Chapter 12: Chapter Twelve

We nally make it to the last hallway that will lead us to the royal ballroom in our dark cloaks. My heart is pounding, and my knees feel weak.

This is not the time to get cold feet.

"Mort, are you sure people will not ask who I am? My dress is an eye-catcher, to put it mildly, would hate for the royal guard to be called," I say dryly.

"Five hundred people are in attendance tonight. I think you will be ne. Tonight is about mystery anyway, and I think it's rude to ask someone's name."

"That's a lot of people," I whisper with a frown and good point.

This might be a little harder than I initially thought to get close to Laura's glass. I bite my lip as I watch Mort take o her cloak and toss it to the side. She is in a dark blue gown resembling a peacock with feathers everywhere. It isn't horrible, and it isn't great either. Very neutral, like always.

"Game face," Mort says, urging me to get going with her raised brows. "I will go around the side to see if I can get a clear view of Laura. Destiny stated that she is very careful of not let any of her DNA to be left around, probably guessing that we desperately want it. I will hold up my st when I can get a clear view of her, which means you need to keep me in your eyesight and Visa-Versa."

"Very German soldier of you," I say and take a calming breath. Tonight, I am not myself. I am a woman who is seeking revenge.

Nobody likes a blond, stuck-up bully.

I slowly take o my cloak, exposing the stunning gown of glistening yellow and black onyx. My skin looks like perfect ivory contrasting with my stark black locks. I'm wearing so many black and white striped petticoats. I doubt I will be able to nd my own legs, and the corset is so tight it leaves little to the imagination. My breasts look glorious; they really do, perfect ivory globes if I were to compare to something. I'm proud of the girls, and I'm aloud to be without any judging. Charming did a fantastic job, and I can see why he is Zora's right-hand man. Using the ladies' room will be a challenge, though, so I need to keep my champagne intake to a glass.

I lower my black lace veil and whip out my yellow fan.

Eyes narrowed, we make our way to the grand entrance, which is magni cent in height. The silver doors must be two stories high, their splendor I have never seen before. Masses of people swarm everywhere in all di erent vibrant shades and styles, taking my breath away. I have never been permitted to go into the royal ballroom, and the sheer size of it would be a world wonder on Earth. The lighting is low and exotic, the many chandeliers emitting a sensuous glow that makes a shiver slide down my spine. Deep sapphire and silver adorned the elaborate décor, and the dark marble oor sparkled and glistened with the dim lighting.

When you rst enter an enormous staircase leads you down into the ballroom oor. A grand entrance is an understatement here. The most exquisite sapphire velvet is draped down the center of the stairs completing the masterpiece. As my eyes scan the majesty of the ballroom, I almost have pinch myself, it was incredible.

Intoxicating.

The music seems to weave its way around your soul, transforming you into someone else entirely. The manifestation of something seemly sinful that tantalizes and tickles your senses, whether you're ready for it or not. The vibrations are mysterious and romantic, all in the same. I stand now at the top of the staircase, gazing down at the fantasy, a world that I never thought existed.

I suddenly smile, feeling a surge of adrenaline.

I pick up my glittering gown and begin my descent to the main level. A server ran into a pillar to my left, the crash of glass being lost in the buzz of the ballroom. Maybe the yellow of my gown blinded him, I think, with a nervous smile. This is thrilling, a body high I have never experienced. I glance to my left and see men in dark masks gawking at me, so lift my lace veil, and I wink at them. One of their mouths drops open as I pass, feeling spirited.

It's like you take me out of my slave attire, and I am a wild woman. I think I'm

experiencing cabin fever being a slave, and now I feel free.

Even if it's just for tonight.

I ignore people's stares and whispers and search for Mort, grabbing a champagne glass from a passing server. I down the contents, needing all the help I can get and dispose of it on another passing waiter. I spy Mort, and she shakes her head at me, and then I lose her as groups of people block my view. It's rather hard to see, but I spot the throne seating down on the far end of the ballroom.

If I were to bet, Laura and Apollo would be seated there. There are curtains and a luxurious lounge area, almost like it is the V.I.P area at a club. I bite my lip, praying she is getting a little drunk and leaves her glass unattended. This is the perfect setting to catch Laura o guard, hoping this can be a quick mission so I can enjoy the rest of the night. She still thinks I am locked away, licking my wounds, no doubt.

I also want to be out of Apollo's view.

He will not know it's me, so I doubt I will draw his attention for more than a minute or two. There are tons of women here, and more importantly, he is an engaged man now. That makes me want to vomit. I wonder as I make my way down to the throne seating what dress Charming made for Laura.

Hopefully, a brown gown with an itchy turtle neck. A little healthy wishful thinking never hurt.

"Excuse me, madam," a male voice says next to me as I still. "You are a vision in yellow. Please allow me a dance."

I turn to see an average height male with a purple feathered mask on. His black and plum nery is appealing enough, and I do a quick glance at the dance which happens to be right in front of the throne seating. That will give me a great view of Laura, if she is there, that is.

Perfect.

I smile at him and hold out my hand for him to kiss.

He raises his blue eyes up to mine and sighs. "We were trying to guess what kingdom you belong to, for I don't remember seeing you at the feast."

Oh, I was there, cleaning up your messy dishes.

I wave my hand. "There are so many people you must have just overlooked me."

He laughs and tucks my arm in his. "Impossible."

"Oh," I laugh, feeling nervous and glance around for a sign of Mort. "You

atter me, Sir. I would absolutely love a dance with a gentleman as charming as you," I say playfully, hoping I sound like a well-bred woman.

Actually, I have no idea what the hell I'm doing.

He looks a bit intoxicated as he peers down at me with heavy lids, his gaze drifting to my chest. "I will be the envy of every male here. You honor me. You look so exquisite, I almost forgot to breathe when I caught sight of you," he laughs and leans in like he is going to tell a secret, "And, my dear, there is no such thing as a gentleman. Just a patient wolf." He leers at me, and I catch his meaning loud and clear.

He's going to have to be very patient then.

Indeterminately.

He talks about the vast estate he holds in Mont Gallow like that should make me swoon or something. I just nod with the occasional giggle as he leads me to the dance oor. My gown is sparkling beautifully as I twirl and get into position. Now I must say that I know how to dance perfectly. My knowledge is on key. I guess along with the language we also know the customs like dancing. Thank goodness, or this would be a very awkward encounter.

Their style of dance is a little like the classic ballroom but with added spice. A little tango here and a little close dancing there. There are a lot of people on the dance oor, but as we start to move to a waltz-like dance, I begin to move closer to see the occupants in the elevated lounge. I only have a few seconds with every turn to get as much detail as possible.

With another spine, I am close enough to see people in masks talking, drinking, and laughing. I bit my lip when I am twirled again. At this rate, I will need to dance all night to get a clear view. I spine again and see Laura in a gorgeous lavender gown, of course. Charming doesn't do anything that is not breathtaking. But, I will say mine is better. oor,

In my humble opinion.

She is walking on the arm of a masked man that is de nitely not Apollo, maybe a cousin? Looks like he is leading her to the large dance oor. My heart skips a beat when I see a wine glass just sitting on a glass table where she came from. Is it hers? I would have to get closer for a better look. I prayed it had lipstick on the glass that matches the pink on Laura's lips. I also see almost all the occupants of the royal family descending to the dance oor.

The dance stops.

I frown as I glance around.

Everyone, including my dance partner, starts clapping. I glance in front of me and see Laura laughing and clapping, and to her left is the magni cent Apollo Augustus Garthorn. I suck in a harsh breath, realizing I'm so close, too close. I happen to be at the front of the dance crowd by chance, which is not ideal. I'm terri ed Laura will recognize me and call me out in front of everyone. And with that thought, I try to scoot back as best as I can but to no avail. It is drawing more attention to me. Apparently, the royal families will participate in a dance, and everyone is honoring them, from what I gather. My mind is in panic mode.

My eyes take in Apollo, who is laughing what someone said. He looks like a version of Zorro with his plain metal mask and dark attire. The buttons at his neck are undone, and his billowy back dress shirt is making me feel lightheaded. Did Apollo ever look bad?! Never in his life probably. I feel bad for the other normal looking men standing around Apollo. It is like seeing Jason Momoa standing next to Zack, from Saved By The Bell. His muscled thighs are well displayed in his tight gray pants showing every bulge, ehem, of muscle.

My cheeks heat, and I curse, looking away.

Get a grip, Viola.

Not wanting my gaze to travel to the family jewels, which appear to be quite impressive. When I glance back my whole-body freezes, Apollo's dark gaze is currently inspecting my yellow gown with an expression I can't read. It's normal, I tell myself, the gown is, in fact, stunning. I take a big breath and shift, looking away like I don't notice. I most likely just drew attention to my impressive cleavage, no more big breaths idiot. La-la-la-la, just another average girl with just an amazing dressmaker. Nothing to see here.

I feel my dance partner put my arm in his like he is staking claim from Apollo. Please. I roll my eyes and slowly glance back to nd Apollo, still staring at me. He can't see my eyes, but I can see his, and they are de nitely zoned in on me. He raises his chin and tilts his head a little, an expression somewhat stony and indi erent. It's so hard to tell with him in that silver mask. I'm sick with nerves, wondering desperately what he is thinking. Why on Earth did Peirce put me in such a bright dress?! Now I'm regretting wearing this masterpiece of a gown. I need to get out of here, or at least out of Apollo's view before I blow my cover. I feel like I can't breathe, su ocation.

I mentally slap myself.

I need to stay calm and stop being awkward. Apollo is just being a typical man and merely admiring female beauty, nothing more. He's engaged for Pete's sake. I am over-reacting like normal.

I hiss under my breath because the dance is starting, and to my horror, it's an interchanging dance. Of course, it is. The music is exotic and enthralling, precisely what I do not want. I am just thankful for the low lighting and masks. Laura is now paired with Apollo, good. She looks completely infatuated with him, pursing her lips and standing too close. This dance is not fast, but you do change partners throughout it.

I grab my partner's hand and curtesy, and he bows.

We dance, and I feel like I'm in some sort of twilight zone, where my body is moving, but my brain is in a fog. I can only hear the seductive notes of the symphony and my beating heart. I must dance my way to the edge and make a clean escape without being detected. I'm in the danger zone. We are intertwining now and I spine and raise my arms as a new gentleman takes my hand. This continues as I near the edge of the dance oor as I'm twirled again. Just a couple more twirls and I'm free.

I make it to the edge, and I feel a strong hand take mine and yank me back into the dance oor, spinning me forcefully. Somewhere in the depths of my panicking mind, I know I'm screwed. I know who I will see when this twirl stops. Dark, glittering eyes gaze down at me, leaving me little to what he is thinking. My whole body tenses up, and I forget to breathe. Just act natural,

please.

I feel his hand low on my hips, much lower than the other men's hands, and too low for an engaged man. As he spins me his ngers trail over my midsection and lower, applying pressure here and there. Seems deliberate, but I can't be sure. I hate this tension, this panic. As I spin, again, I become face to face with him, and it's so unnerving that his expression has not changed.

Does he know?!

It was time to change partners, but he didn't move, he just grabs my hand again and spins me.

Uhh...he might know.

Apollo did not change partners, and I am petri ed to ask why. Maybe it is a mistake on his part, I think quickly. I don't want to jump to conclusions quite yet. Surely this is all my paranoia, my demented thinking. I suddenly feel the heat of his body against my back as his hand presses me hard to him. I feel every inch of his rigid body against mine, and we are no longer dancing. Luckily the crowded dance oor and low lighting almost hides us in the swarm.

My heart pounds in my chest.

I feel like the little mouse being caught under the lion's paw.

His hand that is splayed over my stomach moves upward, applying more pressure as his palm ascends. I try to move, but his free hand grabs the glittering fabric of my gown and yanks it back. Okay, I'm in trouble. Warning sirens are ringing in my head, escape now! Red alert! My adrenaline is owing through my veins, and I gasp when I feel his hand under my breasts. Apollo's mouth is hot against my ear as he lets go of my gown to rip o my mask, tossing it somewhere to my left.

I try to move again, but his hand grabs my neck, squeezing it just enough for me to panic. His ngers under my breasts move up, feathering over my impressive cleavage. Butter ies scatter in my stomach as I feel him boldly caress me. Under di erent circumstances, I would be considered the luckiest girl in the kingdom.

He is provoking me.

His mouth on my neck almost makes me groan. I feel his ngers dip below my lace corset to cup my breast fully, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I nd my senses. I whip around to slap him. He barely inches as he catches my wrist midair. Our gazes clash like the mighty Titians. His dark gaze is hard, and his jaw is exed, he looks slightly manic. Unstable. Unpredictable. He is breathing hard, and I can tell the beast inside him has awoken. Apollo moves so fast the only thing I could do is yelp as he holds me forcefully to him.

I prayed no one is witnessing this.

His mouth hisses into my ear, "I will give you a ve-minute head start."

I jerk my head up to his. "For what? Until you force yourself on me?" I spit back, feeling almost dizzy from my adrenaline.

He throws o his mask, and the look he gives me makes my knees buckle. He is still breathing hard as his gaze drifts over my yellow glory, and he licks his lips. I shiver, seeing the desire air to life in his eyes. "Unfortunately, not Angel. I will give you ve minutes before I call the royal guard for your arrest."

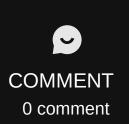
I gasp. "They w-will kill me."

He tilts his head and holds up his ve ngers and whispers. "Five." His eyes seem too dark, and the grin that spreads over his lips makes me want to scream.

This side of Apollo I have never seen before.

Abort mission!

I back up and turn to run!





SEND GIFT