



AN ACADEMIC ROMANCE

# NIGHT SHADE

SORROWSONG UNIVERSITY BOOK ONE

AUTUMN WOODS



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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for picking up Nightshade.

You should be aware that this book forms the first half of a duet, and that Ophelia and Alex's story will be completed in a second book. I wouldn't recommend you read it if you do not enjoy an incomplete/cliffhanger ending.

This book is intended for an audience aged 18+, and contains themes of murder, depression, bereavement, drowning, suicidal thoughts, declining health of a parent, violence, as well as sexual content.

*Do you ever feel like you're being watched?*

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*“Anything in excess is a poison.”*

*—Theodore Levitt*



# PROLOGUE

ANONYMOUS

**A**nnalise was mine. My sweet solace. My English rose. I loved her with a fire all-consuming, a burning from within.

She was mine, and always should've been mine.

My love for her was a disease, and disease knows no boundaries. It knows no laws and no repentance. It doesn't care who belongs to who; it'll sever branches from a family tree without thought.

And this disease, it crawled its way into my soul and sat there, rotting and festering in the cage that *he* built for it. That was, until it ate its way out through the bars and into every vein, muscle, and bone in my body. Until all that was left was the monster he always told her I'd turn out to be.

It was supposed to be me and Annalise until the end of time. She'd leave it all behind and hold my bleeding heart in her hand until the cracks started to fuse.

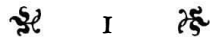
But she chose *him*. Annalise and the girl, they both chose him.

Annalise was my treasure. The prize I never deserved. And even with my fingertips outstretched, she was always just out of reach. And do you know what our ancestors did with treasures they couldn't make use of?

They buried them.

So I did.

And Annalise remains as she should have always been—forever mine.



# OPHELIA

The week my father was killed, I promised him I'd never set foot at Sorrowsong University.

I made him a lot of promises, from the boring and ordinary, to the abstract and emotional. That I wouldn't leave my bedroom light on, that I'd follow all my dreams. That I wouldn't shower for too long, that I'd always love myself.

Standing here represents the final domino falling in a long streak of letting him down.

The gates of the university stare back at me, the wrought iron twisting into a snarl, daring me to take one more step. The gulls above my head take their mournful cries with them, wise enough to fly away from the castle built into the valley before me.

A shudder wracks my spine as a thick fog rolls in over the tarn to my left, the sun struggling to rise behind an overcast sky. Despite the weather, I can still make out the script beneath the university's crest.

*Scientia potentia est.* Knowledge is power.

My snort comes out as a white smudge in the bitter air. It's not a surprising motto for a university. Sorrowsong just doesn't mean it like the other universities do. They're not referring to cures for cancer or faster ways

to get to the moon; they're talking about blackmail. Manila folders exchanged in shadowy alleys, and business deals conducted underground.

Sorrowsong is where the wealthiest of the world's men and women are sculpted into little clones of their corrupt parents, and the air around me reeks of wasted potential.

The duffel bag containing my worldly possessions huffs an anxious sigh when I drop it at my feet to rub the sore indents it has left on my shoulders. Through the howl of the wind and the oddly comforting patter of rain against leaves, I can hear the distant buzz of other new students making their way across the drawbridge and into the facade of the castle. I'm already running late, but as the gates creak open via some invisible control, I can't quite will myself to walk through them.

A depressing truth gnaws at the back of my mind. I don't even want to be here.

But I have no choice.

I've not been blessed with forks in the road; I've not stood in the center of a crossroads and carefully selected my path. Life has funneled me to these ornate black gates. Now it's up to me to walk through them.

There are two girls living inside me: the one clinging onto her final shred of hope, and the one that wants to burn the world down. One tugs me backward, the other forward.

My feet don't move.

A loud car horn shocks me out of my internal debate, my shadow appearing over the roughened terrain before me. I whirl around to face two bright lights in the driving rain, drawing closer by the second. Frozen in place by panic, I shut my eyes, bracing for the impact.

But it never comes, just the squeak of brakes and the gentle kiss of cool metal against my thighs. I pop an eyelid, my gaze connecting with an...angel? A woman cloaked in silver, bending down before me.

*The Spirit of Ecstasy.*

The figurine is delicate, almost apologetic, unlike the rest of the classic Rolls-Royce Phantom, which is about an inch from crushing me into the



muddy trail beneath my feet. The haze of the rain in the headlights leaves the driver anonymous, but the deep, angry voice that wafts from the window raises the hairs on the back of my neck.

“What in the ever-loving fuck do you think you’re doing? Are you *trying* to get killed?”

*Am I?* Maybe I am. I can’t deny that my efforts to cross train lines and get crumpets out of toasters have been increasingly sloppy lately.

“What am *I* doing? What do you think *you’re* doing barreling down a narrow lane in fog like this?” I shout back, hauling my sodden body and bags out of the road with an unceremonious squelch.

The black Phantom creeps forward a little, so the wing mirrors fall in line with my shivering form. I stoop to see the driver, one trembling hand keeping the rain out of my eyes.

My stomach flips at the sight of him, a warning sign flashing somewhere in the distance.

The man behind the wheel does nothing to slow my thundering heartbeat. On the one hand, he looks like he could’ve been plucked from a boardroom on Wall Street earlier this morning. With a shirt as crisp as the air around me and a jawline just as sharp, he taps out a text on his phone as if nearly killing me was just another inconvenience in his day.

But as I study him closer, there are faults in the investment banker image I’d invented for him. Black ink spills from beneath his rolled-up shirt sleeves. Vines, flowers, and ravens waltz along the defined muscles of two powerful forearms, another bird’s wing peeks through the opening at the top of his shirt. His dark hair is disheveled, cutting across his forehead in tousled waves. He looks a little older than me.

Unease prickles the back of my neck, and I’m paralyzed momentarily by a pair of intense green eyes that morph from irritated to curious as he finishes whatever it is he’s doing, chucks the phone in the center console, and turns his attention to my bedraggled appearance.

Silence unravels between us, his head dipping a fraction to see even more of me. Under the somber lighting of the storm, he looks ethereal.

Something deep in my chest screams at me to *run*.

His eyes shift from me to the gloomy pathway ahead, before turning to regard me again. The curiosity in his eyes has been masked with an emotion that makes me take an involuntary step back.

“Rather die than go in?” he asks, an easy grin spreading across his face. The smooth baritone of his voice unsettles me; it doesn’t match his aura or the wicked look in his eye. I can’t quite place his accent.

I pull a lock of hair from where it has plastered itself to my lips, eyeing him warily. “Something like that.”

With two fingers, he shifts the car into reverse. “I’ll back up. I can make it look like an accident. You’d be the third one I have done today.”

I’d smile if my face wasn’t frozen in place by the biting wind. “Marvelous. If you could just throw me off the drawbridge when you’re done.”

“I heard the fish needed feeding.” His immaculate shirt strains over his broad chest as he leans away from me to unlock the passenger door, but I don’t miss the Patek Philippe hugging his wrist as he lazily drapes it over the driver-side window. “Hop in.”

Amid the scent of marshlands and a forest swathed in rain, a wave of leather and smoke engulfs me. Every inch of this man screams *old money*, the very type that my mother and father made me swear I’d avoid. Grief rears its ugly head at the back of my mind, and the slap of my bag against my back as I swing it over my shoulder knocks enough sense into me to walk away.

But a green gaze and an arrogant smile soon catch up with me, impatient fingers drumming on the door of the car. “What’s wrong, fish food? Scared of my driving?”

My boots skid to a halt in the mud as I swivel around to face him. “Is there a reason you’re desperate to get an innocent girl into your car in the middle of nowhere?”

“Innocent,” he repeats the word. Tests it. Lets it linger heavy between us, waiting for me to crumble under the weight of my small white lie. I breathe out a curse and wave my goodbye, but the engine purrs and the car jerks

forward, lurching to a halt across my path. With my exit route blocked, my eyes dart to the woods on either side of the rugged track.

*Bad things lurk in the Solemn Woods, Ophelia. Never go there.*

*Bad things lurk in luxury cars, too, Mama, but you're not here to help me now.*

Turning my back to the stranger, I trudge my way around the bonnet, scowling at every rock, puddle, and twig that I pass. The sound of a car door opening sends my stomach plummeting to my feet. I glance over my shoulder and panic. My new friend unfolds his giant form and slinks out of the car with the grace of a panther.

I should've chosen the forest.

Over six feet of well-honed muscle strides toward me, each movement fluid and calculated, and instinctively I reach for the penknife in my pocket. Two black boots halt, toe-to-toe with mine and I feel his hot breath tickle my ear.

"Just out of interest, where would you stab me?"

I keep my voice steady, but my heart flutters uncomfortably. I don't bother asking him how he knew. He looks like the sort of man that fate itself would bow to. "In the voice box, probably. Seems it'll be the only way to get you to shut up."

His laugh, as warm and thick as honey, dulls the sting of the cold on my skin. Before I can react, four fingers slide beneath the strap of my bag and swiftly toss it onto the backseat of the car. My fists clench in my jacket pockets.

"Give that back."

"Get in the car."

"I'll just walk."

He bites his lip to stifle a smile, and butterflies dance in my lower stomach. I swear, they don't make men who look like this where I grew up. "And what does that make me? A glorified luggage service?"

"It makes you a thief."

“I’d rather be a kidnapper,” he replies, gesturing to the passenger-side door.

I start to walk toward the castle, but something stops me. My phone is in that bag. Through the tinted window, my glare lands on the lucky keyring from my dad swinging from the handle, and I know the battle is lost. I’d rather lose my pride than that little piece of him.

I let out an insult just loud enough for him to hear and slip into the front seat, letting my wet hair soak the cream leather. I grimace at the state of my boots, stomping the mud off on the tan carpet at my feet.

A dark eyebrow arches in my direction as he slips into the seat beside me. “What’s next? Spit in the glove box?”

I drag my gaze to his. “No, shit on the dashboard.”

Another laugh, louder this time and lethally attractive. He flicks a few buttons and the leather beneath my thighs begins to warm, quiet piano filtering out of the speakers. It’s comfortable, but I don’t let myself relax. Something about him seems like an elastic band just waiting to snap.

“I just feel like there has to be a middle step there, fish food. Shit on the dashboard is extreme, you could at least...”

“Pee in the cup holder?” He hasn’t driven yet. This was a mistake. This won’t look good for me in the newspapers. *Girl dies in remote Scottish valley after blindly climbing into a complete stranger’s car.*

He throws up a hand while the other one shifts the gear stick into first. “Exactly. Everyone is so terribly quick to jump to the extremes these days.” The car still stationary, he glances back over at me, running his eyes over my disheveled outfit and tattered bag. “Are you cosplaying Oliver Twist?”

“Fuck off.” I scan his ridiculously overdressed attire. All he’s missing is a top hat and a cane. “Would that make you the Artful Dodger?”

I catch his sly grin in the corner of my eye. “Clever and charming?”

“No, just irritating.” I reach for the door handle to leave, but he holds up two hands in surrender and slowly peels the car forward. His demeanor may be easy, but something about him feels off. Something hides in those green



eyes that is neither humor nor annoyance. Something deeper. Something darker, *hungrier*.

A sketchbook peeks out of the passenger door pocket. My fingers itch to touch it, to get a glimpse inside a mind that is not my own.

“Don’t.”

“I’m not gonna judge your Mickey Mouse fanart.”

He snorts, eyes fixed on the road as he veers us round a fallen log. “More of a Minnie man myself.”

“What is in there?”

The sparkle in his eye is frightening. “Drawings of all my previous victims.”

*Welp*. I guess it’s my fault for getting in the car. “Divorced, beheaded, died?”

He flashes me a wolfish smile, neither warm nor comforting. “Then divorced, then beheaded again. With any luck, you just might survive.”

Terrific.

The car glides effortlessly over the bumpy pathway up to the campus. It’s my first real chance to take it all in. Gargoyles weep tears of rain as we pass them, each one more anguished than the last. A spiked iron fence borders the Solemn Woods, but it wouldn’t stop you going in if you wanted to.

I don’t want to.

A shudder rolls down my spine, and for the first time since the seven-hour train journey and three-hour coach ride, it hits me how isolated it is up here.

Looming above us is Sorrowsong Castle, a centuries-old fortress embedded into the mountainside. Thick stone walls rise into turrets, proudly holding the tiled roof aloft against a charcoal sky. The landscape has been battered and broken by the elements, but the castle stands tall and intact above the river, tarn, and thick forest at its feet. Gray rain pelts gray stone and gray tree trunks. It’s like whoever made the world ran out of paint by the time they got here. Even the grass is a muted shade of green.

A sinking feeling churns my stomach and I pull my phone from the puddle at the bottom of my bag. *No service*. It's not like I have any contacts, anyway, but it still worsens the nausea in my gut.

Three years. I just have to survive three years, and then I'll never set foot in this place again.

One large hand lazily hangs over the steering wheel, the other tapping on his thigh as he breaks the uncomfortable silence. "You haven't told me your name, fish food."

"And you haven't told me yours."

He veers off the uneven track so suddenly that I slap a clammy palm against the cold glass of the window. The car swings into one of two spaces decorated with gold plaques that very clearly say *Chancellor* and my new friend—who I sincerely doubt is the chancellor—kills the engine. "Alex. My name is Alex."

*Alex*. Something about him seems familiar. A warning light flashes somewhere in my mind, but it's too blurry for me to read the caption. There's a reason my hand hasn't left the knife in my pocket; I just need to work out what it is.

The groan of the engine and the crunch of twigs beneath tires are quiet now, only the soft patter of rain on the windshield keeping us company. His eyes lazily take me in properly for the first time, lingering on the slither of wet shirt beneath my jacket for a beat. They coast back up to mine, a seductive smile tipping the corner of his mouth up as he pulls a cigarette from a metal box in the dashboard. He tucks it between his lips and the flame of his lighter makes the mischief in his eyes burn brighter. "Maybe *Oliver Twist* was a *little* harsh."

I tug the hem of my skirt down slightly and gather my duffel and tote bag, my breaths constrained by the thick tension in the car. With a mumbled goodbye and eyes looking anywhere but at him, I leave Alex and break into a jog toward the castle gates. I feel his stare burning the back of my head, but I don't entertain it.

I am not here to fool around with criminally attractive men. I am here for two reasons and two reasons alone: to graduate from the only university on this planet that had a place for me, and to find out why my parents died a mile away from where we are parked.

# OPHELIA

The planks of the drawbridge sound unnervingly hollow as I hurry across them, like something is rotting beneath their smooth facade, eager to drag me under. No time to dwell; I haul my aching limbs and over-filled bag into the impressive Grand Hall.

It's odd to think I've never set foot inside, given I lived nearby for most of my childhood. My parents never crawled their way out of our council estate, but despite a decade of working here and an offer of a staff cottage on the grounds, they never took me here. My father went to great lengths to make sure that not one single day of my childhood was spent between these walls, even if it meant nights apart and long commutes.

I never understood why. There's drama here, but mostly between the children of rival families. They'd leave an outsider alone. Or maybe that's wishful thinking.

The hall is empty, but there's a diminishing buzz in the air like it was full of life just moments before. Overhead, a chandelier sways slightly, the polished crystals tinkling quietly as the wind slips through gaps between roof tiles. The mosaic under my feet depicts the school's crest in subdued shades of white and brown, but my focus is snatched by the centerpiece of the room.