





Feiwel and Friends  ${\bf New\ York}$ 

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### For Rachel and Holly, Thank you for making my dreams come true.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A BAD IDEA, JUST POORLY EXECUTED AWESOME ONES.

—Damon Salvatore, *The Vampire Diaries*, Season 2, Episode 15

### CHAPTER 1

My husband is taking too long to die.

I sit at his bedside, ever the dutiful wife, watching his breath squeeze out of his chest, praying that each one will be his last.

For gods' sake, the man is pushing sixty-four years of age. He's plagued with all manner of diseases from a life of debauchery and indulgence and devils know what else. Yet Hadrian Demos, the Duke of Pholios, clings to life as though there's still something it has to offer him—a bedridden, lecherous old man with nothing going for him except for the sight of my face day after day.

Pholios shifts, as if my thoughts have roused him, and I check over my shoulder, ensuring that Kyros is still stationed in the room, before scooting my chair back an inch. I cast my gaze down to the ground and wait.

"Chrysantha," the old man groans.

"I'm here, husband." I reach out and take one of his spotted, hairy hands, wrapping it in both of mine.

"You look beautiful today," he says.

"Thank you."

I manage not to roll my eyes, for it's how he greets me every morning, as though paying me compliments will get him what he really wants from me, his nineteen-year-old wife.

Pholios smacks his lips together. "Water."

I turn to the pitcher on the bedside table, only to discover it has nothing left.

"You must have been quite thirsty in the night, Your Grace," I say. "I'll refill your cup."

"Kyros can do it."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and I force my face to remain a mask of indifference. Living with the duke often feels like I've got an iron band around my lungs. It tightens the moment I realize I'm about to be alone with him.

Kyros, the handsome young footman, locks eyes with me. Sympathy and regret radiate from him, but I subtly nod my encouragement. The last thing I want is my friend getting fired for disobeying orders.

"At once, Your Grace," he says. "I will return shortly." The last bit is meant for me.

The moment he leaves the opulent master suite of the Pholios Manor, my husband jerks free of my hold and reaches for my breasts.

Long used to the duke's antics, I stand and turn to make my escape, but not quickly enough. He manages to swat my rump before I'm out of arm's reach. I keep my gaze on the ground.

It's the best tactic for hiding my true thoughts.

"Shall I read to you today?" I ask.

Pholios grunts. "No. No more books. Come back over here."

"More books, you said? Let me go select one." I glide to the opposite side of the room, where a line of shelves decorates the wall.

"Damnable nitwit," Pholios says. "I paid your father seven thousand necos for you. Such a waste."

"I'm sorry, husband." The band squeezes tighter.

"I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to hike up those skirts and climb onto this bed to do your wifely duty."

A so-called duty that he has been unable to force me to perform thanks to his illness.

"What duty could be more important than caring for my husband?" I ask.

He doesn't think me cheeky. No one does. I've worked long and hard to secure the reputation of a simpleton. It's saved me more times than I can count. It's how I manipulated my father into marrying me to a dying wealthy duke. If only I'd known then what I'd signed up for. Pholios didn't reveal his true nature to me until after we were married. I thought he merely wanted a bedside companion until he joined the devils in one of their hells.

"Your nightly duty," the duke clarifies.

"It's daytime, husband."

"I know that!" His coughs fill the room, and I ignore them while I take my time staring at the rows of books. I already know which one I will select, but I'm in no hurry to step within reaching distance once again. Not until Kyros is back in the room.

Pholios may be a foul creature, but he likes to keep up appearances in front of his staff. Either he knows what he's doing is wrong and wants to maintain some sort of reputation or he thinks matters of the bedroom should be kept private. Either way, when others are around, he keeps his hands to himself, though Kyros has walked in on plenty of untoward occurrences. I've been grabbed, pinched, slapped, and pawed at more times than I can count in the last two months of my life, which also happens to be the length of my marriage.

But it will all be worth it as soon as Pholios is dead. The duke has no children of his own, no relatives to inherit his title, which means that upon his death, all of this will be mine. The manor, the dukedom, the servants, the *money*. All mine to do with as I please, and no man will ever be able to decide my fate again. I will be a dowager duchess forevermore.

Forever free.

That future is so close I can taste it. Just a few more weeks. A month at most. Pholios can't have much longer left.

And then I won't have to hide who I really am anymore.

When I hear the soft steps of Kyros returning, I select the book of poetry from the shelf. The footman looks relieved to find me on the other side of the room. His sympathy is unnecessary—I can handle the old man—but it is

kind, nonetheless. I return to my chair as Kyros finishes assisting the duke in taking a drink. Pholios nearly chokes when he reads the title on the tome I hold.

"No," he says. "I hate poetry."

Which is precisely why I chose it. "It will clear your head, Your Grace. Poetry livens the soul."

He grumbles some more but quiets as I start reading. I think he likes the sound of my voice, though he mostly stares at my chest while I read, so I raise the book a little higher. After about ten minutes of this, Pholios's snores fill the room once more.

"Are you all right, Your Grace?" Kyros asks me, his tone a gentle murmur so as not to wake the duke.

"Well enough, Kyros, and you?" I close the book and turn in my chair to properly observe the man. Even in his livery, he is quite handsome. He wears the traditional white shirt and stockings with gloves and boots. He's always clean and pristine, with the best posture. His strong chin bears the most adorable dimple in the center, and his green eyes always seem bright. Combed-back, sun-kissed hair hangs past his ears, and his strong form puts many footmen to shame.

Day after day, it's just me and Kyros stuck in this suite, seeing to the duke and his every need. On occasion, Kyros's young son makes an appearance, desperate to show us frogs he's caught in the property's pond or the rocks he's found in the woods. The boy knows to be quiet in case the duke is sleeping, careful to catch our attention and drag us from the room for brief moments to see his prizes.

I always relish the opportunity.

"Very well, Your Grace." Kyros politely does not speak of my marriage with the duke and what I'm subjected to. He has the common sense to know that I have no wish to talk of such humiliation. "Nico learned a new word this morning," he says instead, to bring the conversation to brighter topics.

I smile at that. "And what is the word?"

"Indignant."

"Such a big word for a four-year-old."

"Don't let him hear you say that. He's four and a half, and not a day less."

In the time we've spent together in this room, I've learned quite a bit about Kyros and his past. He had a son at seventeen. He and the child's mother weren't married, and when she became pregnant, she made it very clear that she had no interest in raising a child. Though the law makes no such demands of single men, Kyros took up the role of father alone.

"Where is Nico now?" I ask.

"In the kitchens, helping Cook. You know how he has a sweet tooth."

"I shall have to track him down later. I look forward to hearing him try to work *indignant* into a sentence."

Doran, another footman, enters the room, brandishing a salver with a single letter upon it.

"A letter for you, Duchess," he says in a loud voice, waking Pholios once more. I wish to chide the man, but I keep a wan smile in place.

"Thank you, Doran," I say as I stand and retrieve the folded parchment.

"I'll have breakfast now, Kyros. Go fetch it," the duke says, alert once more.

Though I'm sure both servants leave the room, I don't notice. I'm too busy staring at the handwriting on the letter.

It's my sister's.

Alessandra never writes me. I barely write her—only when I wish to amuse myself by chastising her. She thinks me a puffed-up imbecile, which I find all the more entertaining. Alessandra has always been too obvious about what she wants and how she'll go about getting it. Right now, she's attempting to woo the Shadow King.

I chuckle quietly to myself. If he didn't want me, then he's certainly not going to want her. It's not a matter of vanity. I may have gotten Mother's looks, but that's no matter. A pretty face will only get you so far. What's most important is that I'm the better actress. I can pretend to be what men want. And what men want most, I've discovered, is someone they think they can control. So I pretend to be docile. I pretend to be obedient. When men think

they can control you, they don't watch you as closely. When they think you're stupid, they're not so careful about the things they'll say in front of you.

But Alessandra? I could always tell what she was thinking. Although, I will admit that I hadn't thought her capable of murder. When the truth about what happened to her first lover came out, I was caught by surprise. And even more shocking was the king's immediate pardoning of her.

It's my fault the two of us aren't close. We've always been in competition for our father's attention. His whole world was Mother, but when she died when I was twelve and Alessandra eleven, I knew his love would either transfer to Alessandra or to me. He only ever had enough room in his heart for one woman at a time, so I snatched it up before Alessandra even knew what was happening. She would have done the same if she could.

We live in a world where men decide everything. Where we live. When we receive money. Who we will marry. I knew my best chance of achieving happiness was to wrap my father around my finger. It was her or me.

I chose me.

I feel a little guilty at times, but that won't matter when I finally have what I want. When I'm rich and beholden to no man, I can do whatever I wish, including cultivating a relationship with my sister if I choose.

I unfold the letter and read its contents:

#### Dear Chrysantha,

I wanted to extend a personal invitation to my wedding. Kallias and I are marrying in six months' time. My coronation is to be held the same day, right after the marriage ceremony.

You will attend, yes? Or are you too busy playing nursemaid to your wrinkled husband? Surely you can spare some time for the biggest day in your only sister's life?

# Send your reply along speedily, and I shall save you a front-row seat to this trollop's wedding to the Shadow King.

#### All my best, Alessandra

There's a thundering in my ears, and I don't notice until it's too late that I've crushed the letter within my grasp.

The king.

My little sister is wedding the damned king.

He didn't want me, but he wants her. Her! The murderess.

All this time I've spent plotting, planning, trying to achieve something for myself. I've been molested, degraded, verbally assaulted day after day, and for what? Thus far, I have nothing to show for it.

Meanwhile, Alessandra has slept with so many men that I've lost count. I've called her much worse than a trollop in the past. It was my way of telling her to be cautious. She had to be careful with her reputation if she was to secure a good future for herself. And it made me feel better, when the jealousy over her finding companionship while I was fighting for survival on my own would nearly overcome me. Because I thought carrying on as she did would prevent me from marrying into wealth.

But somehow she won a *king*. She will become an actual *queen*. She'll have untold resources and money and *everything*. No one will ever touch her, not when she's wedded to the most powerful man in the world.

My temperature spikes, and red tinges the world.

She won.

How could she have won? She didn't do anything! She didn't earn it. She didn't even know we were playing the same game and how, how, how, damn it?

During my frantic musings, I hadn't realized I'd drawn closer to the bed. Pholios strikes like a snake, gripping my hip through my dress, and trying to pull me closer.

In my fury, I smack his hand away without thinking.

The duke and I both freeze.

"Did you just strike me?" he asks.

"I had an itch, Your Grace."

He grunts and has the audacity to look offended, but I can tell a foul thought has taken root in his mind when he suddenly smiles.

"Come closer, wife, and I shall forgive it."

"Closer?" I ask.

"Yes, lean over the bed. My comforter has come untucked on the other side. You must fix it."

My face is a mask of emptiness, and my soul burns. I've been trapped in this house too long, stuck in this room with the duke staring at me while he licks his lips and tries to coax me closer. Meanwhile, my sister is living a life of luxury and perfection and freedom. On the damned Shadow King's arm. I had failed to woo him during my stay at the palace, so I thought I'd settled for the next best thing.

I will settle no longer.

The iron band around my lungs snaps. My brain detaches from the rest of my body, and my limbs move without my consciously saying so.

I do as the duke bid earlier. I hike up my skirts and sit astride him. His eyes bulge from their sockets before he has the good sense to reach out with both hands, wrapping them around my waist. He tries to force me into just the position he wants; then he makes his best attempts at thrusting his hips up into me, layers and layers of clothing and bedding thankfully still separating us.

But my focus is on the extra pillow beside his head. I lean down for it, and Pholios's fingers go to cup my breasts. The pressure is bruising, but I don't sit up until I've got the pillow. Even then, it's only to adjust my position.

I smother him with the down-filled cushion.

That which had started to go hard beneath me suddenly goes limp. Pholios's cries of distress are eaten by the pillow, and his feeble body barely moves beneath mine. His hands finally leave my chest to reach for my arms, trying to force them away from himself.

I don't let up the pressure.

"Isn't this what you wanted, husband? Am I finally good for something now?"

If Alessandra can get everything she wants despite murdering a man, then why can't I? Her face rises in my vision, and I close my eyes against it, against every foul thing this man has ever done to me.

Never again.

Even when his pathetic resistance ceases, I don't get up right away. I sit there atop my dead husband, lost in some kind of dark limbo between before and after.

Before, I wasn't a violent person. Before, I'd been patience personified.

Now, I'm free. Now, I can be whatever I want.

Starting with a murderess, just like my sister. I have stooped to her level. The thought finally drives me to action. I right myself, place the pillow back in its position, and smooth out the duke's hair. He looks so peaceful in death.

I hope he finds no peace wherever I've just sent him.

As I return to my chair, I notice a figure in the doorway. Kyros's son, Nico, stands there, crumbs on his chin.

He looks between me and the duke.

I catch my breath.

## CHAPTER 2

Nico puts his finger to his lips, the signal I usually give him when the duke is sleeping. I relax instantly. Of course he doesn't think anything different.

He whispers, "Catch me if you can, Duchess." Then he bolts back out the doorway.

I give chase.

"Did you really just come find me with crumbs on your chin and no sweets to share?" I call after him.

Nico shrieks with laughter. He is surprisingly fast for being so little. He slides down the banister at the stairs, while I have to take them slowly because of the heaviness of my skirts. When I hit the ground, I take off at a run once more, finally gaining on the boy. He pumps his little arms, and just before I'm upon him, Kyros rounds the corner with the duke's breakfast tray.

I scoop Nico up into my arms and twirl him in the air. His giggles lighten my heart, and I reach down with one arm to tickle his tummy before setting him back on the floor. His laughter feels so right in this large manor. It is finally a place where we can all be happy. The duke is dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

I don't think there's a sweeter word.

"What are you two up to?" Kyros asks.

"Father, the duchess was indignant that I didn't bring sweet rolls to share with her."

"I would have tickled you, too, for such an oversight," Kyros says.

"I'll get more for us all!" Nico darts for the kitchens.

Kyros has nothing but love in his eyes as he watches the child run away. "We best return quickly, before the duke grows incensed, Your Grace."

I say, "He fell back asleep, so I thought to escape for a moment."

Kyros nods in understanding, and together, we return to the master suite.

It is hours before anyone realizes the duke isn't breathing.

\* \* \*

In the days that follow, nothing bad happens. No one suspects a thing. The man was dying anyway. Why should foul play be involved? Besides, everyone thinks me too stupid to even conceive of murder. I've made sure of that.

I wear black to the funeral, manage fake tears on Pholios's behalf, keep my face buried in a silk handkerchief gifted to me by the dead man himself with our initials embroidered on it. Father comforts me and brings me flowers; he even asks if there's anything he can do to help manage the estate. He's quite pleased with me, since my brideprice saved him from ruination. Father may be an earl, but his estate was bankrupt. *I* was bankrupt until I married Pholios.

Now his fortune is mine to do with as I choose. No man can tell me how to spend it. Not even my own father.

I've done it.

I've attained what so few women have managed.

True freedom.

The first thing I decide to do with that freedom is explore the estate and get to know my staff. Pholios never let me venture far from him. I was to take all my meals at his bedside. I was to be there when he woke up and long after

he fell asleep. The duke mentioned many times that he was going to get his money's worth out of me. I was his property, he said.

In the end, I think he realized he was sorely mistaken about who had control over whom.

"Your Grace, it is so good to see you again," Mrs. Lagos, the housekeeper, says when she meets with me in the parlor.

I have seen her only a few times since I first set foot inside this dreary manor, when all the staff greeted me in the entryway as their new lady.

Mrs. Lagos looks about as formidable as a kitten, at four feet, eleven inches tall, but gods help anyone who tries to defy her claim that she's an even five (I overheard a particularly nasty conversation to that effect). Her hair is black as night, and her skin is white as ivory. With oval eyes and not a wrinkle in sight, it's impossible to guess her age, and I dare not ask her.

"You as well, Mrs. Lagos. Thank you for meeting with me."

"Of course. How can I be of service?"

"I would like to make some changes to the estate. I hoped you might be up for helping me."

"Certainly. What changes?"

I want my staff to adore me. I want them to *want* me to be their mistress. It's the best way to ensure a seamless transition, and I don't want anyone to question the control I now have. There is a very simple means to achieve that from the start.

"I'd like to raise the wages of the staff by twenty percent."

Mrs. Lagos blinks slowly, as though she didn't quite hear me. Then she grins. "You and I are going to get on well, Your Grace."

"Excellent, because I have plans for lots of redecorating..."

First things first, the master suite. I order it gutted. Every single item is moved to storage, from the bed to the draperies to the carpet. I refurbish the entire room so it looks like Pholios never once stepped foot in it. I want it free of anything that could possibly remind me of him.

I've always been fond of pink, and I find a delightful bedspread in a dusty rose that immediately draws my attention at Matilda's Shop. I decorate the whole room to match. White wallpaper with sporadic chrysanthemums, after my namesake. A white oak four-poster bed with mesh hangings. Gold filigreed armchairs with plump white cushions. An elaborate vanity, painted ivory with more gold knobs. I have the ceiling painted with the colors of the daytime sky with rosy-cheeked cherubs darting through the clouds.

While that's being done, Mrs. Lagos prepares the rest of the manor for renovation. I don't want any reminders of the horrible man who once darkened this home, so she sees to it that all the old paintings and vases and any other heirlooms of the Pholios family are removed to the attic, until they can be sold. Until my yearlong mourning period deemed mandatory by society is up, I'm not permitted to attend events or take social calls.

And yet, not even a week goes by before the letters start pouring in. I glance over mere snippets before tossing them all in a pile near the fireplace.

I was saddened to hear of your husband's death, Your Grace. Should you need any comforting, I hope you will call on me.

This from the Earl of Barlas.

Do not dwell on sadness, Your Grace. It is best to look on the future with hope. Might I call on you soon?

From the Earl of Varela.

I have admired you from afar for so long. Now that you are free to choose your own path, might I throw my hat in the running?

From the Duke of Simos.

And then one terribly embarrassing bit that makes my cheeks blush.

# A woman in your position deserves all the pleasures life has to offer. Be my mistress, Duchess Pholios, and I will keep you satisfied.

From the Baron of Moros, who is already married.

I'll not be anyone's mistress. I'm done with men telling me what to do, whether it's in the bedroom or not. The correspondences remain thoroughly ignored, though I do read them from time to time when I feel in need of revitalizing. It is a boost to one's self esteem, even if such attentions are unwanted.

At least from powerful men.

For years I've dreamed of the day when I will be the one with the power, free to seek out relationships of my own choosing. I have been alone all my life, denied the simple pleasures of romantic companionship as a highborn lady. The second my mourning period is over, I have every intention of putting an end to that loneliness.

I will take a lover.

A handsome, poor—yet skilled—lover who will dote on me and love me and want nothing from me except for the earthly comforts I can give him.

Men take mistresses all the time, and as a dowager duchess, I may do the same. It is unconventional but not unheard of. I will have the power and standing to withstand any scrutiny I receive as a result. And besides, I'll obviously find someone who can manage to be discreet.

But that's not an option for another eleven months and two weeks. In the meantime, I focus on making new friends around the manor or supervising the improvements to the estate. Handymen can be heard hammering and sawing at all hours during the day. Painters and carpenters and mason workers come and go under the watchful eye of Mrs. Lagos and my staff. It'll take months, or even years, before the entire place is refurbished, but that's