided me through the window pane for the moment where I’d let down my guard. My tight grin in place, I turned. “As ready as one in my sick situation can be.”

“Good.” His impudent grin mocked me from three feet away. “Let’s not waste any more time in this nasty place then.”

He bent, picked up my bursting backpack from the floor, and headed out. At least he had the decency not to let me carry the burden on my own. Although, compared to my mother’s inescapable presence, it was only a small burden.

My gaze swept over my small room a final time. It felt as if I was leaving a part of me behind. After all, this had been my home for so long. Listlessly, I closed the door.

“The lift seems to be out of order today. We have to take the stairs,” Julian informed me when I caught up with his long strides.

“That lift has been out of order ever since I moved in.”

His head turned to me, his gaze filled with sudden irritation.

“What did you expected to find here?” I sneered as I followed him. “The Grand Plaza?”

Julian shook his head, and even if I didn’t see his face, I could just picture him rolling his eyes.

Three flights of stairs gave me plenty of opportunity to study his backside. The muscles flexed with every step he took. Never being one to stare at a boy's butt, it surprised me how hard I found it to tear my eyes from the stunning view.

Between the first and second landing, he shot me another suspicious glance. Throughout the years I became an expert at muffling the sound of my footfalls while wandering through the building at night to grab a book from the library. "Thought I was going astray?"

"Just checking," he murmured, facing the steps again.

Downstairs, my backpack landed with a dull thud on the floor. Julian planted his nice bottom on the second step, his elbows propped on his knees. A spider made its busy way past his shoes and disappeared into a small crack in the brittle wall. He angled his head to gaze at me. "Don't tell me you're going to miss this place."

I shrugged and folded my arms over my chest. "You should come here in winter when the mice move in for a warmer place to stay and a nice meal in the cafeteria."

His brows arched and seemed to plead with me to tell I was only joking. I didn't bother, but shifted my weight to my other foot, mimicked his raised brow and dared him to call me a liar. He didn't take the bait.

"Well, in your new home you will have to do without your speedy companions. The only furry patron there will be the giant hound."

A dog? Giant? "No one said I'd have to share a house with a monster other than my mother." The image of Rusty the Rottweiler ran screaming through my head. When I still lived with the dragon,

that stupid dog had flashed his canines at me whenever I walked by our neighbor's garden. A hint of wariness crept to my tone. "And just how big would that giant be?"

Julian took a second to answer. "I know people who mistook it for a horse." His quiet tone released a shudder down my spine. "But don't worry. They keep the dog well fed, so it should restrain the impulse to eat a snotty brat like you."

Seriously?

The door behind me squeaked open, and I nearly jumped out of my skin, half expecting to find myself staring into the open maw of a giant ogre. The beaming face of my mother was just as shocking.

"Oh, you're already here." She reached out with one hand, but apparently thought better of it and pulled back before her fingers made contact with my cheek. "I've got all the papers for your departure. The taxi is waiting outside. I suppose we can start our journey."

Miss Mulligan shook my hand in farewell then saw us off to the front door. Julian stuffed my belongings into the boot of the black car. Two other suitcases had already found their places in there. He climbed into the backseat after me while the dragon sat in front.

"Now put on a nice smile and enjoy the travel," Julian whispered as he leaned over to my side. "You'll like the flight. I guess you've never been in an aircraft before?"

"Aircraft?" I hadn't even thought about that part of the trip. My knees started to tremble. Oh shit! "Isn't there a chance to go by car or train. Or a ship even?"

His forehead creased into a frown. "What's the problem? Are you afraid of flying?"

“I wouldn’t say that, particularly.” Because I’d never been up so high. Actually, just climbing the first few rungs of a ladder scared the wits out of me. Not to mention the palsy when I dared to lean out of the open window in my room. That wager had won me a brand new pullover which Debby nicked from H&M, but I daresay the prize was hard-earned. “I just have little issues with heights.”

Julian pursed his lips. “We best not give you a window seat.”

Within forty minutes we arrived at Heathrow Airport. Nervously, I followed on Julian’s heels, frightened I might get lost among so many people. But then, what did I worry for? This would be my last chance of escape. Maybe drop back, then take a wrong turn and dash for freedom? My strides getting slower, the distance between me and my mishap of a mother grew steadily.

People wheeling their suitcases filled the space between us. Fleet-footed anticipation grew inside me. I stopped and peeked around, searching for a good place to hide until the dragon was out of sight.

From behind, someone slipped his fingers under the straps of my backpack and pulled it down. “Let me carry this for you. We don’t want you to miss your flight for the sake of the heavy baggage, do we?”

“Quinn!” I spun about to fling my arms around his firm body and my nose buried into the fresh smell of his dark uniform.

He laughed, staggering back a couple steps at my enthusiastic embrace. “All right, kiddo. I get it. You’re happy to see me.”

“I thought you wouldn’t come after all.”

He grabbed my shoulders and held me away from him to look me sternly in my eyes. “When did I ever break a promise to you?”

The chance at escape might be gone, but his showing up filled me with happiness. I grinned broadly, knowing he'd never go back on his word.

Julian approached us. "Morning."

"Hey, lad." Quinn planted a heavy hand on Julian's shoulder. "I hope you had no trouble bringing the princess to her carriage."

One corner of Julian's mouth lifted. "So far she heeled like a nice puppy."

I glared at both of them. "Would the two of you stop making fun of me?"

Julian took a surrendering step backward. "Your mother is at the check-in. Do you want to take your backpack with you into the cabin? Otherwise I'll take it to her now."

"No, just take it." I picked up my bag and shoved it at his chest.

He didn't budge at my hard push. One strap over his shoulder, he trudged toward my mother who stood in a snake-like queue at the luggage drop-off. With him gone I would get a moment to say farewell to my friend.

Quinn pulled me aside. "Listen, kiddo. I'm sure your aunt and uncle will provide you with anything necessary. Food, clothes, a room. So no stealing in the foreign country, is that clear? Especially not from their household." He pointed a warning finger in my face, and I restrained the impulse to snap my teeth at his digit.

"I'll be nice."

"Jona, I mean it."

"Okay. Got it. No stealing." Exasperatedly, I blew a strand of hair out of my eyes. "What about gambling and selling my body for money?" Eyes widened, his jaw dropped to his chest. I tried hard to

hold back a laugh at his perplexed expression. “Close your mouth, buddy, I was only jesting.”

His dark brows furrowed.

“Honestly!” I lifted my palms in surrender.

“Very funny.” If he’d been a little bit more like me, he’d have stuck his tongue out with the words. But he didn’t. Instead he heaved a sigh and slipped his hand between my hair and my neck. “You just be a nice girl, do you hear? Don’t do anything reckless. And in God’s name, don’t even think about running off on your own once you’re in France.”

I raised one innocent brow.

“I’m warning you, kiddo. I saw you fall behind just a moment ago.”

“As you said yourself, it was just because of the heavy luggage.” I shrugged. “Anything else you feel the need to warn me about?”

Scratching the stubble on his chin, he pursed his lips. “Beware, cars hit from the right side in mainland Europe.”

“You mean from the wrong side?” I offered.

Long wisps slipped through his fingers as he ruffled my hair. “Exactly.” His low chuckle reminded me of how much I was going to miss this man. He was more like family than my mother could ever be.

And speaking of the devil...With the dragon in tow, Julian approached us again. “We’re boarding in twenty minutes. Better get through the passport control now.”

Bile rose in my throat the moment he announced our short departure.

Quinn didn't miss the tremble of my lower lip. He dipped his head, brushing his thumb over my cheek. "You'll be okay, kiddo." Then he turned to Julian. "You take good care of the princess, will you?"

"I promise." Julian's eyes fixed on mine as he spoke.

My mother bid Quinn goodbye with a handshake. "Thanks for watching over my baby. I hope we'll get a chance to meet again."

Her baby? Which one? The one she'd have drowned in the river with a happy laugh? Disgust twisted my stomach. I had to look elsewhere to restrain from making this woman eat her teeth.

She and her pet started for the passport control with me following at a reluctant pace.

"Julian!" Quinn's shout had us all turning around once more. He retrieved a set of silver handcuffs from the back of his belt and tossed them at Julian, who caught the glinting object with one hand. "You might want to make use of them. And better keep an eye on the exit."

Julian's chuckle didn't bother me half as much as it should have. Neither did Quinn's final banter. Before I knew it, I broke into a run and slammed hard against Quinn's chest. His arms enveloped me with the strength of a best friend, and I wished there was a way to stay in this protective cage.

"Cheer up, kiddo. It's only for six weeks," he said into my ear. "If after that time you still wish to return to England, I'll come and pick you up myself." He pressed a kiss to my temple. The first and the last. Then he cupped my chin gently. "Now go meet your family. They're waiting for you."

There was no chance to delay the walk into the lion's den any longer. Slipping away from Quinn's hug, I dragged my feet over to

the sliding glass-doors where the dragon waited for me. Every so often I cast a glance over my shoulder to ensure Quinn was still there. He waved, then shoved his hands into his pockets, but didn't move until we rounded the corner and he was out of sight.

After we passed the control section, my suddenly lethargic body slumped into one of the many red vinyl chairs lining the wall. Arms crossed and jaw set, I waited for the moment we would board the plane.

It took not a minute until Julian sat down next to me. "You know, six weeks is not an eternity. If you allowed yourself to, you might even enjoy the stay."

"Yeah, sure. Like pulling a tooth." My tone was cold, hard.

Resignation filled his sigh. He brought his hand down on my thigh for a second. The unexpected move confused me. I completely forgot to jerk my leg out from under his touch. But I did want to spit in his face for befriending my mother. Instead, I stared at his fingers for as long as they lay on my jeans.

Then he rose from the seat and crossed the hall to the huge window pane where Charlene stood and paid attention to the traffic of aircrafts on the runway.

Even with his gentle caress gone from my leg, the spot where he'd touched me remained prickling with heat. An odd sensation raced over my skin. I rubbed my hand over my thigh, my heart pounded as warmth filled my body. Whether there was magic in his touch, or I lost part of my common sense, I couldn't tell. Either way, his unexpected caress distracted me long enough to ease the pain over the departure from my hometown and my only friend.

Over the microphone, the air hostess announced the boarding message. I rose from my chair and followed Julian and Charlene through the final ticket control. Sounds of the plane engines grew louder with every stride down the narrow gate. A slight chill wafted into my face as I stepped over the small gap and entered the plane.

Two captains and another hostess greeted us at the entrance and wished us a pleasant journey.

“Pleasant, my arse,” I mumbled and trudged down the narrow aisle behind Charlene until she found the row with our seat numbers inscribed overhead.

She turned with an expectant smile. “Would you like to sit by the window?”

Julian ushered a few words in French to her. Her expression blanked, then she slid into the seat closest to the window. Did he just reveal my little problem with big heights to her? I wished he’d chosen English to sell me out.

Damn! Shock weakened my knees as I realized in France no one would speak my language. Julian planted himself next to the dragon which left the aisle seat for me. I collapsed into the navy blue fabric seat, my mind racing.

The flight attendant had the passengers buckle their seatbelts. I slid the metal slots together, but the belt was long enough for me to fit in there three times. Helplessly, I opened the buckle, searched for a second, shorter belt around my seat, but there was none.

“Let me do it for you.” Julian’s fingers were on the seatbelt before I could refuse his help. Hands lifted to my shoulders, I watched as he buckled me in then pulled at the loose end to tighten

the belt around my waist. His alluring, sweet smell filled my head when he leaned toward me. *Oh, what a scent.* I licked my lips.

His hand rested on my belly. “Too tight?”

I shook my head slowly. He stared into my eyes for an infinitesimal second longer before he leaned back. I had to forcefully take in a breath. “Thanks.”

On the small screens attached to the overhead compartments, an animated hostess had started to give instructions for what to do in case of emergency. I strained to listen and memorize the appropriate conduct in the unlikely event of the aircraft performing a landing on water. The short movie of people gliding down on a giant slide and then initiating their life-vests in the water creeped me out.

“If it’s so unlikely, then why do they show this bloody movie?” My teeth clenched as I prayed the trembles in my body would not be noticed by Julian. Crap. No such luck.

“Relax. Nothing’s going to happen,” Julian whispered in my ear.

The plane taxied back then rolled to the runway. I stared straight ahead, focusing on the headrest in front of me. The captain announced the time in France would be one hour plus to British reckoning and the weather on the mainland was supposed to be sunny and close to thirty degrees centigrade. He expected the flight to take sixty minutes. There shouldn’t be turbulences, just a slight rattle when the aircraft crossed the borders from the island to the sea.

Bloody brilliant. This was going to be one hell of an hour.

5

PANIC

SITTIN WITH MY back pressed to the seat, I really didn't want to look through the small porthole window, but I couldn't help myself. Outside, parts of the wing moved up and down with an eerie creak when the aircraft had come to a standstill at the start of the runway. My stomach churned and nausea shot to my throat.

"Don't be afraid." Julian leaned toward me, and the warmth of his breath slowed the rollercoaster in my belly. "They are not loose parts. It's standard procedure. The captain's testing various parts before takeoff."

His words shattered my short-lived comfort. Fear crawled up my belly again. "Isn't *now* a bit late to be testing everything?"

"That's routine, believe me." I only hoped he wasn't bullshitting me. Tipping my head back to my seat, I focused on the front.

Seconds passed, the sound of the revving engine dotted my forehead with beads of cold sweat.

The instant the airplane shot forward with break-neck speed, my back plastered into the seat. My knuckles whitened with the

strength of my grip of the armrests, and my lips parted as all the air was sucked out of my lungs.

Dear God, I'm too young to die. I had yet to get my driver's license.

If only Peter Pan was here. He would know what to do. *Think a happy thought. Think a happy thought.* My lips moved as I repeated the mantra in my mind like a prayer. But, alas, no happy thought came to me.

The craft flew down the runway like a rocket, the world outside zoomed past in a blur. If I could've moved a single muscle, I might've made the sign of the cross. Now I begged the Lord for a painless end.

All of a sudden, a feather brushed the back of my clenched fist. No, not a plume. Julian's fingers were as soft as a whisper. I sneaked a glance to my right and fell into gorgeous sapphire eyes. Slowly he unclenched my fingers and laced his through mine. "Everything's all right."

His light tone tempted me to believe him. His touch, filling me with trust and comfort, left no doubt I'd be safe as long as he held me. As the plane soared into the air and took to the sky, he squeezed my hand and graced me with his beautiful, crooked smile.

Blimey, here came my happy thought.

We became airborne. And I went deaf. Something got stuck in my ear. Breaths became calmer, and inside my boots, my toes uncurled.

The plane climbed the sky with an ease I'd have never thought possible. I dragged in a deep breath and my ears unplugged. Julian's gentle hold kept me grounded. And when I could tear my gaze from our joined hands, I dared a look out of the oval window.

London from above was a marvelous sight. But seeing the metropolis shrinking underneath the plane's belly also confirmed the end of the life as I had known it for years. Ripped from my island, I was exported to slavery for an endless six weeks.

My glance returned to Julian's hand on top of mine. Slowly, my fingers withdrew from his. This was the second time he touched me today, and similar to the first, my entire body had calmed and warmed from the inside. Unlikely he even realized how I reacted to him. How much I appreciated the caress of his hand and his soothing effect on me. *All the better.* I'd die of shame if he found out.

Avoiding his stare, I focused all my concentration on the attention-consuming task of wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans.

"I guess you're feeling better," he said dryly, then leaned forward to retrieve a book from his backpack underneath the seat in front of him. He stuck his nose in the pages.

I cleared my throat, turning my gaze anywhere but to him.

In front of me a man stood and rummaged in the overhead compartment. He lowered to his seat with a white pillow in his hand and stuffed it behind his neck. My eyes squeezed shut for a second. But this only made me all the more aware of the unfamiliar, warm sensation still surging through me. My heart couldn't feel warmer if someone had pointed a hairdryer's heated stream straight at it.

Though pleasant in an unfathomable way, the sensation made my flesh tingle. I hugged my arms around my waist and pulled my legs to my chest, my feet resting on the seat. Positioned like this, I felt a little more protected...from the eerie effect Julian had on me without his knowing.

Like the captain had foreseen, the crossing of the border between land and sea didn't go so smooth. A series of rattles shook the aircraft and threatened to shatter it at any moment. Panic grabbed hold of me anew, but this time I took care to keep my trembling hands in my lap and out of Julian's reach. The book still held up to his eyes as if he was deeply emerged in the story, he glanced at me every so often.

For as long as the rattle went on, I doubled my effort to even my breathing. "No need to touch me again," I grumbled, frowning at him sideways.

Julian closed his eyes, his lips compressed, and a dimple appeared in his cheek. "As you wish."

I wish to hell you'd stop laughing at me, you oaf! Blimey, why did I even bother about what he thought of me?

I shot a glare at the dozing bundle in the window seat. "And the dragon sleeps like a stone while the world is falling apart around us. That fits. Always oblivious to the rest of the world."

Just then, I caught Julian's free hand gently stroking her forearm. *What the bloody hell—?* So he was her lover after all. A balloon of jealousy exploded in my chest. Unthinkable what his tender caress would do to her when I was so deeply affected by his slightest touch.

The stroking stopped.

A frown creased my brow. His lips thinned to a line as his hand slid away from my mother's arm and clasped the book instead. Long lashes shielding the blue of his eyes, he kept his gaze on the pages.

A moan rose from my mother as she stirred, but Julian didn't move. On purpose I assumed. Trying to hide his deep concern for her from me.

With the absence of his touch, my mother became fitful. She awoke, her face contorted with lines of pain. A minute later, she sat straight gazing out through the tiny window.

My eyes locked with Julian's as my blood ran cold.



Though the rest of the flight went by without any further incidents, my breath hissed out in relief when the wheels touched the ground again. With the illuminated sign coming off above our heads, we unbuckled our seatbelts and got off the plane. My mother clung to Julian's arm like a liana in the jungle as they descended the escalator. I followed on their heels.

Heat dampened my t-shirt with my own sweat. Once inside the air-conditioned building, I wiped my forehead with the sleeve of my sweater. Compared to the mild temperatures in Britain, France felt like a furnace.

At the luggage claim, we didn't have to wait long before our things came circling on the conveyer. Our baggage in tow, we exited the terminal to find a couple waiting for us by a dark gray minivan.

The tall man, dressed in beige shorts and a black t-shirt, had wrapped his arm around the smaller woman at his side. Her long strawberry-blonde hair cascaded down her back. Her face lit up as she spotted our small group and she raced toward us. Her greeting to

my mother and Julian in French was followed by hugs and kisses. Julian had to bend to receive a peck on both his cheeks.

Releasing him, the woman turned to me, beaming like a hundred watt bulb. Instinct had me backing off, my hands raised in self-defense. “We better skip the kissing.”

The lady held out her hand to me and said, “Hello *chérie*, I am Marie Runné, your aunt.”

She swallowed the H of *hello*, and I’d never heard someone pronounce the letter R in such a funny way. Fighting back a laugh, I shook her hand from two feet away. No need to run the risk of being pulled into an involuntary hug.

“This is my husband, Albert.” She dragged out the last bit of his name like he was called *Al-bear*. The name fit. He was, in fact, as tall as a bear, though his silver-gray hair resembled the fur of a wolf’s back.

“*Bonjours*, Jona. My wife and I are happy you decided to come and stay with us.”

I shoved my hands deep into my pants’ pockets and gazed straight into his green eyes. “I was given no choice.”

Marie’s voice remained soft as she spoke again. “It was very brave of you to travel so far to a place where you do not know anyone. But you will find we are family. Do not be afraid. We shall take good care of you.”

Hello? Did I give the impression of being frightened? She could hardly use the aversion against kissing strangers against me, could she? Eyes narrowed, my jaw tightened. “I’m not scared of anything.”

A train of fuzzy warmth spiraled down my neck the moment Julian leaned close to my left ear from behind. His voice low so that

only I could hear, he said, “We both know at least one thing that scares you out of your wits, don’t we?” Then the fiend picked up my backpack and chuckled all the way to the car’s rear.

Blimey, that boy got on my nerves.

The minivan was spacious enough to hold the three of us in the backseats without being squeezed in like sausages. With Julian separating me from my mother, I kept my back turned to him and stared out of the window. It took a long, seventy-minute drive to the place I was supposed to do bond service until my birthday.

In spite of all the misery I had yet to face in this country, France was a beautiful place. In London, brick buildings and hectic traffic surrounded me as soon as I stepped out of the orphanage. Here, trees lined the single lane streets. Lakes, meadows, and hills with all kinds of slopes produced an enchanting landscape. It seemed as if the country itself strived to calm everyone’s stressed out day with the most peaceful of surroundings.

Unfortunately, my mother’s company and the charity work I was bound to do cast an eerie shadow over the surreal peace. The strangers in the front seats tried to make friendly conversation with me which I was so not interested in. But apart from all that, I might’ve even liked it here.

A soft poke in my ribs made me jump. Julian jerked his chin to the windshield. “We’re almost there. This is,” he paused, pursed his lips, “the residence of your vacation.”

“We might as well call a spade a spade.” With one eyebrow cocked, I offered, “The place for slave labor?”

“Your temporary hometown.”

“How very nice.” Flashing my teeth in a parody of a smile, I ignored him to read the place-name sign next to the road.

Bienvenue à Fontvieille.

Albert steered through the narrow streets of the small town and a little farther until the line of houses and shops gave way to woods and stony paths. The car came to a halt in the driveway of an impressive property.

I climbed out of the car when the others did and gaped at the estate. To call it beautiful would’ve been a vast understatement. It looked like somebody had waved a wand and I’d arrived in a fairytale.

Surrounded by a caramel brown picket fence, the house stood to two stories. Front door, window frames and the long balcony on one side adopted the color of the fence, while the sun reflected off the shiny white exterior and blinded my eyes.

I couldn’t name the red, yellow, and violet flowers giving dwellings to butterflies and bees, but they hung profusely from the rectangular planters attached to each windowsill. A gentle wind fluttered the curtains like the twirling tutu of a ballerina. I couldn’t wait to get inside to find out if the interior measured up with the fantasy façade.

Too amazed to even flinch, I stood rigid when my aunt rubbed both my upper arms with her soft hands. “Welcome home, Jona.”

Home. The word lingered in my ears like the soft rustle on a midsummer’s evening.

Marie let go of me, leaving my skin chilled in the uncommon French heat. She walked to the front door with my mother’s arm looped around hers, followed by her husband who carried our baggage.

I was set to fall into line with them, when a brown and white furred beast, trotting around the corner of the mansion, stopped me in my tracks. It came right for me with a murderous glint in its eyes, cutting me off from the safety of the house. Shit, the beast must've devoured a kid only minutes ago. The white shoelaces still hung from its jaws.

I froze. The pony-sized dog lifted its muzzle to my hand and sniffed. Afraid my wince might stir its appetite for dessert, I strangled the frightened sound in my throat.

The giant animal angled its head, gaping up at my face. A low grumble in its gorge grew to the most blasé bark the world had ever heard. The laces tore away from its mouth and dropped as a puddle of dog-drool.

Julian's laugh made me jump. "And here I was thinking the dog was mute."

I squeezed my eyes shut and bit my lower lip, hating how he caught my every moment of fear.

"Sit, Lou-Lou," he said. The mountain of fur lowered her butt to the ground. Her long tongue lolled out sideways between huge, but not very sharp canines. While her tail swished back and forth over the stone patio, Julian rubbed behind her wooly ear then dared to sling his arm casually over my shoulder and around my neck. "Shall we add dogs to the list of things that scare you senseless?"

Unless I was very much mistaken, the guy seriously begged to be introduced to my great right hook. I dared him with a pissed scowl as he dragged me toward the house.

Before we reached the front steps, I managed to escape his grip and entered alone.

Hopefully, he would go to his own house soon, so I could be safe from his sneaky remarks and the bunch of butterflies he woke in my stomach each time with his touch. Actually, I couldn't wait.

My newly discovered family-members gathered in the wide hallway of the house speaking to each other in fluent French. They quickly switched to clipped English, casting me a welcoming smile when I walked in.

The dragon tried to smile at me, too, but somehow the corners of her mouth wouldn't really lift. "It was a long and exhausting journey for me. I'll get some rest. Marie will help you make yourself at home."

At home, my arse. When would the bitch stop talking to me at last? I clamped down on my teeth, glowering at her until she disappeared into a room at the far end of the hall.

"I will make sure your mother is fine, then I shall give you a tour through the house if you like." Marie flashed that excited beam at me.

Pivoting on the spot, I marveled at the light-flooded interior. With a nonchalant shrug I accepted her offer, although I was more than eager to see the rest of the house.

The oval hall held nothing more than a wardrobe and a credenza with a blue and white patterned vase sitting next to an old-fashioned landline phone. Carved wood doors in off-white opened in either direction. When I was sure nobody would notice, I leaned slightly to one side, peeking round the corner of what seemed to be a study. Shelves full of books and collectibles lined the walls of the small room.

To the right of the hall, a flight of semi-winding stairs led to the second floor. Only when I traced the staircase up to the balustrade did I understand the uncommon brightness inside. Part of the roof sloped down over the open space in a garret with a huge dormer, providing the imitation of a real sky inside the house.

“It’s a little bigger than your small room in the orphanage, isn’t it?”

At Julian’s soft taunt I whirled about. He leaned against the doorjamb, his thumbs hooked coolly through the belt loops of his jeans. I straightened and put on my well-rehearsed girlie grin. “You’re still here? Shouldn’t you be heading home to your family by now?” The mocking edge to my voice did nothing to rattle his relaxed composure.

“*Mais nó*, Julian is living with us,” Marie cheered as she exited my mother’s room and grabbed my wrist. “Come with me. I will show you the kitchen while I put on the kettle for a cup of tea.” She tugged on my arm until I followed her, but I couldn’t hide my horror as I caught Julian’s amused gaze.

As he winked, his beautiful blue eyes held the mischievous promise for a very special six weeks.

6

PALACE

IN A SPACIOUS kitchen, vanilla cupboards hugged sage walls. The warm smell of freshly baked bread wafted through the room. The oak table sat eight, and with me the sole occupant at one end, the thing extended like the runway of a fashion show.

The island in the middle of the room reflected in the stainless steel fridge door as Marie rummaged through the shelves. The metallic giant should come with a map. It was clear Marie was getting lost in there.

“I hope Albert didn’t eat it all. Ah, here it is.” She emerged with a bundle enveloped in wax paper and grabbed a plate from one of the cupboards. Taking off the wrapping revealed a pastry of some French kind, which she shoved in the microwave for a few seconds. Moments later, she placed the steaming snack in front of my folded arms.

With her elbows propped on the table, she lowered into the chair next to me. “Eat, *chérie*. You must be hungry.”

“No, I’m not,” I said quickly. The same instant, my stomach gave a traitorous rumble.

Her laughter, like the peals of a tinkling bell, bounced off the walls and filled the room. “You are family, Jona, and very welcome in this house. Do not be shy to help yourself to anything.” The soft shine in her eyes made me feel she meant every single word.

But why now? What drove this woman to play the good auntie today, when for almost eighteen years she hadn’t even cared if I lived or died? This woman was a stranger to me. She’d never come to our small flat in Cambridge when I still lived with my mother, nor did Charlene ever speak of a sister in France. I knew nothing about Marie and wondered how much more she knew of me.

Another rumble started in my gut. Embarrassed, I pressed my fist to my traitorous stomach and wished it would just shut up. My aunt flashed an understanding grin. I didn’t care for it. But it would’ve been a shame to throw away the delicious smelling food now that she’d already heated it. I sneaked the puff pastry from the plate and nibbled at one end. The flavors exploded in my mouth. It was a crime not to lick my lips free of any crumbs that remained.

Happy I was eating, Marie nodded. When the kettle on the marble counter gave a short beep, she palmed my cheek for the briefest moment. Her hand was gone too quickly for me to even think about flinching from her touch.

“I will take this cup to your mother.” My aunt poured steaming water into a mug and dipped a tea bag in and out. “Then we can start with *la tour*.”

I nodded while I took another small bite from the pastry. A couple minutes later, the snack was gone and I waited for Marie’s return. Three minutes stretched into five. What kept her away so long? After all, my mother’s room was just around the corner.

Tracing the geometrical line of triangles along the plate's brim kept me occupied for another minute or two. I chewed on my lower lip. How rude that she could forget about me in such a short time. No voices in the hall outside or footfalls announced her return. The tap-tap-tap of my shoe against the warm terracotta tiles on the floor was the only sound cutting the eerie silence. Bored now, I pushed to my feet and carried the plate over to the sink that took a minute to wash up.

"I see you are already making yourself useful," Aunt Marie chimed behind me.

I whipped around and met her delighted gaze in the doorway.

She took the plate from my hands to store the saucer away in a cupboard above my head. "Come. It is time to see your new home." Soft hands on my shoulders shoved me out through the door.

The living room on the opposite side of the hallway was partly walled with panes facing west. Gorgeous sunlight filtered through. A grand piano in front of the windowpane dominated the room. According to the set of sheet music on the stand, the glamorous instrument was often in use. My fingers brushed over the ivory keys chiming three dissonant notes as I walked by.

Next to an open fireplace, a big grandfather clock ticked in a hypnotic rhythm. It took me into a past, where the sound of a clock provided my only comfort at night. My hand lifted to my left elbow, an injury that had long since healed. I pushed the memory away.

After I finished my walk around the room, Marie showed me their bedroom and my uncle's study, the one room I'd gotten a sneak peek into earlier.

When I stepped out into the hallway again, the front door tempted me as it stood ajar. A warm breeze beckoned me to take the chance and break free. Maybe, if I could catch Marie in an unaware moment and make a dash for the exit, I would get enough of a head-start to find a hiding place in the woods we passed on the way here. In the dark I'd travel back to the airport and somehow manage to get a flight back to London.

Hands shoved into my jeans' empty pockets, I dashed that idea of escape. With no money, the journey home would be more of an adventure than I would've liked. A snort came over my lips as my mind worked hard on another solution.

"This is our bathroom. You can take a look as well if you like." Marie stepped in front of me and ruined my hope for freedom. Damn! She knew what I was thinking. For now it was best to follow her. Later, when I had a few minutes to myself, I'd make a detailed plan of my bid for freedom.

The only room I didn't get to walk into downstairs was my mother's. Fine with me. I'd be happy as long as the dragon remained inside her hole with the door shut. But to my annoyance the wooden door cracked open just as we headed back front to the stairs.

Julian slipped out and silently closed the door, taking every care as a parent would when leaving the nursery of his sleeping newborn.

"Is she asleep?" Marie's voice dropped to a whisper.

Julian nodded.

"Ah, the ever present caretaker. Did you tuck her in like a toddler and kiss her goodnight at three o'clock in the afternoon?" I said.

He leaned closer and whispered, "I can do that with you tonight if you like."

My gulp echoed in the high hallway. I stepped back, fixed him with an unimpressed stare. A tingle in my stomach irritated me while shock and excitement pulsed through my veins.

Marie slapped his arm softly. "Oh, be nice, Julian," she scolded him, but he only laughed. Then my aunt turned toward me. "Your mother sleeps a lot now. The journey to London exhausted her." She placed a gentle arm around my waist and made me move forward. "Come, *chérie*. I believe you want to see your room next."

Upstairs, the corridor spread to both sides. I whirled around on the gallery, enjoying the sunny place. I leaned over the balustrade and saw Julian below, crossing the hallway with loose-limb strides as he headed for the kitchen. Sunrays breaking through the dormer made the fair strands of his hair gleam. Being tucked in by him might make an interesting experience. My heart beat just that much faster.

He stopped as if he could feel my gaze tracking him. His head tilted toward me. His blue eyes twinkled.

Shit. I jerked back as embarrassment and irritation filled me that he'd caught me staring. I whirled around to face Marie and let her show me to my room. His soft chuckles drifting to me from downstairs annoyed me no end.

"We have a small library up here," Marie explained and pointed to the door around the corner to our right. "You can get yourself books whenever you like. Julian stays in the room on the far left. And this will be yours."

Great, he didn't only live in the same house, but also on the same floor. One foot of solid wall was all that separated us. I suppressed a snort.

Next to Julian's dormitory, she opened the door to my private place, and I entered. As I crossed the threshold to my room, I found myself in a fifteen by fifteen-foot piece of heaven. My breath caught in my throat, and I truly hoped my jaw wasn't hanging open.

Sunshine swamped in through wide windows on two connecting walls. The wind played with sheer curtains, pushing the white fabric in and out through the french doors at the far wall that exposed a small balcony.

The rubber soles of my boots made a squeaking sound on the light gray parquet floor as I crossed to the bed made of maple wood. A teddy bear carved into the footboard lured me to trace its outlines with my fingers. My hands skimmed over the floral design of the covers, and I enjoyed the luxurious feeling of the silken bedding. They were nothing like the stiff covers in the orphanage.

"I hope this room is not too childish for you." My aunt's worried voice broke my fascination. "Albert built the furniture with timber from our own woods. That was in the early days of our marriage when we hoped for children."

In the mirror of the wardrobe door, I spotted a glimpse of her sad eyes where she rocked in a white rocking-chair with a stuffed bear cradled in her arms. Although I hadn't paid much attention the night before, I remembered my mother mentioning that my aunt and uncle didn't have kids of their own.

If it had been anyone else, I would've asked straight away. But facing my aunt who had looked at me with those big warm eyes from

the moment I arrived, I considered it rude to ask for the reason why they didn't have kids. Yet my staring must've given me away.

"A genetic disease." She rose from the chair, placing the teddy lovingly back on the seat. Then she crossed the room on a stride that made it hard to back off. "I cannot get pregnant."

As her hand caressed my cheek, she had me wondering if she'd longed for a child as much over the years as I had yearned for a caring mother. Everything might have gone differently if I had been born her daughter.

My aunt would have loved me.

I bit down on the anger at this disclosure. After all, I wasn't supposed to like this stranger aunt of mine. But when she pulled her soft hand away, I almost reached for it to bring it back to my face. I covered the awkwardness by scratching my nose then marched toward a door standing ajar next to the wardrobe. "What's behind there?"

"A bathroom. Both upstairs rooms have one."

"You're shitting me. A bathroom for my private use?" With the door opened fully, I popped my head inside, then turned back at my aunt and cocked one brow. "Let me guess, you hoped for a girl?"

Marie laughed. "What gave me away? The pink and white tiles? Yes, I did hope for a girl. But also for a boy. Julian's bathroom is tiled all in white and blue."

Curiosity nagged me, whether our rooms were totally identical. But I refused to ask. I didn't want her thinking I was in any way interested in the guy. *Because I sure as hell am not!*

“We will dine at seven,” Aunt Marie informed me. “Take the time to refresh and make yourself at home. Albert brought up your backpack earlier and stored it in the wardrobe.”

Some time to myself sounded fantastic after this long day with people always surrounding me. I nodded, longing for the first shower in a private bathroom after more than twelve years.

“I will give you a shout when dinner is ready.” As soon as the door closed behind her, I felt a bit lost alone in the room. Of course she said this was my room now, but I had my doubts and refused to see it as such. The bed, so nicely made, tempted me.

Carefully, I eased onto the mattress. Not one bedspring gave so much as a peep. Feet dangling from the edge, I sank into the pillow and started counting the small round spotlights dotting the ceiling. I could sneak out of the room and downstairs now. With any luck, no one would notice my disappearance within the next three hours, until it was time for dinner. A fantastic and maybe unique chance.

A soft wind carried the scent of trees and freshly cut grass into my room. I breathed in deep, the curtains wafted over my face.

And what if I stayed? Could I bear to live in this house for six weeks?

Tempting. But out of the question.

The most I would do was delay my escape for one night. After all it would’ve been a shame not to test this heavenly bed just once.

I sat up with a jerk, kicked off my shoes so they’d not mess the beautiful bedding, and knelt on the mattress with my arms propped on the windowsill above the headboard. My head slipped under the thin fabric of the curtain. With the first glance outside, a stunned whistle escaped through my teeth.

A slim path led away from the house, about one hundred yards, to a giant garden that rolled out like an oversize vegetable patch. The vineyard was laid out in all its splendid glory in front of me.

Lush green shrubs rose side by side from the ground in several square yards. Broader paths separated them. The soft wind ruffled the fuzzy heads of the bushes. In the distance the misty rain from the sprinklers formed a dance of sparkles. Birds took a busy bath in it. I'd never seen such an enchanting place before. Not in reality, anyway.

I closed my eyes for a couple seconds, wondering how it might've felt as a child to run free and explore.

What would it feel like now?

The pounding of my heart in my ears, the wind in my hair—I hoped I'd get to roam the place soon.

What would Quinn say if he knew what a beautiful prison Abe had sent me to? He'd probably tell me to forget about my mother living in the house too and enjoy the French way of life.

But I could never forget about that woman or pretend she wasn't there.

Or could I? I might for one day. A grin tugged on my lips. In high spirits, I bounced off the bed and went to inspect the bathroom.

The pink and white room was like walking into a fantasy. The sun peeked through frosty glass, gracing a spacious shower cubicle in the corner with warm light. Pulling one of the huge towels out, I rubbed the soft fabric to my face then wrapped it around my shoulders, drowning in the scent of peach. I could happily move into this place for the rest of my stay.

A small metal square built into the wall next to the credenza caught my eye. It resembled a cat flap. When I stood and pushed

against the metal, it even moved back like one. Confused, I bent forward and slid my head into the hole in the wall to see where the shaft behind the flap would lead. Totally dark inside, I couldn't see anything. But my call echoed funnily in there. "Helllououou..."

Someone cleared his throat behind me.

Shit. I bumped my head painfully when I snatched it out of the hole with a gasp.

"That's a laundry chute. You drop your clothes in there when they need to be washed."

Glowering at Julian's amused face, I rubbed my skull. "Don't people ever knock in France?"

"Actually, I did knock. But when you didn't answer, I assumed you were having a shower and considered it safe to come in. I didn't know you were playing the terrycloth-princess in here." He grinned over a stack of fabric in his arms.

I yanked the towel from my shoulders and shoved it behind my back. Heat rose fast to my cheeks. "And what is that?" I nodded my chin at the pile.

Julian ambled over to my bed where he dropped the entire load. "Marie had me bringing this to you. Apparently, these are things she no longer wears. Said to keep the stuff you like and burn your old ones."

"She said that?" I squeaked in disbelief.

"Well, not the *burning*." He gave me a sheepish grin. "But I believe you can discard your shabby things now that you have a selection of nicer clothes."

The sound of my grinding teeth reverberated through my head. If I wasn't careful, I'd wear down my molars in this damn place. "My clothes are not shabby."

Julian pointed to my leg. "There's a hole in your knee."

"That hole is personal."

"Oh, let me guess. It's a special reminder of one of your reckless raids." He quirked one brow. "The pants got ripped during the dramatic escape, didn't they?"

Get bent and die. I shrugged, lips tight. The pair of Doc Martens had totally been worth the sore knee and the damaged jeans.

His laughter as he walked out of my room haunted me. Not until I was undressed and stood under the warm spray of the shower did my irritation ease. This time I made sure the bathroom door was locked.

By the time I stepped out of the cubicle and wrapped myself into a soft white towel, the skin on my fingers and feet resembled prunes. But my hair smelled like a lake of rosewater, and my body soaked in the lotion of some gorgeous flowers. I figured Marie wouldn't mind if I used some of the stuff stored behind the mirror or else she wouldn't have placed it there. After all, she had told me to help myself with anything. I applied the creams generously.

On the credenza, several brushes and a hairdryer lay neatly arranged by size with the handles toward me. Marie could hardly have bought all these things for her possible future daughter the day she thought of getting pregnant. She must have stocked the commode with ladies' utensils when she heard of my visit. The woman really made it hard for me not to like her.

When I was done with the difficult task of drying and brushing my hair at the same time, my usual jejune strands had changed into a soft well of silk. Curtains of shiny auburn framed my face and I had to double check the mirror to make sure it was really me.

Like a horse, I swayed my head from side to side as I galloped out of the bathroom, enjoying the mellow smell and the gentle caress of my hair on my cheeks. I leaped onto the bed and squealed, rolling on my back, feeling fresh like a newly plucked peach. Everything felt right in this brief, perfect moment.

But in the next, footfalls on the wood boards of the balcony stopped me in my gambol.

Clutching the towel to my naked body, I glared at the french window, but no one appeared in the frame. On tiptoes, I sneaked behind the curtains and peeked through. Outside was empty, but to the left, a silky white veil wafted in and out through a door, just like mine.

Great, Marie neglected to tell me the balcony connected Julian's room with mine. And unless I was totally mistaken, he'd just come to pay me another surprise visit. My heady romp probably scared him off—or maybe he did possess some sense of decency and retreated silently.

Whatever the cause, it would be wise to get dressed. And fast. Last time a boy saw me naked, the oaf hopped out of the girls' shower room on one leg with a broken toe and a black eye, courtesy of my fist.

My body had sprouted curves since then, and Julian was the last person I wanted to grant an exclusive look.

I dragged my backpack from the built in closet and rummaged for a set of underwear. A faded gray t-shirt in my hands, I remembered the stack of clothes Marie sent me, which currently sat on my bed. Of course, I wouldn't do as that moron had suggested and burn my own clothes. But taking a look at what my aunt gave me wouldn't hurt. Maybe borrow a thing or two, just for today. Of course, the clothes would stay behind when I parted from the house and my family tomorrow.

Marie had been generous in her donation. This was the widest selection of clothes I had ever possessed. Several shirts with and without sleeves in different colors and patterns spread on the bedding. After wearing the same jeans and sweaters for so many years, this felt like diving headfirst into a pool of treasures.

I grabbed one piece after the other and held it to my chest in front of the mirror. Blimey, what did people ever do with so much luxury? Folding the clothes carefully, I stored them in the wardrobe. For now, a black, tight-fitting V-neck t-shirt would do.

There were also jeans and skirts. In this warm climate, I refrained from picking long pants. But not being the type to wear medieval gowns that reached my ankles, I chose one of the few pairs of shorts among the pile of cotton and linen. Hems fringed, it seemed someone had cut off the legs of this pair of jeans.

I had no trouble fitting into Marie's clothes. The shorts enhanced my hips like they were made for me, although they covered little more than my bottom. The t-shirt accentuated my breasts a tad too much, but long strands of my hair covered it nicely.

A whole new Jona stared back at me from the mirror. But most unfamiliar was the happy smile pulling on my mouth.

Did I just think *happy*? No, definitely not. Marie and her family must be out of their minds if they really thought they could bait me with a beautiful room and nice clothes. I didn't belong here and more important, I didn't *want* to live here. No one could make me, not even a bald judge with a wooden hammer in his beefy hand.

Nothing wrong with enjoying one day in this place, but tomorrow I'd be off.

The little, round clock next to my bed said it was just shy of seven, and I decided not to wait for Aunt Marie to come and get me for dinner. I cast one last look out on the balcony, careful not to step on the boards, but only leaning my head out through the door. The filigree wood construction hovering ten feet above the ground made me aware of my vertigo all the more. Yet the balcony provided a priceless view at the vineyards.

Julian's door still stood open, but there was no sign of him outside. I took a deep breath, steeling my nerves for the coming dinner with family, including the dragon, then turned my back on the enchanting garden and headed for the door. As I pulled it open, I shrieked. Julian's fist came diving for my forehead.

"Whoa." He jerked his hand back before he'd have bashed me flat on the ground. Shock or astonishment, I couldn't tell which, filled his face. Then his gaze dropped and lingered on my bare legs.

"Well, yeah, it's um..." Grimacing, I tried to tug my shorts and cover my legs. And failed miserably. "Short," I said, as if he couldn't see that.

He cleared his throat. "At least, it doesn't leave much room to rip holes into it."

"If this isn't Prince Charming speaking."

That made him laugh. The sound ripped down the walls I'd built around myself.

"Come on, Cinderella." He bowed. "The banquet is waiting."

"We better hurry before the clock strikes twelve and I turn into a pumpkin again." I loped down the stairs after him, grinning like a loon.

7

KINDNESS

A WARM, SPICY smell clung to the air in the kitchen and made my mouth water. Ignoring my mother's attempts to greet me while she helped Marie with the dinner, I slid into the corner seat. So the dragon had come out of her hole again. Admittedly, she looked a good deal better than a few hours before. But she got no more than a cold glare from me.

Julian stood behind one of the two high back oak chairs, observing the drama going on. He shook his head, pulled the chair out and sat down.

When Albert sauntered through the door, Marie ushered my mother to join the rest of us at the table. With six empty seats, the dragon chose the one right next to me. I rolled my eyes, turned and slid out. Disapproval reflected in the look Julian gave me. As I lowered into the chair next to him, his mouth opened. But before he could say one word, my mother cleared her throat a tad too loud to pass as a negligible cough. He dragged a deep breath and sighed.

Why the hell did he care about how I reacted to my mother? I sent him a dark glower, but for the moment, he ignored me.

Albert found a place at the head of the table and Marie dished chicken with veggies onto his plate first. The smell of home cooked food wafted from the serving dishes and promised a succulent meal. My stomach rumbled. I hoped no one heard it. Hastily, I gulped down some water from the glass near me and pierced a chopped carrot with my fork.

“Do you like your room?” Albert shoved a piece of bread into his mouth, his gaze focused on me.

I nodded, chewing on my chicken.

“The furniture might not match your taste,” he continued, pouring himself a glass of wine. “There must be Marie’s teenage bedroom stuff stored somewhere in the cellar. We can change it if you like.”

His offer surprised me, made me uncomfortable even. I frowned. Would he want a reward for his friendliness? In my almost eighteen years, only Quinn helped me without expecting anything in return.

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll only be here for six weeks.” The edge to my tone made me feel bad. In fact, I wouldn’t want a single piece in the beautiful room changed for anything. It was perfect. And I’d only stay for a single night anyway.

Marie stroked her husband’s arm. “See, I told you she likes the room.”

When I met her gaze, her mouth curled into that sweet smile, which punched through my guards.

Argh.

My attention focused on the plate in front of me. I didn't want them to see how much Marie's care pleased me.

"Did you find Valentine and Henri in the vineyards?" she said.

Julian was the one to reply. "Yep."

"And will they come in later to meet Jona?"

"Actually, I asked them not to come until tomorrow. I didn't want to overwhelm Jona with new faces on her first day." His gaze in my direction remained expressionless.

About to take a bite of the skewered asparagus on my fork I set the silverware down, a hollow feeling in my belly. I didn't understand why he was so nice after his earlier bantering.

"That was very thoughtful of you." Marie offered second helpings to Julian and Albert.

"Yes, very thoughtful indeed." Inwardly, I cringed at my own cynical words, when all I really wanted to say was *thank you*. I had no idea who this Valentine and Henri were, or why I was to meet them, but Marie and Albert were enough strangers to deal with for one day.

After dinner, the family adjourned to the parlor. Only Marie remained in the kitchen, and I stayed to help her tidy up the place.

"Just leave the cleaning to me," she said and took the plates out of my hands. "Why don't you go and take a drink with your mother and the others?"

"Uh, no." I had avoided my mother's gaze so well during the meal, I didn't want to ruin the evening with being shoved into a room together with the dragon for any length of time.

My aunt took my face between her warm hands. "I understand it has been a long day for you. Get some rest. Tomorrow I will show

you the vineyards.” She kissed my forehead so quickly I had no time to react, other than close my eyes. “Sleep well, *chérie*.”

Shock and confusion overpowered the comfort her jasmine perfume and warm lips tried to raise inside me. My eyes blinked furiously as I concentrated on my boots. Spinning on my heels, I strode out of the kitchen. Then stopped. Damn, I forgot to say goodnight.

I rubbed the spot on my brow where Marie’s lips had brushed against my skin. So I didn’t bid them goodnight, big deal. They were not family. Marie and Albert were my jailers. No need to show them any pleasantries. Especially, when I *wasn’t* happy in their presence.

Or was I?

Blimey, what did they do to me? The French climate must’ve gotten into my head. I should’ve told Marie off for that unexpected caress and warned her never to kiss me again. The door to my room banged shut behind me, keeping out everyone—and those unwanted emotions.

In the fading light, I rummaged through my suitcase and found my notepad and a pen, settled with the writing tools on the cloudy-soft bed and piled the pillows behind my back.

As night fell in, I’d filled eight pages with denials of my first impressions of this place and the people living here. By the time I came to ramble on about my aunt’s kiss, the room had become too dark to distinguish the blue words from the white of the paper.

I lowered the pen and scanned the darkened room for a moment. Bile rose in my throat. I thought of this marvelous place and how I couldn’t dare to stay.

Couldn't be worse to grant a hungry and freezing child a glimpse of a stuffed turkey through a window at Christmas. Only, I wasn't outside peeking through the glass. I sat inside the warm house, tasted a delicious meal. With two fingers, I massaged the spot between my eyes. The longer I stayed here, the harder it would be to leave.

The hoot of an owl carried through the open french window. A soft wind rustled the trees and the wood of the balcony creaked under someone's feet.

Julian.

My chest constricted, and I held my breath for an uncomfortable half-minute, straining to hear whether he'd come toward my room. But he wouldn't be so bold. With no light in my room, he must think I'd fallen asleep.

Apart from the wind and animals outside, the night remained silent. Tossing my notepad on the mattress, I rolled out of bed and sneaked to the door leading to the balcony. Carefully, I leaned only my head outside to peek around the corner.

Palms braced on the wood railing on his side of the balcony, Julian stared down at the vineyards. The faint shine of light from his room tinted his silhouette in soft gold. He hung his head, his shoulder blades flexing underneath his shirt. An invisible weight seemed to press down on his shoulders.

One had to be blind not to notice it was my mother's health that concerned him. The image of Quinn ruffling my hair when I was down or in trouble haunted me for a second. Maybe Julian needed a little comfort himself, and I could be the one offering it. God forbid, no ruffling, of course.

Teeth clenched, I struggled against this urge. The story about him only being Charlene's caretaker struck me as a masquerade. Even if everyone else did, I wouldn't fall for it.

Blimey, what wouldn't I have given to find out about their uncommon relationship? Anything—but my pride. No way would I ask him about the matter. Leaning against the doorframe, I studied him silently in the dark.

"Can't you sleep?" His words, little more than a whisper, drifted to me.

My heart thudded in my ribcage, shocked he'd caught me staring at him. "I'm not tired." The answer came quick, yet my voice sounded like a stranger's in the dark.

"Come out, it's beautiful up here at night."

"M—m." I shook my head.

For a brief moment, his eyes narrowed to slits. "You're scared." He said it with such conviction I wondered if he felt personally insulted by my refusal. Pushing away from the railing, he shoved his hands into his jeans' pockets and ambled toward me. "Hopefully, it's the height of the balcony that makes you nervous and not me."

"Why would you make me nervous?" The words shook slightly in my throat. I shifted against the doorframe as he neared me.

He halted before my room and leaned with his back casually against the railing. "Why indeed?"

For an immeasurable moment we stared into each other's eyes, and if I hadn't known better I would've thought he actually *wanted* me to be nervous around him. Silly idea. I shoved it aside, clearing my throat. "Who are the two people Marie wants me to meet?"

“Valentine and Henri? They’re nice people.” Hands planted on the railing at either side of his hips, he hoisted himself up onto the edge.

Panic soared through my body, straightened my spine. “No, don’t!” The warning echoed across the field as my hands let go of the doorframe and reached out in a helpless attempt to stop him from falling backwards over the balustrade. Yet fear kept my feet rooted to the floor inside.

His arms still braced against the wood, Julian cocked his head while one of his brows arched up. Not bothered by my concern, he eased onto the insecure railing, his gray sneakers dangling two feet above the floorboards.

His gaze mocked me, like it suggested I come out of my room and make him get off the railing. *Oh, for the sake of my frazzled nerves, just come down from there!* I tamped down the anger over his ignorance and kept to the safety of the room.

He gave me an amused glance from under his lashes then continued as though the scene hadn’t just happened. “Henri and Valentine Dupres live down the road. They’re an elderly couple working for your aunt and uncle in the yards. You will meet them tomorrow morning.”

At his words, pictures of tonight’s dinner rose before my eyes. Maybe now was the time to thank him for his concern, even though I cringed at the thought of letting him know how I really felt. I coughed slightly, tilting my head so the curtain muffled my voice. “It was actually kind of you to delay their introduction until tomorrow.”

“Sorry, what did you say?” He smirked, and for an instant I considered tossing a pillow at him. But that might’ve caused him to

fall backward off the balcony. I didn't want to take the responsibility in case he broke his neck.

"Thank you," I said more clearly, though through gritted teeth.

His teasing grin disappeared. "You are very welcome, Jona."

Blimey, his soft purr gave me chills.

"Earlier, you seemed surprised I would care about your comfort. Why was that?"

His serious words touched the spot of my mind responsible for lying or telling the truth.

"I thought you didn't like me." The feebleness of my tone must've betrayed my unease. My gaze lowered to the gaps between the boards of the balcony floor.

"You do your best to pretend not to like me either." His soft, smooth tone reminded me of sand running through an hourglass. "And yet you're worried right now I might fall off the balcony and get hurt."

"Hey, buddy, who says I'm pretending?" Looking up at his face, I found something in his stare I couldn't quite place. But it reminded me of Rottweiler Rusty when he'd ogled a bone.

My mouth was dry, a cloud of pleasant warmth expanded my chest. A couple of seconds later, he slid down from the railing. A hundred tense muscles in my body relaxed, and a breath I didn't know I was holding whizzed from my lungs.

Damn him for making his point clear.

"Sleep tight, Jona," he said through a lopsided smile and headed back to his side of the balcony.

"Goodnight," I whispered hardly audible to myself.

Julian chuckled then disappeared through the floating curtains.



I woke snuggled into a sea of softness. The faint light of a breaking morning fell through the window above my bed. I yawned widely, my body completely relaxed. Something I'd never experienced before.

Still muzzy from sleep, I blinked, taking in the features of the room. Only then did I remember where I was. Alarm shot through me. Stupefying. How could I've slept so peacefully with my mother resting only one story below?

The floor felt cold against my bare feet as I got out of bed and shuffled into the bathroom. Warm water washed away the last bit of sleep from my eyes. In the mirror, I caught the face of an indecisive child. Chocolate or candy? Dream castle or freedom? If I wanted to leave, then now would be the perfect moment.

Yesterday, Marie made me a fantastic dinner, and I slept through the night on a bed of clouds. I'd tasted heaven, now I needed to go before I grew used to the comfort and wouldn't be able to part from it.

"The vineyard," the girl in the mirror whispered, her tone a suggestive tease. I couldn't leave before taking a walk through the vineyard. *Just once*, I promised to myself. Tonight I'd certainly be off on my way to England.

Five o'clock in the morning seemed a bit early to wander downstairs and wait for Marie to get up and show me the vineyards. I settled on the bed, tucked my feet under the blanket and leaned on

the windowsill. Chin resting in the crook of my folded arm, I gazed out on the vinery and mused about the breaking day.

The first and only day of my slave work.

What would my uncle expect me to do in the yards? I could hardly take a watering can and wet the entire field. It would take five-hundred years or more.

Back straight, I narrowed my eyes to scan the little grapes on the bushes. Mid-August, they should yet be too small to be harvested. So, what else would await me today?

With a little shock of anticipation, I couldn't wait to get out to the vine and do whatever tasks my aunt and uncle ordered me to do.

A shiver rattled my teeth as the morning wind blew around me. The blanket pulled up to my neck, I wrapped myself in it like a hotdog. The covers still bore the warmth from last night. I curled against the headboard and closed my eyes only for a second longer than a blink. But soon sleep sneaked up on me and I dozed off.

Next time I woke, strong sunrays warmed my face and the chirping of a bunch of birds carried to me. A feather brushed the skin from my brow down to the tip of my nose. The purr of a happy cat pushed up my throat as the stroking continued. I blinked against the warm sun. Julian's blue eyes were leveled with mine.

My mind still drifting from chasing a sparrow in the vineyard, I wondered how Julian had found his way into my dreams. We gazed at each other. No one spoke in this unreal moment.

The corners of his lips twitched up and mine followed suit. What I had mistaken for a feather before was in fact a wisp of my hair caught between his fingers. He brushed down my nose one last

time, then let go of the strand, and briefly chipped my chin with his knuckles. “Good morning.”

“Hi.” My voice matched the warmth of the sun.

“I hope you didn’t sleep like this all night. Isn’t a windowsill an uncomfortable excuse for a pillow?”

“Actually, I’ve slept in worse positions.” The serenity of our conversation and the peaceful morning embraced me like an extra layer of blankets. The mixture of mint, basil, and other herbal scents unknown to me drifted on the breeze and filled my head. I snuggled deeper into the crook of my arm. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I came to wake you.”

A mellow chuckle rocked my body. “With bunches of my hair?”

He shrugged. And he wasn’t wearing a shirt. “Would you rather I poked you with a stick?”

The thought of being badgered with a piece of wood made me grimace. “Hair is fine.”

My gaze followed the outlines of his naked shoulders and firm biceps. Strong pecs twitched underneath smooth, suntanned skin when Julian planted his elbows on his squatted knees. I could’ve watched his body for hours without growing weary of the sight.

“We’re supposed to go out in about half an hour. If you’d like to have breakfast before then, Marie would be happy to see you in the kitchen.”

“Eating again?” I cringed. My stomach was still stuffed from the luxurious meal we’d had yesterday evening. “But aren’t you going to have breakfast with them?”

“I don’t usually eat breakfast.” He rose to his full height, smoothing blue jeans over his thighs. “So, are you getting up now or do I need to go looking for a stick after all?”

I tilted my head to him. “Please, no weapons. I’m coming of my own free will.”

His sanguine expression changed to devious. “I’m trusting in that.”

Neck stretched, I watched his taut butt as he walked to his room.



TEAMWORK

THE VERY SAME moment I reached the bottom of the stairs, my mother emerged from her room, her bony body wrapped in a purple house dress. Stupefied for a moment, I trudged outside instead of into the kitchen and found a seat on a wooden bench on the stone patio. Better skip breakfast today.

Lou-Lou lay curled up under the bench and lifted her head to acknowledge me with a tired growl. I tucked my feet under my knees—no need to take unnecessary risks with the black-eyed monster.

The morning sun warmed my face and bare arms. Marie appeared through the front door and approached the table with lazy steps. “Are you not hungry, *chérie*? I can make you a cup of tea or coffee if you like.”

“No thanks.” I patted my still bursting stomach. “The yummy dinner last night should keep me going for a day or two.”

The corners of her lips almost lifted as far as her ears. Blimey, this woman definitely touched a nerve if I just made a complement about her cooking.

“All right then, shall we go?” she cheered.

I leaned sideways to peek around her. So far it was only the two of us. Wouldn’t Albert and Julian come, too?

She tracked my gaze and then confronted me with a frown. “Are you expecting someone?”

“Where’re the others? Are we going alone?”

“Oh, *nó*.” She waved a hand, then grabbed mine gently and pulled me up. “Your uncle and Julian are in the field already. Albert can hardly wait until the cock crows before he leaves the house to tend to his beloved vine.”

They left? How strange Julian didn’t take care of my mother before he went to work outside. Or maybe he popped into her room while I was getting washed and dressed. After all, I took nearly ten minutes to choose a pair of khaki pants and another dark T-shirt from Marie’s donated stack of clothes.

Initially, I intended to wear my own clothes. But they might get dirty out on the field. I wanted them in nice shape for my escape tonight. Well, in as good condition as possible, overlooking the hole in the knee of my jeans and tattered hem of my sweater.

Marie started for the vineyard and tugged on my arm for me to follow her. “*Allez*, Lou-Lou,” she demanded over her shoulder.

With a yawn, the giant dog emerged from under the bench to trot along beside me. I inched closer to Marie, but she assured me the Saint Bernard meant no harm. “In fact, a squirrel was the biggest thing she ever dared to get involved with.”

A squirrel? Lou-Lou's back stood even with my hip as we walked along the footpath. I croaked out a hoarse laugh.

Her moist muzzle bumped into my hand. When she shoved her big head under my fingers, I figured she wanted me to pet her. Nervously, I skimmed my fingers through the soft curls on her meaty nape. It felt all right. Her head not twisting to bite off my hand seemed like a good sign.

The closer we got to the entrance of the yard, the more fidgety I became. The scent of young leaves wafted all around me. Everything smelled so...green. Juicy. Liberating. I picked up pace. Because Marie hadn't let go of my hand since we left the patio, it was me who dragged her along now. The yard spread out in front of us, longer than the runway of the French airport where we landed. It must have stretched a mile in both directions, length and width.

Crushed stone crackled under my boots as I twirled along the path, drinking in the beauty of this place. Thousands of shrubs, tied to wires, stood like tin soldiers. They reached no farther than up to my chin.

"Wicked," I breathed.

"I am not surprised you like them." She grinned. "Some say, one either hates the vines, or loves them for lifetime. In your case I would say, it is in your blood to feel close to the vineyards."

It was in my blood? What a strange choice of words. Yet, this little piece of earth connected with me in an instant. Invisible roots grew from my feet, dug through the stony surface, and anchored me to France. A warm vibration in my body tried to feign I'd finally come home.

Get a grip, idiot. This is the land of the enemy.

My back straightened and the muscles in my face hardened. “What do you want me to do?” The flatness of my cadence detached me from my aunt as well as the vineyards.

Marie tapped a finger to her lips. “You can see if Julian needs help with the fertilizer.”

I tracked the direction of her outstretched arm. Some eighty feet across the field, Julian scooped white powder out of a bucket and tossed it without much concern underneath the bushes. I could do that.

Lou-Lou’s paws pounded on the dirt behind me as I jogged over to him. Clumsily, I climbed through between the two lines of wire ropes stretching along each row while the dog simply dodged them.

Seven rows of shrubs farther west, Julian greeted me with a laugh. “Seems like you made a new friend.”

“Or maybe she just doesn’t want to let her next meal out of sight,” I muttered, eyeing the colossal dog sideways.

He set the bucket on the overturned soil and wrinkled his nose. “I really scared you with that silly story, didn’t I?”

“No, you didn’t.” Unable to help myself, I stuck my tongue out at him. “But I think you owe me an apology for trying.” Fists planted on my hips, I waited for him to say: *I’m sorry, Jona.*

A chuckle ripped from his chest instead. “Rrrright.”

My ego stomped an invisible foot on the ground. “That so didn’t sound like an apology.”

Bucket in hand again, he ignored my complaint and continued his work, with me fast on his heels. The smirk he cast me over his shoulder irritated me like hell.

He'd better not dare think I followed him out of boredom. Or worse, interest. After all, I came over to work. "Marie said I should help you with, um, whatever you're trying to do here." I waved a hand at the powder he dropped in fistfuls to the ground every few feet.

"And here I thought you already took a shine to me," he teased.

So says the guy who woke me this morning by tickling my nose. I snorted and fell back a few steps.

Julian jerked his head, motioning for me to follow him. "Come on, Jona. Of course, I know you came here to work." His laughter chimed out warm and fair and assured me he was just trying to wind me up again.

I paced up to match his stride. "Fine. What exactly am I supposed to do?"

He handed me the half empty bucket. "For starters, you walk along the path and dust the roots with this powder. I'll go fetch another." In a graceful jump, he took the two rows to our left and headed for some sort of square container. Lou-Lou chased him with a happy bark, for twenty feet, then she angled off as a bird caught her eye.

While Julian filled an empty pail with the contents of a man-high box, I dug my hand into the fine powder and let it slip through my fingers. What could a substance similar to flour do to the vine?

Following Julian's example, I dropped a handful to the ground, trying to draw a small white circle around the stem of the little bush.

"You don't need to be that precise," he said behind me, tossing a fistful to the ground on the other side of the path. "Rain will wash the powder in, so the roots can soak it from the wet dirt."

Facing the clear sky, I squinted against the burning sun. “Doesn’t look like it will rain any time soon.”

“Then the sprinkler will do the job.” He winked and continued to toss the floury matter.

Even after he’d turned away from me, I still stared at his back. I couldn’t understand how such small moves from his side set my heart at a jungle drum beat. He had me yearning for more of his attention. I flexed my shoulders, shook off the annoying feeling, then continued with the sprinkling.

The bottom of the bucket had already come into view, when quick, heavy footfalls crushed the stone behind me. I jerked out of my monotone work. Pail flying, I spun on my heel to gaze into the beaming face of a tiny woman who resembled a teapot. Her hair, no longer than my pinky, shone silvery gray in the morning light and curled like pigtails all over her head.

Her lips pulled back in an eerie wide smile, revealing a set of healthy white, but uneven teeth. Stunned, I focused on her heavy eyelids that looked as if they yearned to close over her bright green eyes.

“Ah, Jona!” she cried out in delight, pronouncing my name *Shonáh*. Arms spread wide, she sang out in French, “*Je suis très heureuse de faire ta connaissance!*”

I had no idea what she mumbled.

Then she pulled me into a tight hug. My body tight against her round belly, she swayed me a couple times from side to side. Her embrace knocked the air out of my lungs. Dumbstruck, I clung to her shoulders, so as not to tip over by her enthusiasm.

Only when she let go of me did I manage to croak a hoarse, “Hello.”

The teapot shot a few more words in French at me. I finally caught the name Valentine and figured she was trying to introduce herself. Obviously she knew my name, if not the right pronunciation, so I replied, “Ah, yes.”

A moment later she hugged me again, then shuffled away.

“Now, that was weird,” I whispered after she was gone, trying to gather my composure. “French people seem to be a happy folks.” Always friendly to strangers and blessed with a smile they seemed to wear all day.

To my left, Julian chuckled low and deep. “Valentine was pleased to meet you. And she doesn’t speak English.”

Head angled, I mimicked his lopsided smile. “Really? I wouldn’t have guessed.”

His laughter shook us both as he wrapped one arm around my neck and pulled me forward. The warm ocean scent of his skin overlapped the intense smell of the young vine. I breathed in deeply then swallowed hard.

The small hairs on his forearm tickled my chin and made me aware of how close he really was. His side rubbed against mine, the warmth of his body seeped into my skin. I felt way too comfortable in his embrace. For a brief moment, I longed to rest my head on his shoulder. I tilted my chin to gaze at his cheerful eyes before I pushed out of his hold. He wasn’t my friend and sure shouldn’t be so close. And most important, I shouldn’t feel so good around him.

Julian studied me for a second. Though he didn't say a word, I could read the question clearly in his quiet blue eyes. *Is it really so bad?*

It was too nice. And that was the problem.

His glance lowered to my chest. "Oh bugger, I smudged your shirt."

I pulled at my t-shirt. The powder on his hand had left a white trace on the collar of my V-neck. Before I could dust it off, Julian was already brushing the fabric, giving me a quick start. But he only messed the mark of three fingers into one white blur.

"Stop it." I slapped his hand and shooed him off with a laugh. The powder wouldn't be padded off, not even with my clean hand. Without real anger, I glared at him. "You ruined my tee."

"And I had a nice time doing so." Julian smirked. "Don't worry, princess. A shirt isn't something that can't be washed." He tapped my nose with his powdered finger then returned to dusting the roots.

Hand shoved into the white material, I flounced before him. "You're right. And since your shirt can be washed, too—" A big grin sat on my lips as I pressed my palm to his chest, leaving a white mark on his midnight blue shirt.

Julian didn't seem surprised, nor did he bother to wipe off the dirt. Instead he made one threatening step forward and leaned close to my ear. "I guess you would kill me if I did the same to you." His suggestive words set a bunch of butterflies on the loose in my stomach.

As he pulled me against him, his strong hand on my bottom made me suck in a breath. His whiskers rubbed against my cheek, playing havoc with my senses. With my front pressed against his, a

weakness settled in my knees that had me dreading I'd collapse in his arms any moment.

"But be assured, I'll have my revenge." His voice had dropped an entire octave.

If I weren't out of my mind at this second, I would've sworn he nuzzled my temple. Before I could gather my thoughts, he let go of me and continued his walk.

Heart pounding madly, I took a moment to steady my knees. Better stay a little farther behind, out of his reach.

In silence we continued our task. When it was time to refill our buckets, he got me set with a full pail, but left his empty one by the container. "Can you continue alone for a while?"

"Sure." I nodded then frowned, not wanting him to leave me. "Where are you going?"

"I won't be long. You just finish this line and I'll do the other side when I come back." He strode off before I could agree to his order.

Headed toward the house, his pace increased while I watched him. Maybe he needed to pop to the loo. But he could have said so when I asked. I shook my head, returning to the task.

Blimey, without him, dusting the ground was a darn boring job. I'd covered about twenty yards when Marie found me. At her side walked a man with shocking red hair and a big bulbous nose.

"This is Henri," she said.

The man held out his hand, and my own got lost in the cup of his chunky fingers. With Valentine being a teapot and this man as tall and slim as a beanpole, they really were a mismatched couple.

“Hello, Henri.” I tried to imitate the sound of his name the way Marie had said it. *Ou-ree*.

He flashed a chipped-toothed smile and squeezed my fingers. From his silence and nodding, I gathered he didn’t speak English either. Cool, one more person I didn’t have to talk to, although he and his wife seemed like nice people.

Attention dedicated to strewing again, I whirled around once more at my aunt’s amused chuckle.

“Jona,” she snorted. “What is that on your backside?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I twisted my body to catch a glimpse of my bum, first left then right. A powdery handprint glimmered on my pants.

I growled, dusting my butt to get rid of the traitorous mark of Julian’s hand. The bastard had gotten his revenge indeed. “This will cost him his head.”

Julian came back half an hour later. Too long for a loo-break. Most of my anger had blown off by that time, too. And the bottle of mineral water he handed me vaporized the rest of my annoyance. “Stay hydrated on hot days like this, or you’ll end up with a headache.” He took a swig from another bottle.

The wonderful liquid cooled my throat. Until the first draught, I didn’t even realize how thirsty I was. I guzzled down half a liter within a few seconds. The rest we left in the shade beside the container.

The morning went by almost too fast, and soon Marie called us to come inside for lunch.

“Go with Marie, Princess,” Julian said. “I’ll come in a few minutes. Your uncle needs help with the dirt scanner.”

I knew what he talked about. A small machine Albert had used all morning. A short cable connected a pen-like thing to a little box in his hand. Randomly, it seemed, Albert dug the pen into the earth under various shrubs and read information from the screen on the box. *Winemakers use such funny equipment.* I rushed after Marie.

My face red and heated from the sun, I appreciated the little break in the cool house. Since I'd refused to eat breakfast this morning, my stomach roared a starving rumble by the time I sat down at the oval oak table.

The dragon joined me, yet she was wise enough to choose the place farthest away from me. Dark rings shadowed her eyes, and her hand shook as she reached for a glass of water. Her fingers so bony and slim, it was a miracle she found the strength to even lift the cup to her mouth. While she drank, she gazed at me over the brim. Not to show any weakness, I held her stare with a grim expression. Looking away would've meant I'd cringed from her.

Unfortunately, eye contact brought her to bad ideas such as speaking to me. "How did you like the vines? Julian said you were having a good time outside."

Julian said? Of course, he came to see her when he left me alone out on the field. Bloody hell, I should've guessed. A hint of jealousy mingled with rage at her boldness exploded in my stomach.

"The judge sent me here to work, and that's what I did. No more, no less." I rose from the chair to grab a drink. Sometimes backing off was the wiser way—whatever was necessary to make her stop talking to me.

While I filled a glass under the tap, Marie sneaked closer and wrapped one arm around my waist. “Really? No more than work?” she whispered. “I thought I heard you laughing.”

I glared daggers at her, but she beamed. *Gosh, I hate you for being so lovely.*

When I lowered into the chair again, my mother averted her gaze to her folded hands. Her shoulders hunched, she looked like she couldn’t hold her head up. I didn’t remember her being haggard like this in London. Actually, she’d made a rather steady appearance then, apart from her sunken eyes.

With my attention focused on her, she shocked me when her head suddenly snapped up. Her cheeks gaunt, the bones stood out even more as her face lit up. My heart stopped for a second, every muscle in my body tensed like wire. Bliss sparkled in her eyes. Her entire composure seemed at the ready to pull me into a bear hug.

Run for your life! Panic gripped me while my feet itched to take a flight. Had she gone bananas? It took me only another moment to realize she actually stared *through* me and at the door. Still under shock, I turned my head, only to find the door closed. In the next second, the handle pushed down. Julian slipped in.

His stern features as he entered the kitchen changed to happy when his gaze drifted to my mother. He dedicated the first smile to her. The second was meant for me.

I couldn’t explain what happened in this room, but something was very wrong.

“Oh, you are here at last,” Marie beamed as her husband followed after Julian. “So we can finally eat.”

The two men took a seat, Julian next to me.

“Your face is a little sunburned,” he said. His knuckles graced my cheek.

I flinched away, giving him a disgusted snort. His hand dropped to the table top. Definitely offended, he narrowed his eyes.

Marie’s lasagna smelled delicious, but for some reason my appetite had disappeared. I poked bits of the meal with my fork, shoving it around the plate. More than three mouthfuls wouldn’t go down my throat. My stomach felt strangely full.

Aunt Marie placed her soft hand on my forearm. “What is the matter, *chérie*? Are you not hungry?”

The hair at my nape reacted by standing up as I felt Julian’s questioning look on me. Did he sense that he was the source of my queasy feeling? *Don’t be ridiculous. How should he know?* I couldn’t even explain it to myself. To be jealous of his relationship with my mother felt totally wrong.

“I guess it’s the heat causing me trouble,” I mumbled.

“Oh, of course, you are not used to the French climate. What was I thinking?” Marie padded my hand. “Maybe you should stay inside for the rest of the day. You can come help us again tomorrow, if you feel better.”

And be alone with the dragon? Panic washed over me, tightening my grip of the fork until the white of my knuckles showed. No way. I wouldn’t give her a chance to sneak around me, trying to engage me into a chat. “I’m all right. I can go out with you in the afternoon.”

Anyway, it was my last day around here, and I wanted to spend some more time in the vineyard before I headed off to an uncertain destination after dark.

“Very well. Just let me know when it is getting too much for you,” my aunt said in her ever so sweet French accent. She pulled back her hand after giving mine a short squeeze, and returned to her food.

To evade Julian’s glances, I loosened the strands hooked around my ear and hid behind a curtain of hair.

When everyone had finished, Julian helped Charlene back to her room. Good moment to talk to Marie in the hallway.

“What did you do with Valentine this morning? When you ripped out the bushes?”

She laughed. “We did not rip out the vine, but picked weeds. We need to keep the ground clean of pest plants which would soak up the minerals meant for the vines.”

“Can I help you with that?”

“Of course you can. But would you not rather work with Julian. I thought you two had a nice time together. He enjoys your company.”

And perhaps I enjoyed the time with him more than I liked to admit. But it was a bad idea to get too close to someone who was *allied* with a certain bitch. In fact, getting close to anyone in this house was a bad idea. A small twinge of regret already poked my chest when I thought of leaving without saying goodbye to my aunt.

It was way time to sling my hook.

Eyes fixed on my mother’s door, I sighed. “I’d much rather work with you than with him.”

Julian chose that exact moment to come out of the room. My mouth hung open. I froze under his stare, my shoulders tensed when he shut the door louder than necessary. A muscle in his jaw ticked.

Slowly, he came toward me. My strained expression hardened, expecting his pissed off remark. But he walked right past me and headed outside.

“Marie, make sure she’s applying sunscreen before she goes out again.” His hard tone cut to my core.



SPY

THE WIDE LEAVES of the grapevine swayed before my eyes in the light summer breeze. Their luscious smell filled my head, while dirt crept under my nails. My hands were sore from pulling out wee plants by their roots. The muscles in my slouched back protested.

It took a lot of effort not to cry out in pain or quit digging and go sit comfortably in the shade. I clenched my teeth as pride kept me going. Minutes stretched into hours, and my body screamed at me with the slightest move I made.

The aching seemed to lessen if I kept myself distracted, so I took the chance to make plans for my imminent departure. I'd pack my few belongings into my backpack before taking a nap until around midnight. By then, everyone else should be fast asleep.

The first few miles I could hike, or maybe even try to hitch a ride in a car. Without money, taking a bus was out of the question. There should be enough people at the airport I could lift some money off of to fund the flight. This option I preferred to the alternative—snatching money from Albert and Marie.

It wasn't only the promise to Quinn that kept me from stealing from my family's house, but my aunt's hurt and disappointment when she would find out.

A glance over to Marie had me thinking about a farewell letter to her. Although I didn't plan to take any of her clothes, I wanted to thank her for the nice meal she cooked me and her generosity.

The thought of her sad face when she'd notice my disappearance tugged at my hidden conscience. I stopped thinking about her altogether and let the physical pain take over control again. This sensation was easier to handle, if not for long. Finally, I sagged heavily on my bottom.

"This looks easier than it is, *nô?*" Marie's soft chuckle charged the humid air. "You should take a break and get a drink."

I grabbed the water bottle from the ground right next to me and lifted it to my lips. Liquid heaven filled my Sahara dry mouth and throat. Legs crossed, I rested for a few minutes and took the chance to study my aunt while she continued ripping weeds with admirable passion. Her love for the vines was almost tangible.

She had me wondering what would've become of me with her patience and support. I might be holding a high school degree now and ready to go to college. My days as a criminal teenager probably would've never come. I hated how I'd landed in the gutter instead of my aunt's care. But why hadn't she come?

Intrigued by this question since my arrival, I swallowed hard. Eventually, I said, "Marie?"

Her smudged hands stopped and she turned her head to me. I cleared my throat, but words got stuck in it.

“What is it, Jona?” she prompted. The slight tremble of my hands certainly didn’t escape her attention.

I swallowed past the lump that tried to keep me from finding out the truth. “You seem happy to have me here. And all the nice things you gave me—” I clasped my hands, lowering my gaze. “Why didn’t you take me when my mother wasn’t fit for the job and shoved me into the youth center?”

With a thrust, Marie embedded the small spade in the earth and wiped her fingers on her shirt. On her knees, she scooted over to me then cupped my face in her two dirty palms. “*Chérie*, I would have brought you to France the very instant. An orphanage is no place for a child.” The warmth in her eyes showed all the love she had for me.

Where had she been during the past twelve years then? As a kid I would’ve loved to live in an enchanted place like these vineyards. Not quite a child anymore, I loved it nonetheless.

The tip of my shoe dug into the pebbly ground. “Why didn’t you come get me?”

“Because I did not know of you, *chérie*.” She shook her head slowly, as though she couldn’t believe the truth herself.

But what was she saying? She was Charlene’s sister. Surely, my mother wouldn’t have kept me as a secret from her family.

Aunt Marie took my hand and squeezed it. “When your mother was about nineteen, she met that soldier from England. His name was Jake, or Jack. She never told me his last name. Charlene was determined to follow him to the island. Never-dying love—I think those were her words.” Marie gave an exhausted gasp. “Poor Charlene.”

From the disapproving frown on my aunt's face, I assumed my mother fell head over heels for a man who didn't return her love. An unexpected sting in my chest made me hunch a little more. I ground my teeth, confused as to why *I* would feel agitated when my mother wasn't loved by the man she wanted to be with.

"Our parents tried to talk sense into her. They argued a lot. But in the end, my sister left us one night. There was a little note of farewell which only told us not to look for her."

My mouth sagged open. Charlene took a run? To a foreign country? She was braver than I actually gave her credit for.

"Do you know what happened then?" The demand in my voice surprised me.

"After a month, I received the first letter from her. She told me she was all right, found work in a new country, and rented a small flat." Marie's features turned sad. "I think in total I received five or six of her letters over the years, but she never put an address on the envelope where I could have sent something back. It was terrible not to know where she was. But the worst thing was that my parents never forgave her for running off. They died four years ago without seeing their eldest daughter again."

I wondered if my mother felt sorry when she heard about her parents' deaths. "How come Charlene is living with you now?"

Marie sat on the ground, hugging her knees to her chest, legs crossed at the ankles. "A couple of months ago, she returned, broken and sick. She needed care."

And it was just like Marie to forgive her older sister on the spot and offer her a home. Like she did with me. I could do nothing but

admire my aunt for her kindness. “Do you know about her life in England?”

“I can only tell you what she told me.” Marie’s brows furrowed. “She was with child when she left. The soldier was your father and she had to find him and tell him.”

A silent moment gave me the chance to swallow my surprise. My aunt spoke about the man who fathered me. Now, I understood why I felt sorry when I heard of this soldier toying with my mother. He didn’t only hurt her, he abandoned us. Abandoned me.

My chest constricted painfully as I tried to breathe. In this big world, didn’t there exist one person who wanted me in his or her life?

“He was based in the United States for a few years. Your mother stayed in Britain, though, ashamed to return to her family unwed and with a baby in her arms after all the fights with our parents. She was certain they never would accept a child out of wedlock. So she hid you from us. Never let us know.” Marie’s sad eyes warmed when they intruded mine. “The mentality never bothered me. I would have loved you all the same. You can imagine my surprise when I learned what a lovely niece I have.”

Her loving words did little to sooth the anger that was brewing along with her story.

With a rush of energy, my rage grew. I rose to my feet and paced down the line of shrubs. Because Charlene was ashamed of me, I had to pay for my unworthy existence by spending my youth in a prison for kids.

Marie followed me and grabbed me by my elbow, but I yanked my arm free.

“Jona, wait!”

Her plea faded as my march turned to a bolt and I ran. I was undeterred in my quest to strangle my mother.

What's the point in bringing me here now, when the time of detention would've ended for me in a few weeks? Charlene spoke of a home in France. Right, a home she denied me for seventeen years. Damn that woman, I'd go and wring her bony neck.

Burning rage constricted my lungs, made it hard to continue running. But I forged forward to the house. My breaths erupted like the puffs of an active volcano. I kicked at the ground hard. Stones shot in all directions as I let out some of the frustration that boiled in me.

Cancer was one way to get rid of the dragon, but today *I* would make sure her last hour finally came.

With a determined stride, I neared the house, but someone beat me there. Through the wide window pane in the parlor, I spotted the dragon resting on the couch with Julian taking a seat right next to her. Stopped dead, I kept to the low line of bushes in the garden. I even held my breath for a second then shook my head at my own silliness.

Drained of any healthy flush, Charlene looked close to death with her arms lying lifeless by her side. With a caring touch, Julian took my mother's hand into his. His other hand stroked first her fingers, then her forehead, wiping long colorless strands of hair from her face.

To catch the two in an intimate moment ranked high on my *never-do-that* list. But for some reason, I couldn't tear my eyes away from the scene. Crossing to a weeping willow, I hid in the long

overhanging branches and peeked around the trunk to catch another glimpse through the glass.

My mother's eyes remained closed, but her lips moved with an effort. I'd die to find out what she told him. The stroking continued for a couple of minutes. All of a sudden, Charlene's eyes opened and focused on Julian's face. Something she saw there must have caused her pure happiness, for that was what she radiated with both her face and body.

And then it occurred to me that it wasn't so much Julian's look, but what he did to her with his hands that stirred a certain change in my mother's composure. Hadn't I experienced a similar stimulation only yesterday?

Charlene propped on her elbows and waited until he helped her to a sitting position. The lively color of youth replaced her white face. Her eyes grew wider and lost their glassy sheen. A spine that seemed broken only seconds before straightened. She beamed. Strong and content.

Oh my God! Julian was her personal brand of drug.

As my back sagged against the tree, a breath pushed out of my lungs. The scene I just witnessed seemed so very weird. Surreal. What was Julian's secret? He must have one.

I peeked around the tree one last time to catch a glimpse of him talking to my mother while he held her chin cupped with his hand. Then he tilted his head to gaze through the window. His eyes caught mine in an instant.

Shock slammed into me. Bloody hell, I couldn't move.

Julian rose from the sofa, his expression blank. My nails dug into the bark of the willow, and my heart knocked against the base of

my throat. I swallowed hard. As he held me with his penetrating stare, I completely forgot why I'd come here in the first place. The world spun around me. It needed to stop. Finally, I found the strength to tear my gaze away. I whirled around and marched back to the vineyard.

Marie cast me a troubled glance when I stormed past her and Valentine to find a place some fifty feet away. Knees digging into the ground, I ripped weeds with a whole new enthusiasm.

Secrets. Secrets. What was it about Julian that made everyone feel better around him? Calmer. Healthier. He could hardly cast a spell over people.

Capable of hypnosis? I shook my head. Dirt crumbled from the bundle of dandelion I just tore out of the ground and tossed to the side. With a smudgy arm, I wiped beads of sweat from my forehead, pushing a sigh of anger through gritted teeth. Damn, there was something weird going on with that guy.

And Charlene? The dragon woke from the dead in the front room. All happy.

All his.

She shouldn't be his. She was my mother and about two hundred years too old to be *his*.

A hand landed gently on my shoulder so unexpectedly I jumped to my feet and shot around. "And why the hell do I care?" I bellowed before I even got a clear glimpse of who I was facing.

Julian gazed at me with a stunned expression. My outburst had made him back off a step. He shrugged, forlorn.

Exhaling through my nose, a storm raged inside me. I didn't know what to do to keep myself from exploding. He just stared at

me. His silken hair glinted golden in the sun, his eyes shone like the surface of a calm sea. Inwardly, I whined. *How dare he look so sweet?*

Oh no, I wouldn't be fooled this time. A mental slap helped to tear me out of my passing fancy. His sweetness must in no way distract me now. He wouldn't do this calming voodoo on me. I wouldn't let him. "Stop that!"

"Stop what?"

"Stop weaving your hocus-pocus around me."

The left side of his mouth twitched. "Jona, are you feeling all right?" One of his hands came up to touch my shoulder.

My brain shouted *suspicion* in a shrill siren, and I slapped his hand away. "I feel perfectly fine." With my finger pointed at his face, I frowned. "I just won't let you infect me with your...your...happy feelings. You're like a drug."

He angled his head at my angry tone and questioned my sanity with an arched eyebrow. "You better put this on, girl." A straw hat dangled in midair from his hand. "A sun stroke can be a nasty issue." He stuck the hat on my head and tapped the top. Invisible roots tied me to the ground when he pivoted and walked away.

The hat shaded my face from the wretched glare of the sun and shielded my eyes. Julian brought it for me. I'd be damned if he wasn't concerned about me. My steely core turned liquid. He really cared.

But that was not an excuse for his relationship with my mother, and I sure didn't need him to care about me. I needed no one. Hand clenched around the brim, I tore the hat from my head. Like a flying saucer it shot at Julian's back. "I don't need no bloody hat! What I want is an answer!"

He stopped and turned around. “An answer?” After he picked up the straw hat from the dirty ground, he wiped off the dust with one hand. “And just what would you want to know, Jona?” he drawled.

One heartbeat. Two. I couldn’t bring myself to mouth the question. Julian waited while seconds ticked by.

Ah hell, what was I afraid of? With a final deep inhale, I stalked the few feet to him and, on tiptoes, glared into his face. “Are you, or are you not, my mother’s lover?”

Quickly, Julian cast a nervous glance over his shoulder like he was afraid someone could’ve heard me. His firm fingers curled around my upper arm, he pulled me further away from where Marie worked the field.

“I’m a lot of things, but certainly not her lover,” he hissed, trudging off with me in tow. “And if you stopped spying on people, you’d never come up with such stupid ideas.”

“I wasn’t spying,” I snapped, yanking my arm from his hold. “Not intentionally, anyway.”

He stopped in his tracks when I did and faced me. “What *then* were you doing in the garden while I checked on your mother?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Oh, but what kind of relationship I have with her is *your* business, is it?”

“Yes! No. Argh!” I raked a hand through my hair.

It *was* my business. After all, we were talking about my goddamned mother. “What’s your intention? To become my stepfather?” A gruesome shiver trailed down my spine. That could never happen—especially not when I felt so annoyingly attracted to him.

Julian said nothing. Instead his brows pulled together, his penetrating eyes studying me.

I retreated a step from his intense stare. But this little distance could barely break whatever channel he used to read me. Goddammit, I so hated to be an open book around him.

“Now, give me that damned hat,” I growled. The woven straw crunched under my grip as I snatched the sombrero from his hand and put it on my head. I stormed away, headed for the fertilizer container. His amused chuckle bounced off my back in the heated air.

Done crawling on the ground for today, it was time to strew some powder again. The floury dust ran through my cupped hand and bedecked the earth around the shrubs. Alone, the task was not the funniest of jobs but in a way preferable to the slouched work of weeding.

I had hardly made it down one row when shoes crunched the path behind me. No need to pray it would be Marie or even Valentine. To suppress a pissed growl took some effort as I glanced over my shoulder. Julian had started tending the other side of the aisle, his gaze focused on the task before him.

After a few more steps, he caught up with me but still avoided my glance. On the other hand, I couldn't resist casting a sideways glimpse at him every now and then.

The ripped hems of his blue jeans scuffed along the path as he moved in silence. Tracing up his strong, long legs, my gaze remained a few moments on his lean hips, taking in the enticing sight. His blue t-shirt hugged a flat stomach and firm chest, the short sleeves flexed with his biceps. My fingers itched to trace a line from his neck down

his back to the slight curve just above the waistband of his pants. Heat rushed to my cheeks even as I thought of it.

While we walked with only about five feet of footpath between us, my annoyance with him flared off quickly. I tried to hold on to that anger—it felt more comfortable to be pissed with someone than discover an unwanted addiction to his smile. But I could as well have tried to stem the tide.

Maybe I was mistaken. What if all the hocus-pocus around him was simply the way my subconscious was dealing with a very scary fact—that I was falling for this guy? And fast.

The comfortable feeling when I'd opened my eyes to him this morning surfaced in my mind. As if he was no ordinary man but my personal island of peace. Confusion and longing warred inside me. I craved this man like nothing else. He said he wasn't Charlene's lover, but could he be trusted?

Every few steps, Julian wiped his dusty hand on his backside, just to dip his fingers anew into the bucket and retrieve a handful of powder. The right side of his bottom was soon covered in white—like mine was that morning when he groped me with his powdery fingers.

To remember the feel of his hand on my butt brought a pack of hot coals to the center of my stomach. Dear God, I mustn't even think about it. I took off the hat to fan my heated face, then placed it back on and tried to concentrate on the work.

"Is Quinn really your lover?"

Air whizzed out of my lungs. I shot a stunned glance at Julian's face. The question shimmered in his eyes.

Yeah right, you so want to know that, huh? I didn't reply.

“I didn’t think he was,” Julian said, the satisfied tone unmistakable.

Even though we barely spoke during the following few hours, I enjoyed just being near him. Once, as I bent over and rolled up the hems of my pants to expose my pale calves to the warming sun, I caught Julian stopping to study me. I tilted my head, met his gaze. He gave me a tight-lipped grin and returned to work.

There were not many things I was going to miss when I took off tonight, but Julian’s smile was definitely one of them.

We left the vineyard together with the others at about five in the afternoon. I was starved and welcomed the smell of food when I entered the kitchen. Marie had decked the table with cold cuts, vegetables, boiled eggs and bread.

To my great delight I learned that the dragon was fast asleep in the front room and Marie didn’t dare wake her just yet. With only the four of us surrounding the table, I experienced what it must feel like to belong to a normal family.

My aunt spoke about a new boutique in town which she would love to visit on the weekend, while jocular Julian pierced a slice of cucumber on my plate before I could. He shoved it quickly into his grinning mouth.

I’d just sucked in a breath to tell him off, when Albert disrupted my false anger. “Now, Jona, how do you feel after your first day out in the vineyard?”

To be fair, I had trouble keeping my eyes open, but I’d also hardly felt better in my life. “My back aches a bit,” I admitted, stretching, and gave Marie a sheepish look. “Throwing that funny flour to the ground was yet the better idea.”

“You mean the fertilizer?” my uncle corrected.

“Yeah, right. I only hope it won’t turn into dough with the next rain.”

Now he and his wife laughed while Julian shook his head with a smirk.

“It sure won’t,” Albert said. “It’s nothing like flour at all.”

“What exactly is it?” My tone was light and eager like that of an intrigued child.

My uncle’s eyes cut to Julian. “Lad, did you not tell her? You spent the entire day out there together.”

And what a fine day it was.

Julian shrugged, swallowing the bite of bread in his mouth. “She never asked.”

While his nonchalant attitude made me and my aunt chuckle, Albert tsked at him. Then his glance returned to me. “What you and Julian did today was supply the plants with minerals and vitamins to grow healthy and strong. You could have dissolved the powder in water and poured it over the roots. But to carry a can is a lot more exhausting than to carry a bucket with powder. To the plants it makes no difference.”

Excitement rode Albert’s voice when he spoke about his vines. It made him happy to tell me all about the different types of grapes and how the geographical location affected the taste of the wine later.

That evening I found I could give the man a good time by just listening to him, even long after we’d finished our dinner.

“Tomorrow, when we are out again, I will show you how to operate the tester and you can do scans of the ground if you like.” My uncle beamed at me.

I felt a painful sting in my chest, knowing there would be no tomorrow for me here. I'd already be gone and on my way back to England when my family woke the next morning.

10

RESCUE MISSION

THE FIRST LIGHT of a new day warmed my face. My nose itched and I rubbed my finger on the tip while forcing my eyes to open. Throbbing pain in my forehead reminded me of Julian's advice to wear a hat on a scorching day in the open field. A warm drop of drool rolled down my chin. I wiped it off with the back of my hand as I raised my head from the hard surface. *What the hell...*

Where was I?

As I straightened my stiff back in the chair, a long yawn escaped me. My muscles rebelled but my joints clicked into place with a good stretch. When my arms sank back to the desk, I spotted my work from last night. A half-finished farewell letter addressed to Marie, crumpled from my tired body resting on it all night.

"Bugger!" Yesterday's labor in the field had worn me out. The last thing I remembered was having to rest my head for one minute. I must've fallen asleep while writing the bloody note.

My stuffed backpack waited in the corner of the room. Heck, all I wanted was to get away from this place. But here I was, stuck in my aunt's house, trapped for another day with the dragon.

"Crap." Some of the frustration erupted as I banged my fist on the desk, sending the pen flying in a high arc to the floor. "No, no, no!"

My glance skated over the clock on my night stand. Bloody hell, I should've set the alarm. Falling asleep had ruined my chance at freedom for another day.

Tonight I'd be more careful. This stupid mistake mustn't happen again. I needed to get out of this place and fast.

Downstairs, I greeted everyone with a long face on my way to the door. Not even Marie's beaming smile could melt my ice-cold glare, and I shrugged off Julian's questioning tilt of his eyebrow with a sneer.

And then I bounced into *her*.

Charlene came in through the front door the exact moment I wanted to slip outside. The book she held dropped to the tiles with my impact and flapped open somewhere in the middle. My hands clenched to fists at my side while a grumble rolled from my chest and filled the hallway.

The dragon beamed. "Good morning, Jona."

Oh, get the hell out of my way or I'll put a stop to that happy grin with my bare hands.

I wanted to step over the item on the floor, which on a second glance happened to be a photo-album. The glimpse of one particular picture made me freeze.

The photo was of me—in front of this very house.

Sneaking up on me to take pictures? Damn her to hell.

Marie huddled next to us to gather the book for my mother. She rose with joyous surprise on her face. "Where did you find this?"

Charlene cut a glance to her sister. "It was one of the few things I took with me when I ran away. I must have thumbed through this book a thousand nights." The sickeningly sweet smile softening her voice made me want to puke.

"Look, *chérie*." My aunt turned with the open album in her hands. "That is me and your mother when we still were young. Oh Charlene, you must have been Jona's age here."

My stomach dropped to the floor. Involuntarily, my gaze drifted to the photo she pointed out. The faded color proved it was taken many years ago, but I would've sworn that was me standing outside the door and smiling for the camera. The same dark red hair wafted around the girl's face, the same eyes stared at me. The red dress and white pumps looked irritating on me though.

"I cannot believe how much Jona resembles you in your younger days." Marie's words made me sick with repulsion.

"Come on, you two. Let's go to the front room and look at these pictures together."

Or, you could grab a gun instead and shoot me in the head. "Honestly?" I gave both women a wry smile. "I don't think so." *No way in hell.* Bad enough, I looked exactly like the dragon in her younger days, but there was definitely no chance I would sit and reminisce with them about the 'good old days' and notice every bloody detail of our resemblance.

Maybe it was a good thing we collided in the hallway and not in the kitchen, because if I had a kitchen knife in my hand at that

moment, I might've considered scarring my face most cruelly, simply to make a difference.

Careful not to brush against my mother, I stepped past her and escaped into the morning breeze. Deep breaths calmed my anger only a little as I leaned against the wall.

Birds flew across the flawless sky. Another hot day in the dragon's den. I really needed to get away from here. The farther I could get from my mother, the better. Did she honestly think she could just enter my life and expect us to be best friends? As if the past twelve years never happened.

Marie came out a little while after me, and together we walked to the field. I appreciated the silence between us.

Out in the vinery, my pacifying song crept to my mind, the one I didn't know the title of. I began humming, and the notes of this haunting melody stayed with me all morning.

As promised, Albert instructed me on how to use the iPad-sized device to make scans of the dirt. For the simple reason to distract me from thinking about my mother and the unhappy meeting this morning, I wanted to get my hands on the gadget with buttons on the round keypad and a lit screen.

But my failed prison escape chewed me up. Pebbles bounced off my boot as I kicked the dirt. No matter what, I had to stay awake long enough tonight to pull off Houdini's grand disappearing act.

Since Julian was assigned to me to 'cheer me up'—and I heard Marie use those particular words before she sent him off with me—his short trips back and forth to the house and the field didn't escape my attention. If this was his way to perk me up, I could very well do

without his help. What was he doing anyway? Serving the dragon another lamb for her to roast?

And yet, I found myself staring after him, every time he excused himself for a few minutes. I kept my face emotionless, but inside I screamed at him not to leave. Confusion and doubts were my permanent friends.

In the evening, I ate my gumbo extra fast. A headache provided a good excuse from the chit chat.

Aunt Marie bade me goodnight at the bottom of the stairs. “Too much work isn’t becoming you.” She reached for my hand to squeeze it tight. “Tomorrow, you will not be going out to the vineyard.”

Oh, how right you are. Inwardly, I sneered. But at the same time, the loss of my new family swung a noose of barbwire around my heart.

“You need to recover, *chérie*,” she went on. “And it is the weekend, so we will find something nice to do, just you and me.” The corners of her mouth lifted. “What do you say?”

I say that sounds great. Bile in my throat stopped me from slamming the lie right into her face. I pulled my hand away.

But it’s not a lie, and you know that. Damn that better part of me and its infamy to talk back.

Confused, I simply nodded once and then turned on the spot to run up the stairs. Safely over the threshold of my room, I slammed the door shut and leaned against the cool wood. Hah, as if I could keep confusion from following me inside. A sigh puffed through my half parted lips, and my gaze wandered heavenward. “God, let me get out of this house before I go insane and change my mind.”

I rushed to the bathroom to shower off the sweat and dirt from today's work.

Once clean and dressed in ragged jeans and an old black tee, I sat at my desk to rewrite Marie's letter. The paper folded twice, I tucked the message into my notebook. Later, on my way out, I would leave the letter on the kitchen table.

Light dimmed outside. So this was it, I was prepared to go. Reaching over to my night stand, I grabbed the alarm clock and set it for midnight. Strange, how such a simple task took me over three minutes. My throat tightened while I fumbled with the clock. Better close the windows tonight, so as not to wake Julian with the noise of the alarm.

Julian.

My focus blurred. I drew back to a part of my mind where I had saved his luscious scent. If only there was a chance to smell the warm wild wind on him again. Just once more, before I had to go.

My skin tickled at the memory of his touch. The fingers of my left hand traced my wrist, the spot where he'd wrapped his fingers around me when he'd freed me from the shackles outside Judge Abe's office. An image of his lopsided grin flickered before my eyes. The one that grew on me all too quickly.

I wished there was a way to say goodbye to him. A letter would never do.

Swiveling on the chair, I took in the beauty of my room one final time in the fading daylight. What a palace. *And you're turning your back!*

A dull thud, like someone had dropped a cutlet, snapped me out of my mulling. I walked to the french doors. The moment I pulled

the curtains aside, a sparrow, or something similar—hard to tell in the fading daylight—took off from the railing and gave me a start. It fluttered excitedly in circles then shot up to the roof and out of my view.

Crazy birds. The curtain slid from my hand, but upset chirruping drew my gaze to the boarded floor. My eyes grew wide and my heart turned to pudding.

One step out on the balcony sat a young bird. Cocking its small head this way and that, it never let me out of focus. Its head was the only part moving, even when I squatted on the threshold.

“What are you doing on my balcony? Can’t you fly?” I said in a soothing whisper. Very slowly, I shoved my hand forward, but the bird hopped back, its wings still folded at its sides.

“Don’t touch it,” my most favorite voice in the world said, and a spray of bliss washed over me.

Julian approached on a gentle step. “It must have fallen out of its nest. There is one right above your room. Underneath the eaves.”

As he lowered to his knees, the bird retreated to the corner of the banister where it got trapped.

“Can you bring me a towel from your bathroom?” he asked.

“I don’t think the bird needs to be rubbed dry. It needs a lift.”

Julian’s exhausted sigh came with an amused half-smile. “Off you go.”

After a suspicious glance at him, I loped off to fetch the terrycloth he wanted. “So, what are you going to do with it?”

“I’m trying not to put my scent on the bird when I set it back in its nest. The mother bird won’t accept her chick if she smells a human on it.” He scooted forward to gently catch the terrified bird.

“Be careful,” I whispered.

Julian moved so nimbly and gracefully, he would’ve been able to catch a wild horse out on the plains. All the while, I held my breath until he’d cupped the bird with the towel.

He turned and showed me the scared little fella in his hands. “Its heart drums like a machinegun.”

I sighed, relieved, struggling against the impulse to stroke the tiny bird’s fragile head. “What now?” My voice was barely louder than a whisper.

“Time for the little runaway to go home.” Julian startled me when he tilted his head up and bent his knees slightly. His stance suggested he was going to push from the ground and fly like superman. I cocked a brow and bit my tongue, restraining from saying something stupid.

Someone was definitely crazy out here, and it certainly wasn’t me.

He straightened and avoided my stare, clearing his throat. “Well,” he stammered with a sheepish expression. “Could you bring the stool from over there so I can climb to the nest?” He nodded his chin to his side of the balcony, where an old wooden stool sat in the corner.

Panic gripped me immediately. I stepped from the threshold, back into my room, and clutched a hand to my chest. Shaking my head frantically, the color drained from my face.

“Oh, right.” His gaze locked with mine, and he exhaled through his nose while his lips curled. He looked so cute when he searched for a solution. “Could you hold *Tweety* for a moment?”

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, pulling a whiny face. "I've never held a bird before." And yet I strangely wanted to.

"Don't worry. You can do it." He stepped into my room and handed over the small bundle.

As gently as I'd ever done anything before, I took the bird from him. Instantly, the tiny animal started rebelling and chirruped like I was after its life. "Oh dear, I guess it wants back to you. Badly."

Julian laughed. "The bird wants back to its home. So we better hurry." At my reluctance to hold the bird, he shoved it toward me. "It's okay. Just don't squeeze."

Julian's hands cupped mine, and he waited until the muscles in my clamped fingers relaxed. To be honest, it was hard to relax at all with him holding me so tenderly.

"Okay, you got it. And always remember, the bird fears you more." He winked, and I was afraid I'd crush the animal with the new rush of excitement swamping me.

While he slipped out through the french window to retrieve the stool, joy filled my chest that he trusted me with the care of something as fragile as this bird. The sparrow's dark button eyes glinted. I felt the racing heartbeat Julian had mentioned. The powerful sense of a protector surged through me.

"Let's see if this works." Julian had placed the stool in front of my room and stepped on top. When he held out his hand, I placed the bird-package into his palm. My own hands trembled as I pulled them away from his.

He lifted the bundle over his head, growled low, and rolled his eyes. "Stools, my arse." In the next instant he stuck the chick in front

of my face. "Take it again for a moment." After he returned the bird into my protection, he stepped from the low chair.

"What's the problem?"

"The chair is too small, I can't reach the nest. And since I can't f—" He cut himself off, and when I angled my head he gave me a pointed look.

Don't even wonder about it.

Julian examined the square window right next to the french doors that led from my room to the balcony. "Do you think you can step onto the windowsill from inside your room?" His tone had softened a good deal, and his expectant and encouraging gaze made me wonder if I actually could be brave enough, just for him. "You don't have to lean out, just hold onto the window frame. When I reach down give me the bird."

"Reach down? From where?"

One swift move and Julian had hauled himself onto the railing.

A breath caught in my throat, my spine stiffened with terror. "God, Julian, will you please get down?"

Not wavering an inch, he balanced along the narrow wood plank to the wall. "Don't worry. I won't fall."

I was too scared to lean outside and see what he was about to do exactly, but through the window I saw his feet lifting from the railing and figured he pulled himself onto the roof somehow. Seconds later, footsteps sounded through the ceiling of my room and proved my assumptions right.

"Oh, this would all be so easy if..." he muttered on the roof.

"If what?" *If he could fly?* I snorted. *Well, buddy, if you could, I'd say you applied for the entirely wrong job here in the vines.*

Julian's irritated grumbling surprised me. I knew he wasn't angry, but the slightly off tone was something that so did not fit him. It would rather come from someone moody—like me.

"Okay, hop onto the windowsill now, Jona." His order came from too far for me to feel comfortable.

I gathered every ounce of bravery stored within my shaking body and climbed over my bed onto the sill. My gaze focused on the task and the bird, but never outside. Not standing halfway steadily, I reached outside and lifted the bird.

"A little to the right," Julian ordered, and I obeyed, struggling to breathe. He laughed. "The other right, Jona!"

With a hot face, I steered my hand to the other side. The bird's tiny weight left my palm. Excited chirrups from more than one bird carried down to me and assuaged my tense nerves.

I dropped from the window ledge onto my mattress, then stood and waited for Julian to climb down from the roof.

The white towel sailed to the floor. Next, his shoes and shins came into view, dangling outside my window for a second. Then he dropped to the balcony and I shrieked with sheer horror. My heart skipped a beat, I took a jump backward into the room.

But he'd landed softly like a cat. "Job done." Straightening, he rubbed his palms on his rear.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Jeez, you scared the hell out of me."

"Sorry about that. But you know," he took a step toward me into my room, "I'm majorly proud of you. Climbing up that ledge was very brave."

"You think?"

He nodded. For an awkward long moment we stared at each other. When the silence became unbearable, I coughed. “So, what does it look like up there in the nest? Are there more young birds?”

“There are three. Why don’t you come out and see yourself?”

An outraged laugh ripped from my throat. “Very funny.”

“No, seriously, I think you should try to get over that fear.” His face was stern, meaningful, but encouragement shone in his eyes. He grabbed my hand and tugged me. “Come on. Marie gave you the prettiest room in the house with this beautiful balcony, and you don’t even appreciate it.”

“I—that’s not true.” I wanted to defend myself, to protest—to his statement *and* to how his soft touch on my hand made me move. “I love the room.”

Julian tugged a little harder and I stumbled one step forward, then another.

“No wait, I can’t do this.” My knees trembled when he tried to pull me out onto the porch engulfed by darkness.

“Of course you can. Just grip onto my hand and do as I say. I’m holding you.”

I couldn’t say what convinced me in the end, his gentle tone or his warm blue eyes. But before I could think straight again, my right foot shoved over the threshold and landed shakily on the dark painted boards. The wood felt warm against the bare sole of my foot, but it creaked eerily under my weight. *Please don’t crack. Please don’t crack.* My quavering left leg followed.

“Very good.” Encouragement emanated from his smile. It seeped straight into my soul. He tightened his hold of my hand then laced

his fingers gently through mine. “Now turn around. No need to look over the railing right away.”

“Huh?” My breathing on high speed, I winced. But he didn’t give me time to think. With a soft shove, he directed me around till I faced the outside of my room.

“Oh my god, what are you doing?” I squeaked out in panic.

“I’ll guide you. Trust me.” Julian switched on the dim balcony light. Then he enclosed my other hand with his. He pulled me away from the wall, very gently. “I won’t let you fall.” His voice held the seal of a promise.

With some reluctance, I took one step after another to his subtle pull. Hysteria blurred my vision, I closed my eyes and followed blind.

“Breathe, Jona.”

Inhale. Exhale. Trembling breaths pushed out hard.

“You’re doing great. We’re almost there.”

“There? Where? At the slide to hell?”

One more step and Julian stopped then wrapped both his arms around my middle. He leaned against the railing, feet planted far apart for a better stance. He cradled my back against his chest. “You did it. Just see what a grand first step you made.”

Felicity smashed a hammer down on hysteria and took its place. “Hopefully, it won’t be my last.” Reluctantly, I opened my eyes to face the façade of the house tinted in soft porch light some seven feet away. My jaw dropped to my chest as amazement washed over me.

Blimey, all I wanted was to get back inside. But Julian’s hold of me felt solid and secure. I knew he would keep his promise, and only for that reason I stood rooted.

“Now, eyes up there.” With my hand wrapped in his, he lifted his arm and pointed one finger to the top of the roof. I zoomed in on the small nest right under the eaves. Three tiny round heads popped over the edge, the mother bird towering watchfully over her spawn.

It was lovely. Not just the sight of the nest built under the eaves, but also how much care shone in the mother-bird’s eyes when she hovered over her children.

“I always wished to have someone look at me that way,” I whispered without thinking.

“Like the bird?” I felt him staring at me from the side. “You might not have noticed, but there is someone in this house who looks at you exactly like that.”

I huffed and rolled my eyes. “Yeah, the dragon, right.”

“I’m not speaking of your mother.”

My brows knitted together, and I tilted my head to glance at him from only a few inches distance. “Who then?”

“It’s Marie who tries to pull you into her embrace.” Julian’s thumb drew small circles on the back of my hand, sending little shivers up my arm. “She’s pleading for allowance, don’t you see?”

“Allowance for what?”

“To love you.”

The truth tugged at my heart. Aunt Marie did everything possible to make me feel at home and welcome. But too much hatred for my mother filled me, didn’t allow anyone else’s love to intrude.

Hypocrite, my mind shouted. There I stood, dreaming of someone who’d replace my loneliness, and yet I was about to break the heart of the only person who’d tried to make this dream come true. But I couldn’t allow my aunt to break through my shield. Not

when those who I opened up to tended to leave me in the end anyway.

“She offered to spend the day with me alone tomorrow.” It eluded me why I told him this, but suddenly Julian seemed like someone I could be honest with. Someone like Quinn. “And she gave me so many beautiful clothes.”

“Sadly, you didn’t put them on tonight.” Taunting me, he tugged at the hem of my t-shirt. “But she knows how to welcome someone, doesn’t she?”

“She does indeed.” A low chuckle ripped through me. “Very much to the contrary of you.”

Out of the corner of my eye I caught him arch a brow.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” By his voice I could tell he was smiling.

“Well, you weren’t the most charming person in the world when we first met. With all the bantering and such, no wonder you don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Who says I don’t have a girlfriend?”

“Well...you. I mean, you said you weren’t my mother’s lover. And I don’t see any other girls around.” I bit my lip. *Shit*. There was probably another woman waiting for him somewhere. Someone nice and young, not god-awful like the dragon. Suddenly an invisible boa slithered around my chest and did what it was supposed to do best. It constricted.

When I spoke next, I sounded anything but confident. “So...do you?”

“No.” He dragged out the word and laughed softly.

No girlfriend. The snake evaporated, replaced with a bunch of excited butterflies I wanted to squash with my fist. This really shouldn't make me so happy. The pounding of my heart annoyed me something awful. Especially when he must've caught it with my ribcage pressed so snugly against his chest. And a firm chest it was.

Warmth emanated from him and seeped right through my skin where it heated my core. A mix of joy and uncertainty shook my bones.

Out of a habit when I felt insecure, I resorted to my snappy tone. "See, that might be different if you were a little nicer to girls to begin with."

"It might," he whispered. And then he brought his face very close to mine. "And yet, here I stand, holding you in my arms after only three days."

I sucked in a breath, swallowed, and lowered my gaze to my bare feet as his words sank in. I shouldn't be here, in this house. Nor in his arms. And most of all, I shouldn't enjoy it as much as I did. Ready to rip out of his hold, my spine stiffened as did every muscle in my body.

Julian's arms wrapped a little tighter around me.

"Shh," he breathed. "You'll just scare the birds."

11

BALCONY

IF SOMEONE HAD ever told me that one day I'd be sitting on a balcony fifteen feet above the ground and actually enjoying it, I'd have given him the finger. And yet, here I sat. The warmth of the wall seeped into my back while I watched the stars in the velvety night sky.

"Your knees stopped trembling. You're not getting comfortable in the end?" Julian glanced at me from the railing where he casually perched. For the past five minutes he hadn't taken his eyes off my shaking body which he probably assumed was related to vertigo.

I hugged my knees tighter to my chest and nodded. "Strangely enough, it seems so." I wouldn't tell him the rattle of my bones had actually set in with his tender hold and soft words and finally ceased when he guided me to the wall and released me. He didn't have to know everything.

"So, what's your plan for tomorrow? Will you and Marie paint each other's nails pink, lounge on the patio with your swim suits on,

and sip from cocktails with fancy little umbrellas?” Blowing at his imaginarily polished nails like a real diva, he made me laugh.

“You’d like to see that, wouldn’t you?”

The look he gave me from under his lashes would fit a mischievous wolf. “I so would love to.”

Sparkling electricity ran through me, raising gooseflesh along my arms.

“You cold?” He made the wrong connection again.

“Blimey, nothing ever escapes you, does it?”

Julian jumped off the banister and shrugged out of his gray hoodie. My eyes widened, and I tilted my head to keep him in focus when he stepped closer. Reflexively, I leaned forward as he squatted so he could swing the sweatshirt around my shoulders, even though I wanted to protest.

“You needn’t do this. I can fetch my own from inside,” I told him. “Keep it.”

Without his hoodie, he sat back on the banister. “Nah, I’m not cold.”

Neither am I.

But the smell that enveloped me the moment he placed the warm fabric on my shoulders kept me tongue-tied. It was like someone popped a can and a double dose of Julian’s wild wind scent escaped. I breathed deep and shoved my arms through the too long sleeves.

With my arms crossed on my knees, I buried my cheek in the cozy material and peered at him from the corner of my eye. Should I tell him that he was never going to get this sweatshirt back? The crook of my elbow hid my grin. But the dimple appearing in his left

cheek and his slight frown had me wondering if he read my thoughts anyway.

He lifted one foot up to the railing and leaned his chin on his knee. Grabbing his ankle, he held the leg in place. "It's the end of day three of your detention. How many more to go? Thirty-five?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Right." He chuckled, but I couldn't see how that was so funny. "What's your first impression of your new home?"

"It's not my home," I said in a voice gone cold, matter of fact. "But everyone is quite nice, and I like the house and the vineyard, if that's what you mean. Working is actually *okay*." My glance traveled farther up. I studied the stars for a moment. "This would be a good place to live if Charlene wasn't here."

"How so, Jona?" His intense tone pulled me back from the sky. He slid his leg down and propped his elbows on his thighs, leaning forward. The porch light played softly in his blond hair. "What exactly would be different if your mother wasn't in this house? I mean apart from you talking a lot more during meal times."

At his mocking grin, I frowned. How dare he probe and poke his nose where it didn't belong? "Everything."

He cocked a brow. "Name *one*."

"Just one?" *I could allow myself to enjoy this place.* The actual sound of grinding teeth filled my ears, and my eyes narrowed. Blimey, I hated being outsmarted.

"The stench of dragon nest wouldn't follow me everywhere I went." I grinned bitterly. "Come to think of it, do you believe Charlene would repudiate me if the smell of another human was on

me?” To provoke him, I rubbed the sleeve of his sweatshirt on my cheek.

No answer came from Julian. Instead he eased off the railing and lowered to the floor opposite me. Burning blue eyes studied my face for a long moment. “Do you always use sarcasm for protection?”

Yes.

It protected me from the world. From people who tried to get too close. If I hurt them first, they couldn’t hurt me. Especially, when they planned to disappear from my life. “Why do you say that?”

“I haven’t heard anything out from your mouth about your mother that wasn’t dripping with sarcasm.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, so what?”

“Just saying.”

And it bothers you like hell, doesn't it? “Well, I’ve got news for you, Mister. That’s just who I am, and if she’d cared at all the past twelve years she would’ve known me, and then she might not have forced me to come here after all.”

“If that’s really who you are, then why haven’t I heard your lippy tone toward Marie?”

Lowering my gaze, my head sank back onto my bent arm and my voice dropped to little more than a whisper. “Marie is different. I find it hard to be myself around her.” Thinking of her alone instantly calmed the emotional storm brewing inside me every time someone made me talk about my mother.

“Or, maybe it’s just *too easy* to be yourself around her?”

I blinked twice then raked a glare over Julian. Was he accusing me of a soft personality? I was anything but.

The years in the orphanage and partly in the streets had taught me a hard lesson: be soft and you go down like a ship under cannon fire. With no one to raise a stinking finger to help you. Only the toughest kids kept their heads on in a place like the Westminster Children's Home, where teachers tried to get under your skirt, and bullies aimed to make you the poster child for losers.

"You don't understand," I uttered. "I don't even blame you. From your place in the world, everything must seem easy. Living in a palace with nice people around, and a good job in the vines, there's nothing to worry about. But things look a little different from the gutters of society."

Julian's lips curled as he scooted across the floor toward me. Gaze locked on him, I followed his every move. His long legs sprawled out before him. When his left arm brushed my right, the nearness of him struck me once again. Excitement rose from my stomach to my chest and set my heart fluttering. Arms crossed over his chest, he tilted his head to regard the stars.

"What are you up to?" I murmured.

"Just trying to see the world from your point of view. If that's okay with you."

"Oh. Feel free."

He cast me a sideways glance, and the strangest thing happened. The expression in his face remained one of intrigue and friendliness, but his eyes seemed to live through a multitude of emotions in this extended moment.

What the hell did he see? For a second, I had the feeling he really had glimpsed the world through my eyes.

Scads of icicles slowly stabbed a line from my neck to the bottom of my spine. My toes curled on the warm wood. The urge to crawl away from him—to safety—rose strong within me. But an even more powerful impulse kept me rooted. Like two opposite poles of a magnet, I was drawn toward this man with every cell of my body, with every breath of my soul. At this moment, I wouldn't have budged if someone had shocked me with a cattle prod.

Happiness invaded me and kept me paralyzed. If I'd been able to move at all, then it would've only been in one direction. Toward him. An invisible aura radiated around Julian that made me want to sling my arms around him and press my body against his as tight as a cliffhanger would hold on to life.

Please, turn it off! Or else I was going to lick that peaceful aura off his very skin.

The sensation stopped. As fast as it had begun.

A final quiver started at the back of my neck and slithered down until it uncurled my toes. Julian crossed his legs, relaxed his hands at his sides and gazed at the night sky. Everything returned to normal.

Apart from me. I sat stock-still, but inwardly I panicked. Bloody hell, *what was that?* Did I go mental? Please not now. Not so shortly before my escape into freedom.

Calm down, Jona. You're tired, that's all. Shaking my head, I tried to get rid of the hysteria inside me. I clenched my hands to fists and buried them in my lap. An exhausted sigh lifted my chest. Calm enough to speak, I turned to him. "So, what does life look like from the gutter?"

Julian turned his head and studied me for a couple of seconds. He replied to my question with one of his own. "Can I ask you something very personal?"

Uh, after what just happened? Not sure.

Frowning at him, I shrugged my right shoulder.

"If your mother was already dead, and Marie had offered to take you to her home, would you have come?"

Of course was the answer I should've shot at him the very instant. But for a very strange reason I couldn't lie to him. Didn't want to. After a few seconds of deliberating, I slowly said, "No."

Julian nodded. "I thought so."

Swallowing hard, I tucked my hair behind my ears, let my hands rest behind my neck, and dropped my head. One particular reason would've kept me from coming. I didn't want to get attached to anyone again in my life. Ever.

That was why I'd had no boyfriend yet. Why I had no real friends in the orphanage. And why I refused to let Marie get any closer than she'd already managed in the past couple days. I had to protect myself from getting hurt by being abandoned, which, *let's face it*, would undoubtedly happen in the end.

To get my attention again, Julian tugged softly at one leg of my jeans. "It doesn't mean everyone will leave you just because your mother did."

My head snapped up with the feeling of being read again. "Yes, it does. If my own mother could do that to me, what stops a total stranger from doing the same?"

My furious tone didn't affect his soft one. "You know, sometimes people are sorry for what they did and try to make up for it."

A warning light went off in my head. This conversation was going downhill and fast. Anger boiled and threatened to spill out. "And *you* know, sometimes they just make the same damn mistake twice."

A sad expression settled in Julian's face. Yep, he knew what I was talking about.

My voice took on a sickly sweet note. "My mother certainly told you she came to the orphanage for the first time when I was already twelve years old, didn't she?" I rolled my eyes. "Uttered incessant apologies non-stop. She'd promised to get me out of that hole in a few days when she'd arranged her new life." I paused, took a furious breath.

"How stupid of me to finally believe her. The pain only cut deeper when she didn't show up a few days later as she'd pledged. In fact, she didn't show up for another five years." Until three days ago. With a typical, for me, sarcastic grin, I added, "She wouldn't have kept that part of her past a secret from you when you're *so* close, would she?"

"Maybe she had reasons not to come, Jona."

Oh yes, he knew.

I folded my arms over my chest. "What kind of reasons could that be? And why had she conveniently forgotten to inform me?"

"I don't know. Why don't you ask her?" A hint of innocence dabbled in his tone, just enough to make me understand he knew

very well, but wouldn't betray my mother and give the reasons away before she had a chance to explain.

A laugh escaped me at his ridiculous words. "Yeah, right. As if I really wanted to know. She can tell her lies to the reaper when he comes for her at the end of her goddamned life."

Julian's lips thinned to a line and I went silent. He always seemed so personally touched when I slagged my mother. I didn't want to hurt him. Not now. Not tonight.

A few minutes later, I cleared my throat and tried to steer the conversation in a different direction. "How long have you known Charlene?"

"A while."

"Oh, that says a lot." Behind closed lids, I rolled my eyes. "Was she already ill when you met?"

Julian nodded. Of course, why would he know her before he started taking care of her?

A sudden curiosity kept me firing questions at him. "Does she pay you for your services?"

"I'm paid for the work I do for Albert in the vineyard."

"You didn't answer my question."

When Julian inclined his head to lock gazes with me, I could see that he chose his words very carefully. "I don't get any money from your mother. But she's paying a price to someone else. It's a high price, too."

"And that *agency* she's paying sent you to take care of her?"

His soft chuckle warmed the atmosphere around us. "Sort of."

Suddenly, an angry hiss from underneath shook me to the bone. Valentine's cussing in French cut through the night. Julian didn't

bother to stifle a heartily laugh. He switched to the language that was all Greek to me when he replied to her.

When we heard her disappear down the path, I lifted an intrigued brow at Julian. “What did she say?”

“She cursed the birds for pooping on her slippers and threatened to shoot them all with Henri’s old shotgun.”

The image of the teapot going berserk over a handful of birdies brought a grin to my face. “And what did you tell her?”

“To be careful not to shred the façade instead. The old, twisted gun backfired more often than it hit a target.”

The laugh we share freed me like nothing before. When he didn’t pester me about my mother, I actually really liked this man.

During the following half hour, Julian told me everything he knew about Valentine and Henri, how old they were, about their three grown up children who occasionally visited here, and what was their main work in the vines. But it was more the soothing sound of his voice that kept me intrigued than the actual information he gave me.

I studied his beautiful blue eyes as he spoke. The sight of his tongue whisking over his lips from time to time to wet them sent a shiver through my body. And I noticed how he would rub the back of his neck and stare into the distance when he tried to remember something in particular.

A yawn stretched my mouth. I tilted my head to smother it in the crook of my arm.

Gentle fingers hooked strands of my hair behind my ear. “Your day has been long enough. You better go to sleep now. I can tell you more about the people here tomorrow if you like.”

“No,” I said quickly. “Please, tell me now.”

The shine in his eyes seemed to intensify for a moment, then he continued.

Nothing could’ve stopped me from listening to Julian. Not even sleep when it crept over me. I still heard his mellow voice long after my eyes had closed, and my head rested heavily on my knees.

Half asleep, I barely noticed the two strong arms that shoved under my bent legs and spine. As I was lifted from the floor, my head rolled to the side to rest on a comforting shoulder. My nose grazed the warm skin of Julian’s throat, and I buried deeper into the crook, savoring his enchanting scent of fresh wind wafting along a shore.

My hand wandered up his chest and cupped his neck for better hold. The cropped hair in his nape tickled my palm. If sleep hadn’t captured me already, I would have started to explore the sensation. I’d have skimmed my fingers up his neck and tangled them in his soft tousled hair if I had found the strength.

Holding on to him tight, I made him bend down with me when he lowered me onto my bed. His breath feathered against my face. I opened my eyes briefly. A smile that came mostly from his eyes bade me goodnight.

Please stay.

My knees dipped to one side as he let go of my legs and withdrew his arm. Gently, he removed my hands from his neck and placed them over my stomach. “Sleep tight, princess,” he whispered, brushing a wisp of hair from my forehead.

I blinked in slow motion, my cheek buried deeper into the soft pillow. Through a haze of sleep, I watched him turn away. His

fingers swept over the clock on my night stand, and the hands on the clock spun madly.

“See you tomorrow,” he crooned before he slipped through the curtains.

12

PAYDAY

I STOOD NEXT to Julian on the balcony, and the little chick with the button eyes comfortably nestled on his palms.

Julian flashed a toothpaste commercial grin at me. “Are you ready?”

I nodded and he crouched. With his next stretch, he pushed off the ground, levitating toward the roof. All the while, I saluted and sang “God save the Queen,” but the chirrups of the birds overhead overlapped my blaring. When I got to the part “long may she reign,” I jolted upright in my bed, wide awake.

The sound of my quick inhale echoed through the otherwise silent room. I pressed a sweaty palm to my brow, trying to get a clear view.

“Blimey, what a weird dream.”

Bright daylight floated in through the windows. I snapped my head right and left, pondering why I woke in this room again and not on an airplane to London.

Then memories of a glorious time on the balcony popped into my mind. Warmth filled me as I recalled being enclosed in Julian's arms. His scent still wafted all around me. A deep breath filled my head with a stunning sea breeze. Only when I wrapped my arms around me and my hands dug into soft cotton, did I realize the scent was coming from his hoodie still shrouding me. I didn't return it to him last night.

And I never will.

But how did I get into bed? And why didn't I strip off my jeans? The last thing I remembered clearly was his melodious laughter when he told me of Valentine's landing on her broad behind while she tried to uproot an ill plant the other day.

I raked a hand through my bed hair and brushed the bangs off my face. My fingers skimmed over my right temple—*saluting?* There had been something...in my dream.

Then I winced. *Levitating.* Julian had become airborne.

And you haled the Queen, silly. Weird things happen in dreams. Get a grip.

My eyes narrowed at the french window. The dream seemed so real. Julian had crouched before he took off, just like yesterday evening when he wanted to set the bird back in its nest. He prepared to—

To what? To fly?

Be serious kid. He wasn't a mutant, Superman, or anything alike. He was Julian, the ordinary guy next door. Lovely, but ordinary.

A sigh of frustration pushed through my nose as I dropped onto my pillow. A second later, the siren of an alarm clock blared next to me and gave me a jump start out of bed. I beat the device with my

flat hand. Thrice, to make sure the blaring really stopped. With one hand clutched to my pounding heart, I sank into the swivel chair and let my head tilt over the backrest.

Boy, things were turning out really weird this morning. Could I judge the kind of day I was going to have by its beginning, I might do better to climb back into bed.

I snatched the clock from my nightstand to check why it would go off in the morning when I set it for—

“Midnight.”

My stomach dropped, my mouth sagged open. Both clock hands were aimed up.

A picture of *Cogsworth*, the living pendulum clock from *Beauty and the Beast*, sitting on my nightstand danced through my mind, the hands on his Disney face spinning madly. According to this “overgrown pocket watch,” it was twelve exactly.

I couldn’t make any sense of it.

A frown pulled my brows together and I cut a glance to the french doors, as if the answer to my confusion lay just outside. But what was there to see, other than the familiar scenery of a few trees in the garden and five hectare vine?

Julian.

This place wasn’t kosher. At the moment, a lot of things didn’t make sense; most of all Julian. Every time he came within an arm’s reach, jittery feelings swamped me. And this went far beyond the average crazy. There was something very *not normal* about the guy.

Since I already missed my flight home—again—maybe I should delay the escape for a little longer and instead do some detective work. Considering the nice time I had with him last night, I supposed

I would survive a few more days in this place. Maybe a week even. Of course, it would be my first priority to stay out of the dragon's reach. But finding out more about Julian tempted me sorely. My stomach went all bloomy at the thought of spending a few more days around him.

From a drawer, I picked out a pencil and paper and started scribbling a list. After all, this was the first step Sherlock Holmes would take to resolve a case—take notes of anything unusual. It took only a couple of minutes to write down everything weird about Julian.

There was the surreal happiness he infected me with every time he touched me. I stared at the wall in front of me for a moment. Was feeling happy so bad? *No, no. Stay focused.* I blinked and returned my attention to the list.

Next point was the revitalization of my mother when no one was watching—or when he *thought* no one was. The awkward incident last night, when he tried to see the world through my eyes and I almost turned into an aura sucking vampire. And of course, his strange behavior when he put the chick back in its nest—the crouch before takeoff. Was there anything else?

Flying.

No, the dream was too weird to mention. Maybe the alarm clock? I pursed my lips. I could hardly blame it on him that the alarm went off at the wrong time. Grabbing the clock, I examined it from all sides. For the past five minutes, it worked accurately, the minute hand was pointing at one.

Tapping the pencil against my pursed lips, I spun in the chair and thought of what else I could jot down about Julian. But a knock

on the door made me jump right out of my seat. Rushed by panic, I shoved the list into the drawer and slammed it shut.

“Come on in!” My voice resonated with the awkward feeling of being caught doing something forbidden.

Marie’s friendly eyes peeked into my room. “Oh good, you are up. I was concerned when you didn’t come down for breakfast this morning.”

“Yeah, sorry, I slept in. The alarm went a little crazy.” I shrugged and held the clock out to her. “It didn’t wake me at the right time.” Which should have been hours ago.

“Don’t worry. It is Saturday, you are allowed to sleep in. Are we still on for a girl’s day out?”

Now that I had decided to stay for a little longer, the idea of spending a few hours with Marie alone appealed to me. It would be nice to get to know this friendly woman with her ever beaming face. Also it came to me that she had known Julian for a much longer time than I had, and she might come in handy on my expedition to discover his secret. The longer I thought about it, the more I believed he had one. So why not mix business with pleasure? Marie could at least answer me some questions.

Step two at resolving a case: *investigate*.

A broad grin crept to my lips. “Sure. What did you have in mind?”

Marie stepped over the threshold, but didn’t let go of the door handle. “Would you like to go to town? I have to stock the fridge for next week and I could use some help. Afterward we could go shopping for you, have lunch together, or get ice cream.”

Shopping for me? *Lady, I've got no money. And you don't want to be seen with a criminal.* But ice cream sounded fabulous. We had never gotten any in the orphanage, and to run off with a cone in one hand had actually been a very bad idea. After I'd lost the entire load on a spectacular escape through Hyde Park a couple years ago, I'd refrained from repeating that silly act just for one sweet lick.

"I'll get dressed and meet you downstairs in a minute."

The corners of her mouth tugged up. "But you are dressed, *chérie.*"

"Oh, right." Marie chuckled and left.

Swirling back to my desk, I shrugged out of Julian's hoodie and took a final deep breath of its scent. Mmm, this sea breeze cologne was the stuff dreams were made of. Downstairs, Marie had served a small breakfast and urged me to sit down at the neatly decked table with violets in a small pot in the middle. I barely swallowed the first draught of coffee, when Albert walked in and joined me at the table with a quirky look upon his face.

My gulp echoed through the room. Should I ask him why he stared at me, or just pretend not to notice? From the plate in front of me, I stole a croissant and tore off a small piece, while my eyes remained on my uncle's face. Slowly, I shoved the bite into my mouth.

Albert nudged the glass of strawberry jam toward me then laced his fingers on the table. "How did you like your first two days in the vineyard?"

"It's okay, I guess. It's just work." I shrugged and dipped the knife into the jam, then smeared it on my pastry. "I really liked the dirt scanner," I said in between bites and a grin slipped to my lips.

With deft fingers, Albert unbuttoned the cuffs of his white shirt and rolled up the sleeves. “*Oui*, that is my favorite, too.” His voice had dropped a notch and he mirrored my grin, which gave me a strange feeling of connection to this man.

With another sip from the hot drink, I washed the croissant down. “Is there no one tending to the shrubs today?”

“Saturdays and Sundays we normally run shorter shifts. Today Valentine and Henri are working outside. Everyone else can take the day off. Although, I might take a look later and make sure everything is okay.” He cast a sideways grin at my aunt, who snorted in response.

“Of course you will be out there later. When has there ever been a day in the past ten years that you have not?” Marie’s loving tone didn’t match her accusing words.

Albert pulled her to his side and planted a kiss on her palm. “But you knew that well when you married me.” He chuckled. Then he turned his gaze back to me. “I watched you work, Jona.”

“So?” If he intended to tell me off for not giving my best in the vines, I would have to enlighten him that this was after all slave labor and he should be happy I helped at all.

“It seems you had a good time out there,” Marie teased as she eased into the corner seat next to me.

Taken by surprise, I arched a brow, but didn’t find the right words to contradict. Maybe because she was right.

“And you really were a great help,” Albert continued. “You may not be too happy about the way you came to France.” He curled his lip and scratched his head, appearing slightly uncomfortable. “But it seems like you are going to stay with us for a while.”

A very short while. I licked a drop of jam from my middle finger, then leaned back and crossed my arms over my chest. My eyes darted from one to the other. What next?

“Your aunt and I do not want to force you into anything, but we could do with another pair of hands on the vineyard, especially in this busy season. So we wanted to ask you if you would like to do this as a real job. Just for as long as you will be our guest.”

I liked how my uncle put my stay in his house. Unlike everyone else, he understood it was only temporary quarters and not *my new home*.

“We will, of course, pay you for the work.” Marie gave a reassuring nod which, together with her words, had my jaw drop to my chest. “How does two-hundred euro a week sound to you?”

For about thirty seconds I said absolutely nothing but struggled to come back to my senses. “Did you just say two-hundred? *Euro?*”

The dragon must have forgotten to mention I was bound to be their slave until my birthday. Old Abe definitely didn’t say anything about payment when we last met.

Albert nodded, pulled his wallet from the back-pocket of his trousers and slip out a one-hundred euro bill. He placed the note on the table, then shoved it toward me, just like the jam before. “This is your salary for the past two days.”

Or, as I liked to call it, my ticket back to England.

The little red devil on my left shoulder rubbed his hands while his horned head bobbed with conspiratorial snickers. If Albert meant what he’d said, and I’d endure another week in this house, I might be able to walk off with three of those pretty green bills in my pocket.

To make sure none of them would go back on their offer, I gave both a daring glance before my hand slowly crept forward to snatch the money.

“You agree?” My uncle’s mien did a good imitation of his wife’s beam.

I bobbed my head slowly, still unable to utter a single word.

“Great. Now, I wish you two a nice day.” His gaze switched between me and my aunt. “I will be out in the vineyard and see if Henri needs a hand with the scans.” He winked at me then turned to silence Marie with a kiss before she could tell him off in her sweet manner.

As he disappeared through the door, Aunt Marie sighed and planted her chin into her palm. “He is incorrigible.” The devoted spark in her eyes had me wondering if she already missed him.

“If you are finished, can I get you to clear the table while I shove a load into the washer?”

“Sure.” When she was gone, I hummed my little melody as I stored the butter and jam into the giant fridge then cleaned my plate. Water soaked into my shirt and, rubbing the front dry, I bounced into Julian on the way out of the kitchen.

If he hadn’t wrapped his arm around my middle so fast to prevent me from falling, I might have taken a filigree vase from the waist-high credenza down with me. Marie certainly wouldn’t have liked that, so I was happy to find myself in Julian’s hug instead.

But this was, hands down, not the only reason.

“Whoa, sorry,” he blurted, although his tightening grip revealed he was anything but. Also a smirk undermined his credibility a little too much.

I liked it when only one corner of his lips came up and he quirked his brows. All that was missing to make me fall in love with this move was the growl of a tiger that had claimed his victim.

For the fraction of a second, a very scary thought crossed my mind. What would happen if I took his face between my hands and pulled his head down for a kiss?

Are you nuts? You don't do kisses.

Right. A kiss meant giving up protection and showing affections. And this was something I must never let happen. When my stance was steady again, I shoved against Julian's chest, wrenched out of his embrace, and silenced the part of me that pleaded to stay in his arms just a little longer. "Get off. You're crushing me."

He tucked his hands into the pockets of his black pants and gave me a suggestive glance. "Sorry. I guess there's no immediate danger on the ground floor."

"None that would break my neck if I fell."

Ignoring my snappy tone, he leaned around the door frame to survey the kitchen. "Is your aunt around?"

"Doing the laundry."

"I am here, Julian!" Marie climbed the stairs from the cellar and approached us, a basket full of freshly laundered clothes braced on her right hip while her hand clasped the brim. "What do you need, dear?"

"Can I borrow your car? I need to get something from town."

Marie's gaze darted to my eyes and back to him. Then her lips pursed. "Actually, Jona and I are going to town. You could come with us."

Julian frowned, luckily not at me but at my aunt. "I thought you two were going to have a ladies' day. I don't want to disturb."

Fingers laced behind my back, my mouth curved. "You're not disturbing." *Oh my god, did I really just invite him? And with that silly sweet voice?* Pivoting to Marie, I gave her an expectant look. "Right?" *Can someone slap me? Hard, please.*

"Not at all."

Julian's eyes traveled to the left to meet my gaze before his head inclined. "Okay," he agreed slowly. "I'll just check on your mother and then meet you two outside." When he walked past me his eyes still fixed mine with a stare as though he doubted my good will and expected me to start laughing at his silliness to fall for my joke any second.

A sweet grin was all I granted him. "Hurry up."

"That was very nice of you, *chérie*," my aunt approved after Julian had disappeared in the dragon's hole.

Shrugging it off with one shoulder, I turned on my heel and sauntered outside. My grin spread wider and wider. Inwardly, I jubilated at the thought that Julian would be around us all day with no chance to run back to Charlene every half an hour. Oh, today was shaping to be one fine day indeed.

13

TOWN

THE BACKSEAT OF Marie's sedan provided a good view at Julian, who'd climbed into the passenger seat. As far as the seatbelt allowed, I lounged in the corner with my legs pulled up and scanned every inch of his handsome face while the tires rolled over the unpaved country road. His straight nose perfected the harmony between his high cheekbones and intelligent eyes.

The corners of his lips twitched slightly when he cast me a knowing glance halfway over his shoulder. A flush warmed my cheeks, but that didn't stop me from studying him. If at all, my gaze dropped for merely a second. The seawater blue of his shirt accentuated his midnight eyes. He blinked twice before he faced front again.

Outside, the beautiful French landscape rushed by on our ten-minute drive to town.

"I believe it best we start off with a little shopping," my aunt said while she steered the car onto the main road. "Afterward we can eat lunch together."

“Fine with me,” Julian announced, and I agreed with a low *um-hm* from the back.

After we passed the place name sign *Fontvieille*, Marie turned into a one-way street lined with colorful two story houses blending in perfectly with the mountains in the distance. In the city’s public parking lot, she maneuvered the car between a green van and a convertible and cut the engine. As soon as we climbed out, the busy murmur of Saturday morning shoppers drifted to us and curiosity built high within me.

We rounded a corner, and then I halted mid-step, holding my breath. A whiff of home surrounded me, bringing with it memories of Friday raids in old Blighty.

“It looks like *Oxford Street*,” I cheered, and spun on the spot to take in the neat marketplace, lined with fancy boutiques and shops.

Nudging my ribs with his elbow, Julian chuckled. “Just a wee bit smaller, I suppose.”

“Much smaller.” But it didn’t matter, the sunny place was a good enough imitation.

We came past a stand where the reflection of the sun in silver caught my eye. A manifold of watches and filigree bracelets covered the velvety counter top, pendants in various shapes and all colors of the rainbow.

Seeing the fine jewelry, a tingle started in my fingers. *Oh yeah, The Dodger was back*. But my promise to Quinn virtually tied my hands. I shoved them deep into my pockets and swallowed hard at the temptation as I forced myself to walk on with the others.

Nevertheless, this crowded market presented another alluring opportunity. It’d be too easy to fall behind and take a wrong turn,

then shake Marie and Julian off. Yesterday, I might have even considered a move like this to escape my punishment called *family*. But this morning, I'd come to a decision, and for now, I'd stick with it.

Julian startled me when he inched closer and said so low only I could hear, "I didn't expect a place like this would make you so happy. Should we keep the watch on you in case you get lost in the crowd?"

I castigated him with an exasperated glare. Did he get another sneak peek into my mind? "If that is what's on your mind you should've brought Quinn's handcuffs."

Julian snaked his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. "Maybe I did."

My focus zoomed in on the stainless steel loop he half-tugged out of the pocket of his pants, and which glinted mischievously in the sun. Stunned, I pushed away from him. "Jeez, Julian! Who are you? Abe's twin brother? You're not going to use them on me."

His chest shook with another laugh. He shoved the cuffs back into his pocket. "Don't worry, I don't intend to." Hands raised in surrender, he moved closer with a smirk. "As long as you're staying near."

You keep your amazing smile on and I'll do whatever you say. The little girl within me sighed in hopeless devotion to her Prince Charming. On the surface, I built a wall of protection with the only thing I knew always worked a hundred percent. "Okay, Dad. Do you want to hold my hand, too?"

His lips curled, and I could barely hold back an outraged laugh about him contemplating this option.

“You can’t be serious,” I snarled before he could even insist on me taking his hand.

Julian raised a suggestive brow.

“I’m not going anywhere, okay?” My laugh softened, since this definitely was one of the most bizarre conversations I ever had. With a person anyway. Talking to the pigeons in the park didn’t count.

We followed Marie, who’d walked a few steps down the street and peered through the window of a fashion shop. Julian nudged me again and offered me his bent elbow.

“Is this your insurance for me not to *fall behind*? An alternative to the shackles in your pocket?” In spite of my teasing tone, I wanted nothing more than to hold on to him and let him guide me through the maze of shoppers loaded with bags.

Julian blinked slowly. His arm didn’t budge. “Come on, I won’t wait forever.”

“Oh, you’re so pushy.” I rolled my eyes at him, but then I happily looped my arm through his. My fingers curled around his firm biceps that flexed lightly when he tucked his hand into his pocket. With a firm squeeze of his arm against his body, he ensured my hand wouldn’t slip away.

A few feet in front of us, Marie halted and took a step back to peek into another shop window. “Oh, this is just lovely,” she cheered over a caramel colored blouse. Straightening, she pivoted to us and at the same instant caught our joined arms. Her mouth dropped open, her expression an unambiguous *Oh*.

“It’s not what you think,” I whined. “He’s just worried I might—get lost in the crowd.”

“Oh.” Now the word came from her mouth, but before she turned to walk on, she cut us both a cheerful glance. She definitely approved of us being linked.

Oh glee.

Julian stopped in front of the sliding glass door as we entered. “I’m sure you ladies don’t need me for this. I’ll head back to Paul’s piano shop and see if he’s got anything new. Back in ten.” Then his eyes switched to me. “Have fun.” The door shut when he stepped away and headed back in the direction we came from.

Was he talking about sheets of music when he mentioned a piano shop and something new? Probably the reason why he wanted to come to town in the first place. I didn’t know he could play the instrument. Would be nice to sit with him and listen to him playing.

Marie’s hand on my shoulder broke my staring after him. A warm shine lingered in her eyes. “The music store is only one block away. He will be back soon enough.”

Yeah, right. And what do I care? I harrumphed and strode after her when she walked off with a chuckle on her lips.

Marie demonstrated what a French woman in shopping mood was capable of. Within minutes, she’d rushed through the spacious store with dapperly dressed mannequins lounging at each end. It was hard to spot her face behind piled up shirts, dresses, and pants on her arm.

With her free hand, she tugged on my sleeve and dragged me into one of the many changing cubicles lining the back of the shop. “Come, *chérie*. Let us try them on.”

Shock slammed into me at her words and I stopped in my tracks. Taken by surprise with my abrupt halt, Marie whirled around

because she still clasped my shirt. She struggled not to drop the entire load on the marble floor.

“What is wrong? I am sure I got your size right, and they are really lovely clothes.” She held the rainbow colored pile out to me.

“Ma’am, I don’t do lovely.” And most of all, I didn’t intend to spend a single cent of my traveling money in this shop. “Really, I don’t want any new things. What you gave me the other day will do for a decade.”

“*Fadaise*. Nonsense. You can never have too many clothes in your closet.” She waved a hand, but then a doubt rushed across her face. Her shiny green eyes narrowed. “Or are you worried about the money? Of course, you do not have to pay for any of these. Albert and I will cover the costs of everything you need.”

This woman’s and her husband’s generosity went far beyond the levels of normal. An awkward fist clamped my stomach. “Why, thank you,” I stammered, shifting my weight to one foot. “But you shouldn’t. I really don’t *need* anything.”

Aunt Marie pouted. “All right then. But if you find something you would like to have, do not be shy to ask for it.”

Knowing that would never happen, I nodded just to be free of her insisting.

While she vanished into the cubicle, I roamed the shop taking looks at things I’d never own. In front of a slender tall mannequin that was modeled after an African woman, I halted and gaped at her short, bright yellow summer dress.

The halter neck top provided a stunning view of the upper bow of her breasts, and the waist of the dress was set high. The model’s bare legs silhouetted against the three thin layers of laced fabric and

were clad in breakneck high heels. Though the design and style of the dress were simple, I'd barely seen a more beautiful thing in my life.

"You would look amazing in this dress."

I shot around to find Julian sprawled in a square leather chair across the way.

Blimey, he was back. And I'd missed him in this—what? Eleven minutes?

Head on the low backrest, he'd laced his fingers on top of his stomach and eyed me through relaxed slits. His lips twitched.

I laughed low. "You're crazy. Me in this dress? Never."

"What's wrong with it?" He straightened, propped his elbows on his thighs and leaned forward.

Stepping aside to grant him a better view at the dress, I motioned up and down the mannequin on the square pedestal. "It's bright yellow."

"So?" Smooth like a cat, Julian rose from the chair and with his hands shoved into his pockets he joined me by the dummy. "A little color would suit you. Why are you wearing black all the time? You aren't going to a funeral."

I shrugged. "Maybe I am." *Sooner or later.* "Actually, I like to stay invisible. Blend in."

"Which comes in handy when you're on the run from the police or a mad shop owner, I suppose." A tick in his jaw and a dimple—he was suppressing a grin.

Great. Anger ate at my insides when escapades of my reality seemingly amused the man I felt so strangely attracted to. "Why miss out on all the good action? The adrenalin rush during a close

escape would bring some excitement even to your straight life.” I gave a little pelvic tilt and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Diva,” he drawled. “Do you bite, too?” Julian clicked his teeth twice, spun on his heel, and walked away, chuckling.

I flipped him off, but he didn’t see it.

My attention returned to the dress. *Me—in yellow*. The guy was nuts.

“I think I’ll get these two shirts and a pair of trousers.” Marie’s cheering made me snap my head in her direction. She strolled toward me holding the clothes in front of her as if to examine them one last time before she made her purchase.

Stopping next to me, she looked up. “Do you like that dress?”

“Not at all.” I let the hem drop from my hand. “Just look at this hideous color. I would never wear anything like it.”

“Really?” Marie scanned the mannequin from bottom to top. “I think it would look nice on you.”

Oh no. Her, too? “I don’t think so. Are you almost done? I’ve seen a nice shop across the street. We could drop in there as well.” The lie should distract her so she wouldn’t make me try the gown on.

“Sorry.” She scurried to the cash register with me in tow. “I got caught up with my shopping.” Pulling her wallet out of her purse, she glanced around the store. “Is Julian back?”

“He’s waiting outside.”

The shop assistant scanned the price tags and shoved the clothes into a big plastic bag. The digital display on the counter flashed one-hundred twenty nine euro and seventy cents.

“Bloody hell, that much for a pair of pants and two shirts?” I blurted before I could think better.

The blonde woman stared hard at me, but my aunt didn't so much as blink at the total. She took my hand and led me toward the exit, where Julian waited, drinking from a small bottle of mineral water. He wiped the bottle's mouth then held it out to me.

I took a swig. "Thanks."

He nodded once.

The three of us made a tour through four more shops. The woman was insatiable, buying sweaters, blouses, skirts and shoes. Julian and I had to help her carry the bags or she'd be packed like a donkey in the veldt. She must've spent close to five hundred euro before we finally headed to a bistro with our stomachs rumbling.

We found seats at a table outside. Taking the menu, I scanned through the dishes, but they were all written in French. I flipped the card around to see if the other side would be in English. It only displayed a man slinging his arm around a man-shaped baguette. *Brilliant!*

Julian frowned at me over the edge of his card. "What's wrong?"

Leaning toward him, I whispered, "This is all French. I can't read the menu."

He smiled and rolled his eyes. "You're in France. Of course this would be spelled in French." The legs of the metal chair scraped on the pavement as he scooted closer. "Come on, I'll translate for you."

He started reading the dishes out to me in the national language and gave me the appropriate English name for each. To hear the French words roll off his tongue set my skin on a sensual tingle. The temptation to ask him if he could read the menu again nudged me, but instead I settled for a pasta dish.

He ordered on my behalf when the waiter appeared. “Would you like a coke with it?” he asked me, and when I nodded he passed the order on.

Twenty minutes later, a man dressed like an oversized penguin served our meals. “*Pour mademoiselle,*” he sang in a soft lilt when he set a nice heap of spaghetti in front of me.

“*Gracias.*” I shot the waiter a proud grin. Julian shook his head, chuckled low, then started eating his chicken in wine sauce. I dug in, too, realizing I was starving.

“Are you ready for afters?” Marie rubbed the back of my hand on the table while the waiter came back for our empty plates.

I patted my bursting stomach. “I couldn’t eat another bite.”

“Oh come, you would not say no to ice cream, would you?”

My mouth watered.

Without waiting for my final answer, Marie spoke to the waiter and he gave a nod. “Would you like some dessert too?” she asked Julian.

“No more for me, thanks.”

The penguin hurried to bring me and Marie each a cup the size of my foot, filled to the edge with chocolate and vanilla ice cream, topped with a mountain of whipped cream and two wafer rolls. My brain froze with every spoonful I shoved into my mouth. Three quarters down to the bottom, my stomach resigned, but I couldn’t stand to waste any of this precious dessert.

“Please,” I begged Julian. “Could you help me finish this monster sundae?”

Through with her dessert already, Marie offered him her spoon and we took turns scooping the cream from the cup. Julian fished out the cherry that stuck on the bottom of the glass tub.

I was full to the brim, but this little cherry must have been the most appetizing thing in the world. Never having had any, I could only imagine how heavenly it would taste. My mouth watered anew with the mere sight of it on Julian's long stemmed spoon.

He sneered at me as he lifted the fruit to his mouth. My heart sank. But then he gave me a wink and brought the spoon in front of my lips.

Uncertain, I chewed the inside of my cheek.

"Go on, it's yours," he urged.

I opened my mouth and he steered the cherry to its final destination, his eyes fixed on mine the entire time until I bit into the fruit. The sour taste was nothing close to what I had expected. I grimaced, swallowed the bite but kept the pit in my mouth. It rolled along my teeth as we left the bistro and headed back to the car.

We made a stop at the local supermarket where Marie spent another small fortune on food and drinks, then she steered the sedan on the road home.

My heart sank with each mile she drove. The day alone with her and Julian had been too beautiful. Already in a few minutes the horrible face of my mother would put a stop to my joy.

14

ARGUMENT

ONCE BACK HOME, Julian and I slugged the heavy bags after Marie into the kitchen to help her put away the groceries.

As we walked through the door, the warm scent of chocolate took me on an immediate journey through time. A sudden impulse to twirl on the spot shot into my legs and, for the blink of an eye, left me light-footed. Without my knowing, soft giggles shook me. But catching a glimpse of my mother's rear when she was bent over the opened oven made me gain control.

"You came just in time for coffee and cake. I made your favorite, Jona," Charlene said when she pulled a steaming chocolate fudge cake out of the oven.

In spite of the mouthwatering scent that wafted in my face, anger spiraled up inside me. Not just because of her getting off talking to me, but most of all because it was a memory belonging to her and me alone that had made me smile right then. I fought to stay rooted in the present again and leave things in the past alone.

“And just what makes you think you know anything about my favorites? It’s not as if you came to the orphanage lately to find out.” My toxic cadence earned me a poke from Julian. I didn’t care. After all it wasn’t half as painful as the twinge of my heart. With a heavy thump, the bag in my arm landed on the counter.

The blue cushions on the bench wrapped around the table flattened when we all took our seats while Marie brought the coffee pot and poured while Charlene dished out cake. It did smell delicious, but the devil may get me if I ate anything made by the dragon.

When she was about to hand me a piece, I stared straight at her, all memory shoved away. “No thank you. I don’t fancy your bloody cake.”

My aunt exchanged an uneasy glance with my uncle, but neither reprimanded me. In fact, it was Julian’s fingers that suddenly nudged my chin tenderly and tipped my head so I would gape at his penetrating eyes.

“Did someone ever tell you that you’ve the mouth of a snotty brat?” His thumb smoothed over my cheek, then he let go of me. I was still gazing at him when he began sipping his coffee.

The temperature around me dropped to an uncomfortable level. Unbelievable, how he made me wish I hadn’t lipped off to my mother for once with this one reprobative glance. It scared the hell out of me to realize how much this man’s opinion mattered to me. I had never cared what anyone thought of me, so why now?

I drank my coffee fast to quench the taste of bad conscience. And while everyone else still shoved bites of chocolate cake into their mouths, I excused myself from the next round of refills.

Some alone time was on the plate. To have so many people around me all day exhausted me unexpectedly. It surprised me even more when I realized I roamed through the vinery instead of retreating to my room. Strange, how very much this place had grown on me in the last three days. Only now did I realize I actually missed working out here.

I paused from pounding the path and pinched the bridge of my nose. A glance back to the house and up to my open door on the balcony ascertained my suspicion. Blimey, I was falling in love with this house and the grounds. I dragged two restless hands through my hair, pushing out a desperate sigh.

What would Quinn say if he could see me now? I missed my friend. His scolding when I was dragged to the office and he'd taken care of me as well as the saucy chats we'd shared when he'd invited me to McDonald's for a coke and a burger before he'd delivered me at the orphanage.

He would want me to be happy. *'If you can't change a situation, make the best of it.'* His words surfaced in my mind. Maybe I should listen to my friend for once.

Kicking stones out of my way released some of my frustration, but the doubts and confusion remained. I'd run from so many places in the past when I nicked a little money or something shiny. I'd even run from the orphanage. Twice. But I'd never made it farther than Gatwick or Chelmsford by dodging the fare before an official had caught me and sent me back to the institution.

In fact, I grew tired of running.

Maybe, just for a little while, I could enjoy the pleasantries of having a nice place to stay put without worrying what tomorrow would bring.

Surrounded by all the greenery, I tilted my head and gazed at the sky. “Damn, what’s your bloody plan?” For a moment, I studied the clouds drifting by, knowing I wouldn’t get an answer other than maybe a bird pooping on my face. With my hands tucked deep into my pockets, I strolled back to the house. The kitchen was empty, but I heard people chatting in the front room. Muffled but desperate, Charlene’s voice caught my attention.

It went against my nature to eavesdrop. After all, I didn’t give a damn about what the dragon had to say. But as my foot hovered over the second stair, she mentioned my name and that was enough to change my mind.

I crept to the front room door and strained to listen.

“...will get over it eventually. Trust me.”

I had a strange feeling of foreboding on the subject Julian was talking about.

Sounding close to tears, my mother replied, “But what if she just can't forgive me? It doesn't seem like she ever will.”

Yup, my intuition was dead on. What struck me weird was that the dragon confided in Julian with her doubts and sorrow, and not in someone who’d be a little closer to her. Like family. I’d have expected her to talk to Marie, instead of her caretaker.

“You have to give her some more time,” Julian insisted in his familiar soft tone, the same one he used when he’d dragged me out onto the balcony last night.

“But you of all people know time is the only thing I don't have left!”

Hard as it was to admit, her grief sounded genuine. It gave my heart a twinge. The second within only an hour.

“Be patient, Charlene. Rest. Conserve your energy. I'll take care of everything else.”

The room fell silent. What was going on? I urged to lean around the corner and peek inside, but I mustn't give away my advantage. The wall behind me cooled my back as I frowned at the ceiling, waiting for them to talk again.

Dissonant notes sounded from the piano, like someone hit random keys when walking by.

My mother cleared her throat. When she spoke her voice had dropped a few notches. “I've noticed a change about you.”

A silent second ticked by.

“Did you?” The faintest hint of disapproval from Julian.

I hadn't observed anything different about Julian. But then she probably referred to a longer period than the few days I knew him. Blimey, curiosity threatened to kill me, so could this woman be a bit more precise, please?

“I know that look.” she said, and her off-key tone made the hair at the back of my neck stand up. “But you should be wise enough to see there's no way.”

“I don't know what you mean.” Curt and precise. He knew just too well, all right.

But should I know, too? What way did the dragon mean, and who was she to teach him?

I silenced my thoughts to hear more, when my mother's harsh scolding of Julian drifted to me. "Of course, you know. Don't think I'm stupid just because you're that much older."

Oh boy, she must've forgotten to take her pills. Mental disorder. He could hardly be older than twenty, and she must be way over forty. In teenager reckoning this was like comparing Apollo to Medusa.

Her sigh dragged through the room. "You can never give her what she needs. All you will do is hurt her."

Her? A red-hot lance of jealousy stabbed my heart. Charlene was talking about another woman. No surprise, her mood had changed to snappy. From the very beginning, I suspected she wanted this man for her own, even if he played way beyond her age class.

But he couldn't be taken. He told me yesterday, and I would swear he didn't lie to me. Just...*no*. I refused to picture him holding another girl like he held me last night.

There...I...Oh, shut the hell up, Jona.

"I'm not intending to hurt her—or anyone. Don't worry, I do know my place. My first and foremost duty is to you. Your daughter," he said, pausing and then speaking with effort, "comes a close second."

Hands clapped over my mouth, I killed the sound of my sudden inhale. Disbelief replaced the jealous spear in my chest. Footsteps approached the door. I swallowed the amazement and quickly dashed up the stairs, taking steps three at a time. At the top, I spun around and casually walk back down, pretending I hadn't heard any of their conversation, but my heart raced madly inside my chest.

Spotting me on the stairs, my mother paused. For the blink of an eye, the awkward feeling of being caught stopped me in my tracks as well. A purple shrug, wrapped around her skinny shoulders, made her ashen face appear more sallow. Without saying one word, she hurried on into her room and closed the door.

Stunned, I remained on the stairs, stared down the empty hallway, struggling to shake off this unnatural feeling of guilt. I would have never thought it possible, but her sorrow left a sore spot in my soul.

Ah, what the hell...

Dumping the thought, I spun on my heel, ready to ascend to my room. But music coming from the parlor froze me in place.

Julian played the piano.

Captivated by the sweet melody, I wondered if this was what he got from Paul's. I sneaked closer and peeked into the room. Julian wouldn't notice me standing there with his back toward the entrance. Good, because after what I'd heard him say a minute ago, I didn't think I could look straight at his face. The noose of confusion still wound around my throat, and words would've evaded me anyway.

The beautiful chords he played filled the room, and me, with calm. Clutching the doorframe, I pressed my cheek against the smooth wood, gazing dreamily out of the window into the flaming red sunset.

It escaped me when the first piece of music ended and he started a new one. But at the first chords, I straightened with a start. He was playing *my* song. The one I so often hummed to myself, not knowing where I'd first heard it, or if I'd made it up by myself.

Only he didn't just play the single notes as I would've hummed them. His hands caressed the keyboard up and down as they caroled over this little melody of mine. A minute later, Julian angled his head, casting a glance at me over his shoulder. His eyes all smiles, he winked.

Argh, caught.

My heart thudded against my ribcage so hard, I feared if it pounded a notch louder, it might've served him as a metronome.

With a slight flick of his tilted head, he invited me to come over and join him on the piano bench. Ever so slowly, I walked toward him, worried I had misinterpreted his gesture. But that doubt vaporized the moment I approached the piano and he slid over to the end to let me take a seat next to him.

He leaned in, and his familiar smell filled my head. "Could you turn the page for me?"

On the stand sat a pack of music sheets with lines and notes, but I couldn't begin to make sense of it. At this moment, though, I knew he went to Paul's only to get this piece for me. That was the reason he went with us to town from the beginning.

My fingers cold, I fumbled with the page, turning it over, then I sat so still one might've mistaken me for furniture. His fingers never stopped moving gracefully over the ivory. Sometimes they just stroked the keys, the next moment they pushed them down with firm insistence. It almost felt like he made love to the piano with his very hands, and for the briefest moment, I wondered what it'd feel like if he stroked me the same way.

My eyes skipped to his face, and I bit my lower lip, not wanting to explore this thought any further.

Twice more, he nudged me with his elbow and said, “Next page, please,” while he concentrated on the notes in front of him.

And then the piece ended, the final chords ebbing into silence. Hands clasped in my lap, I waited for him to turn to me. “How did you know...” I uttered in a confused whisper. “This song. How did you know it’s special to me?”

He sighed. “How could I not know when I heard you hum it all day yesterday in the field?” He tucked a stray wisp of hair behind my ear and brushed his fingertips across my cheek before he dropped his hand again. A sensuous shiver shook me, and I picked up my former thought once more.

An awkward silence fell between us. With my throat too dry, I had to swallow twice to find my voice again.

“What’s it called?” I asked.

Julian smiled to himself as if this was a joke only he would understand. Next moment, his hand covered mine, and his warmth seeped into me. “It’s called *Hallelujah*.”

Hallelujah. The song had a name.

And what an irony of the title compared with my dreary life. It irritated me no end that my hand wouldn’t stop shaking under his. And to make matters worse, my breathing had noticeably picked up speed.

I couldn’t allow him to see how nervous he really made me, so I cleared my throat something forceful and said, “Can you play it again, please?”

He wouldn’t take his hand from mine. Not before he smoothed his thumb over my knuckles. Then he nodded and flipped to page one to read his way through the song once more.

My gaze switched back and forth between his concentrating face and his skilled fingers while he was performing this wonderful music for me. At his gentle shove I turned the pages, but eventually, I leaned my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes, soaking in the soothing sounds. Certain that his dancing fingers never stopped and turned the pages, I wondered how he could have learned this piece by heart so fast. But not enough to ask, or even open my eyes.

When the song came to an end again, the final note lingering in the room, I didn't move. Neither did he. Only his head turned slightly, his cheek brushing my hair, and I felt his tender gaze searching my face.

“Again please,” I whispered, and without a comment Julian agreed to my demand. His steady, masculine shoulder told me I wasn't unwelcome, because if he had shoved me the tiniest bit, I would've backed away instantly.

He let me rest against him and listen for what felt like hours. Each time the song ended, it took only a little nudge of my arm for him to play the beautiful melody again.

And again.

All night long.

15

CONQUEST

I OPENED MY eyes in my private castle the next day, the soft melody of *Hallelujah* still playing through my mind. As they had every morning, the chirping of birds and a warm sun greeted me through my opened windows. Tucking the blanket up to my ears, I buried my cheek deeper into the soft pillow and reveled in the previous evening.

I lost count of how many times Julian had played my special song, or how many others he'd coaxed from the ivory keys on the piano. He must've played for hours. Just because I asked him to.

Well after eleven, we'd finally ascended to our rooms and he'd bid me goodnight with a nudge of his knuckles to my chin.

Even though the story remained unclear, I knew Julian had entered my dreams again last night.

A sigh lifted my chest. I rolled on my back and braced my head with my arms. Soft light danced on the ceiling, reflecting off the opened window above my bed. Julian's confessing words to my mother filled me with joy. Of course, his foremost duty was to her,

his charge, but he'd named me a close second. He would never find out how much that meant to me.

It was new that someone awoke this kind of feeling in me. My protective walls threatened to tumble. I could do nothing to stop the once so solid defense from crumbling before Julian.

The idea to stay a bit longer played in my head.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my face. These thoughts were too weird and dangerous. However long I remained in this place, eventually the moment of parting would come. And I couldn't allow anyone, be it Aunt Marie, or Julian, to break through my circle of defense.

But just like this house and the vineyards, Julian grew on me.

My attention fell on his gray hoodie hanging over the backrest of my swivel chair, and I swung my legs out of bed. My bare feet made no sound on the cold parquet as I ambled over to get it. The smell of warm, wild wind still lingered on the fabric and wrapped me into a cloud of ocean breeze. Just how could any man smell this good?

No laundry detergent or shower gel could bring on that irresistible scent. It seemed strangely natural, rolling off his very body and tinting everything in his vicinity with this sweet fragrance.

I slid my arms through the sleeves. Nearly three sizes too big, the hem of the hoodie hugged my thighs. The cuffs clasped in my palms, I brought my hands to my nose to get an extra shot of *Julian*.

At the same instant, footfalls on the balcony boards drifted into my room. Panic struck fast when I felt caught at reveling in his smell. I quickly locked my hands behind my back, presenting my

most innocent grin, as a knock sounded on the glass of the open door and Julian shoved his head in through the curtains.

“Hi,” I blurted, with the rush of blood to my face.

“Good morning.” He swept the curtains aside and stepped into my room. On a small tray in his left hand, he balanced two steaming cups and toast with jam on a plate.

“You missed breakfast again. Since we skipped dinner last night, I thought you might be hungry. I saved this for you.” He whisked the tray in front of my face.

The smell of hot chocolate drifting to my nose set my stomach on a rumble. But Julian withdrew the small breakfast and retreated to the balcony before I could make a grab for the cup. “I thought we could eat out here today.”

Oh, you snake. Apparently, he didn’t grow tired of helping me get past my fear of heights.

“We?” I stopped by the door, watching him with hunger for both the man and the food, as he set the plate down on the railing. “I thought you normally don’t eat breakfast.”

“For you I’ll make an exception.” He picked up the hot chocolate and held it out to me, but from too far away for me to grab it.

“Know what?” I murmured. “I’m not hungry. I’ll just wait until lunch. Yeah, that’s what I’ll do. The sun is up quite high. It can’t be too long until noon.”

Twisting his wrist, Julian glanced at his watch. “It’s nine thirty. Quite a while to go,” he mocked. “Wouldn’t a cup of sweet chocolate be nice now? And just look, I’ve brought you toast.”

Yeah. And as if my stomach took sides with Julian it chimed another annoying rumble. My frown ought to tell him he could shove

the toast up his arse. Just because we spent this beautiful evening together, didn't make him my personal trainer in *causa vertigo*. I pivoted and headed for the bathroom.

"Jona?"

At his crooning my name, I turned around.

"You still have my hoodie." His arched eyebrow weakened my stance.

Don't even think about getting it back, buddy. This is mine. I might not have told you so yet, but that's a fact.

I crossed my arms over my chest and smirked. "So?"

"So?" He repeated with a disbelieving laugh. His sweet tone matched his look. "I'd say if you want to keep it you owe me."

He was willing to trade? That could be an interesting deal. "What do you want?"

Cup raised, he wagged his brows. "I want you to have breakfast with me."

"Okay, bring the food in and we can eat on my bed." My victorious grin said it all.

"Outside." This time it was as though his eyes spoke the word, and with a lustful growl. How could a girl ever resist him?

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Arms raised, I stomped forward. "So gimme the bloody cup." All my strength was necessary to control the rising fear as I stepped out into the warm daylight. Panic gripped me harder with each stride. For a millisecond, an equally shocked expression flashed across Julian's face. There was barely time for him to shift the cup out of the way before I collided with him. His strong arm wrapped securely around my waist. A whine escaped me as I

shut my eyes and buried my face in his shoulder where I hoped my deep breaths would steady my shaking nerves.

Julian's abs flexed against my body when he chuckled low. "Easy there, love."

In the next instant, he stiffened. We both did as his words sank in.

Aware of every inch of his body pressing against mine, a joyful song started to play in my mind and I tilted my head to meet his gaze. The tips of our noses almost touched when he dipped his head. I expected my heart to speed up. Instead it stopped beating all together.

The firm hold around me loosened, his hand came up slowly to shape against the side of my neck and face. His thumb brushed my cheekbone. Between his blinks, I stared into the deep blue of his warm eyes.

The balcony, the house, the entire world around me melted away. At this moment, I could've stood on top of the Eifel tower and would've felt utterly protected by Julian's hold.

Heat seared me from the inside. My fingers trembled as they clenched the collar of his orange shirt. I forced my hands to uncurl and lay flat against his chest so as not to tear off his top button. When his face inched closer, I licked my lips. My breaths erupted like the puffs of a steam train.

Blimey, I wanted to taste him. Feel the sensual bow of his lips. Trace it with my tongue. But the very instant they brushed against my bottom lip, he tensed and pulled away. A cold spot remained on my cheek when his hand dropped.

A dry cough made his Adam's apple twitch. He handed me the cup. "You better drink your hot chocolate while it's still warm."

The stern note in his voice dragged me back to reality. I double blinked. Grief caught me in a stranglehold when I saw the remorse in his eyes.

Kiss. Fantastic idea.

What got into me to let my control slip so badly? I took the cup from him, retreated to the wall and sank to the floor. Sips of the hot drink warmed my stomach. But they could do nothing about the cold in my heart.

Julian stood rooted and studied me. Cursing the moment I bounced into his arms? I would swear he'd felt the same sparkle between us when he'd leaned down to kiss me.

Warming my fingers on the hot chocolate, I balanced the cup on my knees. The black smiley on the green mug presented a friendlier face than Julian.

"What changed your mind?" I croaked. "Didn't you say you were going to make an exception for me?"

"What?" In an awfully sweet manner his brows knitted together, and he stared at me, lost like a child in first grade who had no idea what the teacher wanted from him. Probably the very same look I gave him so often.

"Breakfast." Forcing a grin, I raised my cup. "You're supposed to sit down with me and eat."

Whatever had been on his mind before rushed from his face as he blinked slowly. Placing the plate with the delicious smelling toast between us, he lowered, too, and took a sip from his cup. Two of the slices covered with raspberry jam helped swallow my

disappointment. Julian had none. Didn't mean he didn't look disappointed.

Neither of us spoke, and when I finished my drink, he grabbed the cup together with the plate and carried the tray to his room.

He didn't come back.

Letting out the sigh that had tightened my chest during the previous ten minutes, I crawled into my room and jumped into the shower. It was time to wash off the confusion and drown my longing for this guy in the spray of water. After all, I should be happy we didn't kiss all the way. It would've complicated my situation enormously.

The progressing day made it clear Julian evaded my presence. While I helped Marie prepare a pasta meal for lunch, he accompanied my uncle to the vinery. And when I joined them in the early afternoon simply because I was bored and would've loved to use Albert's dirt scanner some more, Julian excused himself and returned to the house.

Small needles of regret jabbed me in the chest and with every hour that separated us, the empty pit in my stomach grew. The needles had turned to lances by the time I went to bed, because this was also the first evening he didn't bid me goodnight.

On the plus side, my mother kept out of my way, too. Neither did she stalk me, nor talk to me during the remainder of the weekend.

The next couple of days, I gave my best in the vinery. But without Julian's company, the work wasn't even half as much fun. Chats with Valentine were my highlights.

They started on Tuesday afternoon. Together with Marie we knelt in the dirt and pulled weeds. Valentine rattled on in French for

hours while my aunt replied with a few words every now and then. Apparently, the teapot shaped chatterbox missed it when Marie rose from the ground and patted the dirt off her trousers then went back to the house to make us all a snack.

Helplessly, I stared after my aunt while Valentine continued her French monologue. It took her almost five minutes to realize no one answered her. Confused she glanced to all sides. Her gaze focused on me. The grin of a happy farmer curved her mouth.

Very much to my surprise, she returned to her task and continued rambling. Just to make her happy, and maybe because I had no one else to talk to, I filled her brief gaps with *ahs* and *ohs*. Sometimes I would even ask, “Is that so?” or “Really?” But she understood me as little as I understood her.

The silence when she finally stopped talking actually felt weird. So out of a funny mood, I told her about London in my language. I explained the location of the orphanage and detailed how Miss Mulligan let us attend the celebrations in the street when Prince William and Kate married last April. Valentine’s *ahs* and *ohs* to fill my gaps now made me chuckle and propelled me to continue my babbling.

Straightening once to ease the pain in my back, I caught a glimpse of Julian only a few feet away. A pair of sheers still clutched in his hand, he stood as if frozen in time and stared with narrowed eyes. Easy to imagine how our conversation must’ve intrigued him. City lass and countrywoman finding a way to communicate.

A weak smile pulled at the corners of my mouth. The first twitch of his lips after three days kick-started my heart into

pounding with joy. His amount of attention was little, though. With a sigh, he twisted and trudge off.

Wednesday, I sought his nearness purposefully, hoping he would say something at last if only I stood close enough for a while. Again, he wouldn't speak to me. But his returning glances didn't escape me.

Sometimes, he looked away quickly when I caught his gaze on me. Other times he would just fix me with his stare.

Needless to mention that his awkward behavior freaked me out. I decided to confront him later and set things straight between us once and for all.

In the late afternoon, a heavy downpour washed away our plans to work in the field and sent us inside sooner than usual. I showered and dressed in blue jeans and a dark blue tee from Marie's selection then peeked out on the balcony.

Tock-tock, fat drops tapped a romantic rhythm on the wood. Thick gray clouds hovered low. Not even seven o'clock, it was dark like bedtime. Light burned in Julian's room and illuminated the balcony through his opened door, but there was no sign of him outside.

"Julian?" I said, but he didn't hear me through the rain. If he did, however, he refused to appear on the balcony.

Crap. We really needed to get this straight. Now.

Back shoving against the door frame, I slowly made a step outside. Fear slammed into me like a baseball bat from the shadows. The wood creaked under my weight and I sent a silent *Ave Maria* to heaven. My teeth crunched as I inhaled three times deeply through my nose. My eyes fluttered shut. Then I shoved my left leg in the

direction of Julian's room. Dragging the right behind, my back and hands flattened against the solid wall.

It would've been easier to take a walk down the corridor and knock on his door. But somehow it seemed important to approach him in this way. Like I'd prove worthy in facing the danger on my conquest of his castle.

As I inched forward, the rough surface of the wall yanked hair from my scalp. Thin slits between the footboards allowed a glimpse to the pebbled ground underneath. If this weak illusion of a porch broke underneath my weight, I'd make a breakneck dive into death.

Just freaking wonderful.

"Julian," I whined. But when I angled my head to the left his empty doorway mocked me from miles away. "Lord, please let me survive this." I swallowed hard at the panic in my chest, shoved my foot another step to the left. And another.

Through the thick curtains of rain, I perceived a dark ball, growing as it shot toward me. I froze. As a big raven flapped its wings excitedly and landed on the railing in front, my shriek ripped through the air.

"Argh! Gosh!" It took me several breaths to calm down enough so I could lower my arms from protecting my head. "You bloody...*filthy*...beast!"

The damn bird only cocked its wet head and fluffed up its dripping feathers. To my hoarse shoeing sounds, the raven finally took off into the rain again, giving me another start as the wings fluttered like those of a bat.

I closed my eyes for a second. The image of Julian safely sprawled on his bed surfaced in my mind. "Oh, I so hope you know

what risk I'm taking for you." Walking through my personal hell. Still, the thought of him filled me with encouragement.

I turned my head to the left to focus on my goal again.

And there he stood, like a dark knight in a circle of light.

Clad in a dark gray sweater and even darker trousers, he leaned against the frame of his french doors, arms crossed over his chest and eyes wide with wonder.

"Hi." Excitement replaced my initial panic, thudding my heart to a faster beat. He'd come and get me and everything would be good.

But Julian remained motionless, watching my every move—which wasn't a lot at this bloody moment. *Damn you to hell, wretch!* I almost breathed a hysteric laugh.

"What in the world are you doing out here?" he drawled eventually.

"Coming. Talk." There wasn't enough air in my lungs for a longer answer.

"There would've been an easier way to my room." Mystification warred with amusement in his face.

"I know." I did sound desperate, all right.

His blond brow arched. "Why didn't you take that way?"

Questions, questions. Didn't I look tense enough? "I *don't* know."

"Would you like to come in?" He gestured a hand toward the room's interior.

"I guess." *Oh please, do I have to drop to my knees and plead for your help?* He could have that. My wobbly legs threatened to give way underneath me in a second.

He made a step toward me and reached out with one hand. It cost me quite an effort to let go of the wall behind me and lay my trembling fingers in his palm instead.

Instantly, his warm touch infused me with a strength I couldn't find only a minute ago. He pulled me into his protective arms and stared at me from an inch away. A second later, he ushered me through the french doors into his realm.