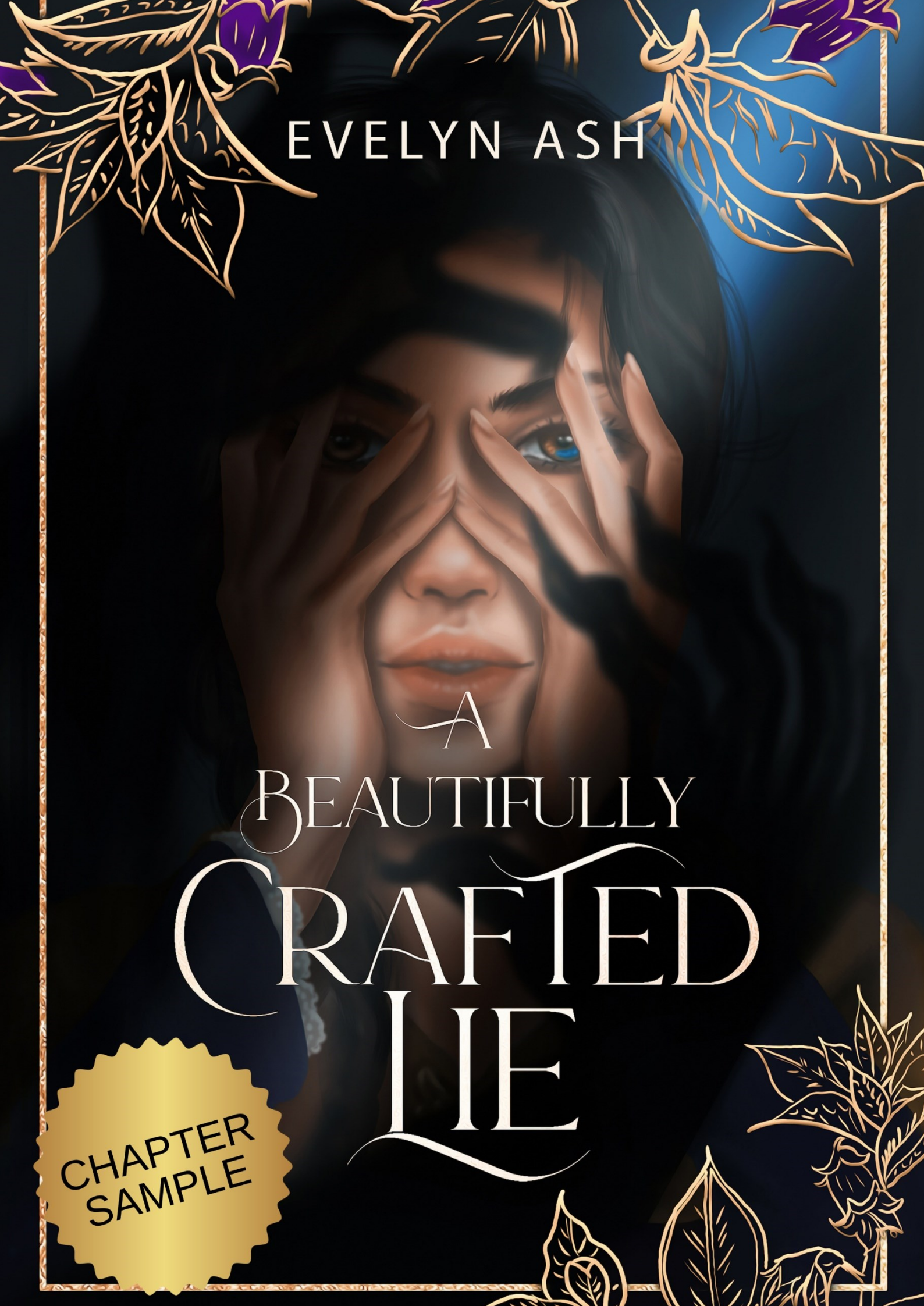




EVELYN ASH

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BEAUTIFULLY
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LIE

CHAPTER
SAMPLE

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EVELYN ASH

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This book contains scenes that might be difficult for some readers, this includes physical and emotional abuse, violence, flashback of attempted rape, thoughts of self harm, slavery, substance abuse and depression representation.

Some information in this book is based on fact, the rest not. I will leave it to your discretion.

For those who saw the claws and reached anyway.

PART ONE

*There once was a girl with eyes full of stars.
She dreamt of far planets, Venus and Mars.
There once was a girl with a heart pure and warm.
She gave it to one, who then turned it to scorn.
-The Diary of Glynis Ashglo*

ONE

BRYNDIS ASHGLO

Never step inside a mushroom circle, and if you do, be sure not to break it. It is where magic is strongest. Where one of The Others have died. They are sacred and are forever connected to those who remain living.

The Legends of The Forgotten, by Tibor Harper

“I wonder if the boy will still want you if he knows what you are hiding...” a voice purrs from the depths of my mind, purposefully digging sharp claws into my subconscious as it uncoils from its sleep. I know that voice. It’s the reason I risk escaping the confines of our town for our weekly soirees. It’s the voice I aim to silence. The one I *need* to silence, lest I suffer the same fate as my mother.

“Bryn?” Declan’s voice softens as he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “What’s the matter?” I look down at my feet to see mushrooms circling me. “Careful!” he barks as I decide to step back, but I trample the edge, breaking its perfect sphere. The air buzzes with the sound of a thousand bees, but none are visible. Bouldermore isn’t an average town. Our threats are more than mere superstition. These woods are off limits for good reason, being plagued by monsters preying on innocent flesh.

“Shit.” The single word escapes through my gritted teeth as a gust of wind sweeps across my skin. Shadows darker than midnight dance between the trees, leaping from one stump to the next.

“We should go,” he whispers, looking over his shoulder. His chin brushes against the cluster of rowan berries stitched to the collar of his jacket. The sound of beating wings sends a tingle up my spine, making my heart race. My limbs go weak. It’s said that The Others, monsters too cunning to be spoken of aloud, hunt these woods. By breaking one of their sacred circles, I’ve told them where to find us.

“He will despise me because of you,” I answer the creature in my mind, and its cruel laugh adds to the chill in my veins.

“Bryn? What’s wrong? What are you looking at?” Declan’s panic seeps into his voice, flaring up once more. But he doesn’t look anywhere but at me, doesn’t see what I see, hear what I hear. The sound of the creature’s echoing laughter drowns out his words, as deafening as wind blowing in my ears.

“Don’t you see, young one? No one can hear me but you. I’m as much a part of you as the skin covering your flesh.” Its laughter is vicious. Harsh. It’s the sound that steals me from restful sleep, the voice narrating the dreams that wake me in the depths of the night, drenched in sweat. I need to find nightshade. It’s the only thing that will keep it at bay. *“One of these days, you will stop running.”*

I squeeze my eyes shut. “We need to hurry.”

Declan searches the trees, looking for something, someone, but I know he won't find anything there. Whatever it is, it only wants me. Its voice lives *inside* me, clawing for a way out.

"What is it, Bryn?"

"Nothing!" I lie. The truth is that the creature is right. I don't know what Declan will do if I tell him my secret, and I need him too much to find out. My lungs burn, and my legs tremble by the time we reach the top of the long hill where I'll find what I need.

I'd give him a reassuring smile if my heart wasn't threatening to stop beating. There, where the massive patch of nightshade stood only a week ago, is now nothing but a pile of wet dirt, wiped clean of everything that keeps the minuscule shards of hope alive within me.

TWO

BRYNDIS ASHGLO

Deadly nightshade, also known as Belladonna, should be handled with utmost care as it is one of the deadliest plants in existence. It is associated with the word “silence” since it is believed that the gods themselves created this plant to silence their enemies for all eternity.

The Herbal Healer’s handbook, by Agnes O’Connel

“Gods! What happened here?” Declan gasps over my shoulder. “What a shame. I know how much you liked those flowers.” His hands rest on the sides of my shoulders but fail to give me strength. The creature’s laughter echoes in my mind, reverberating down to my bones. “I saw a patch of yellow ones not too far from here.” He tries to comfort me, flexing his fingers against my skin. To him, I’m a foolish girl in need of her favourite flowers to decorate her bedroom. He’d never been inside my room, so he wouldn’t know that these flowers have never been on display. He doesn’t know what they’re called, nor does he know that possessing them would single me out as a threat, a witch. If only he knew those flowers are the only things able to silence the *thing* crawling beneath my skin. Declan would probably condemn me along with everyone else if he knew. I wouldn’t blame him; he’s too straight-cut, too honest and good. Declan is too brilliant to be burdened by my secrets, and I fear I’ve already tainted him enough.

It’s not the howling wind blowing through the trees that raises the hair on my arms. Nor is it my waterlogged boots. Dread has dug its talons into me. With my secret patch of nightshade gone, I’ll undoubtedly lose my mind the way my mother did, driven mad by magic, same as all the witches in our family. Nightshade is as lethal as it is beautiful. Ten drops of it brewed as tea will draw an adult man into an endless sleep. In lower dosages, it numbs enough to ward off restlessness, a lingering pain, or even a witch’s madness setting in. In essence, it’s an escape from this life and its afflictions. It had helped to extend my mother’s time with me, for which, I’ll always be grateful. Nightshade is my only hope, but now all hope is gone.

“You’re right. The yellow ones will look just as nice.” I force a smile as nausea creeps up my throat. I hate yellow. I hate that it’s our family’s signet colour. I hate that it’s cheerful and happy. And I hate the fact that I can’t like those flowers for his sake.

“Come,” he whispers, returning my smile and taking my hand in his. Pressing my cheek to his shoulder, I inhale his scent. Pine needles, sandlewood, and a tinge of sweat. Moments ago, he told me he was leaving Bouldermoore to become Prince Eamon’s valet, a position his father had pleaded for on Declan’s behalf. I can still see the smear of mud splattered across Declan’s face, the evidence of my fury after he delivered the news and walked away. I swallow my amusement as I recall the flare of his nostrils when he turned to face me, mud clumped against the back of his head. I’ll miss him fiercely. It’s unfortunate that his family despises people like me about as much as they do a contagious disease, as if the creature inside me can attach itself to them. As if it is my choice to be the way I am. A witch. The label feels surreal still, even though I’ve silently worn it for most of my life.

I stare up at him in envy of his carefree grin. “I...”

A deep and heavy gong echoes through the woods. The watcher's bell. Birds fly from the trees, scattering aimlessly into the night. In all twenty-five years of my life, I've only ever heard tales of it being rung. The last time was the day of the great massacre, long before I was born.

I look toward our home and the slippery path that led us here, then back to Declan, my heart racing.

Gong, gong.

Declan's face pales.

Gong, gong.

I run before I think things through. Before I devise a plan of any sort. My legs are numb and unsteady, like they belong to someone else entirely. Declan is right behind me. The rustling of leaves makes it clear. His presence fuels the scraps of courage I cling to... To run faster... To breathe more deeply... To face whatever awaits us.

My foot slips, and I fall. My breath leaves me with an ungraceful grunt as my fingers splay beneath me, digging into the wet dirt. Unable to find purchase, I slide down the muddy slope a few feet before Declan's fingers wrap around my arm, tugging me back onto my feet. My palm burns as a fresh cut blooms, and my wrist aches from the impact, but there is no time to stop for assessment, not of my injuries, nor the situation. Declan may be our finest soldier's only son, and a capable soldier in his own right, but he hasn't seen battle. He doesn't know bloodshed, but neither do I. Training in the courtyard, patrols, and second-hand knowledge isn't enough.

Images of flames and tortured screams flood my mind, ingrained in me through my mother's tales of the massacre. Most children are told whimsical tales at bedtime, but I received versions that were morbid and grim. "*Truth is dreadful,*" my mother would say, "*best not be surprised by it.*" My chest tightens with panic. Is that what we'll find? Is that what's waiting for us in our town? My lungs burn, but I refuse to give in to the pain, even as white-hot tears streak my cheeks. Cold, exertion, and dust have been my three triggers for as long as I can remember, the chains that tighten around my chest, the bramble shoved down my throat. I push on, keeping up with Declan but urging my legs to carry me faster. *I will not be afraid.*

We reach the edge of the woods in record time, and I can barely breathe. "Wait!" Declan commands in a tone that freezes my boots to the cold, wet ground. "Never charge blindly. One more step and we are out in the open."

He's right. Of course, he's right. I nod, trying to control the rise and fall of my chest and the wild pounding of my heart. *Stand up straight. Shoulders back. Deep breaths.* Reaching into my satchel for the glass cylinder holding my medicine, I find it missing. It had contained my brew of honey, nettle, ginger, and poppy, my remedy to ease the pain of my shortcomings, but it must have fallen out. *Dammit!* I take in the meadow stretching out before us. Tall grass sways in the wind, silver in the moonlight. Past the meadow, the tall and thick wall awaits us. It was constructed to keep us safe, to keep us in and *The Others* out. Yet I feel I may suffocate within its confines.

Commanding voices fill the night. Even though I can't make out the words, I can visualise the chaos waiting on the other side, and I swallow my building anxiety. The creature's sharp-toothed smile broadens as my throat goes dry.

Waiting for Declan to confirm whether it's safe to cross the meadow is pure torture. We need to keep going. His family is on the other side, possibly needing his help. My family... Laoise...

"*Walls can't keep out what's already inside,*" the creature mocks. I squeeze my eyes shut. Unlike before, a golden glow of light now looms over the manor. Every lantern and torch possible is alight in the courtyard. Every candle and oil-dipped wick within the manor and every home are burning brightly. There's no way we can enter without being seen. Not now. Not when every man within those walls is on high alert.

"Let's go." Declan nods toward the furrow and the wrought iron grid that runs across it.

"Whatever happens," I whisper, not needing to face him to confirm that he hears me. His posture tenses immediately, shifting the energy between us.

"I knew this was a bloody bad idea. We should've never come." His tone is clipped, but I know him well enough to understand that he's only trying to hide what he fears deep down. "The coast is clear. Run!" He shoves me forward, but my feet stay rooted to the spot.

"What about you?" My eyes widen as I look back at him and the red rowan berries stitched to the collar of his jacket, but he doesn't look at me. The artistic son of a soldier now resembles a warrior himself, his shoulders drawn back and his jaw set with self-control.

His palm flattens against the small of my back, lingering long enough to send heat racing across my skin. "Right behind you, now go!" His fingers curl against the soft cotton fabric of my dress, echoing the words he spoke in the forest: "*I need to go so that I can come back a made man and ask for your hand.*" Without further warning, he urges me forward, and I run.

My feet slip on the grass as my dress drags and twists above my ankles, catching on the shrubs and slowing me down. Mud and water have soaked through my cloak, adding extra weight. I'm too slow, much slower than I would have been if I had better footing; much slower than I would have been if I was allowed to wear trousers, like him.

I'm out of breath when I reach the wall, crashing into the cold, wet stone with my palms shielding me from injury. Declan has me by my elbow before I register that he's next to me, my crimson handprints painting my father's great wall. Declan's grip is tight, and I know it'll leave marks on my skin, but it doesn't bother me; it's the least of my worries. The town is in danger. The nightshade is gone. Declan is leaving... What is the harm of a few bruises in comparison.

Dropping to his haunches, he begins to work on the bolts fastening the heavy grid of woven wrought iron to the thick stone slabs of the outer wall. "Dammit!" he curses under his breath, dropping the first bolt. It falls into the freshwater furrow, the color of poorly brewed coffee. He fumbles with the next, his nervousness apparent in his lack of coordination. Two more to go. Declan doesn't move with his usual grace or efficiency as he tries to clear our path of the only thing locking us out of the manor's grounds and our town on the other side. My skin prickles with the sensation of being watched.

"*You're on the wrong side of the wall.*"

I stiffen, looking back over my shoulder toward the woods, so dark it's almost black. Mist settles like a white blanket over the trees, leaving only their peaks exposed to prevent suffocation.

The thundering of hooves grows louder, followed by the grating of the horses' iron shoes over the gravel in the courtyard. "Don't let them through the gates without identification and

just cause!” Goosebumps rush down my arms and neck. People rarely travel at night; they wait until sunrise, until it’s safe to do so. Until The Others are sleeping.

I need to get back to my room before someone notices I’m not there—if it’s not too late already. Getting caught isn’t an option. Declan removes the last bolt and urges me to go first. A decent flogging and lengthy confinement. That’s what I’ll get... what we’ll get. We’ve always known the risks, but never have we been this close to discovery. I hold my breath, then duck under the low stone arch and balance on the narrow ledge that separates me from staying dry or taking an unwanted—and unexplainable—swim. My steps, even though they are few, echo off the double layered stone walls, making my heart race.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I step out from under the arch and into the stable yard’s square. Gravel crunches under the smooth, hard sole of my boot. Every muscle in my body turns rigid as I sense someone watching me, waiting for my acknowledgement before unleashing their fury. Cringing, I reluctantly open my eyes one at a time, straighten my spine, and search the doorways, arches, and corners in front of me, then frown in disbelief. There isn’t a single person in the stable yard, nothing but a lone raven perched atop the stable’s roof. Fresh hoof tracks surround me, smoothed by a strong gust of wind that twists my skirts around my ankles, evidence of horses galloping from the stable yard moments ago.

Declan crouches under the arch, balancing on the same narrow ledge I’d crossed. He’s closing the iron grid behind us, fastening each bolt except for one, which is now at the bottom of the stream.

A loud bang sounds from my right, and my heart lunges into a painful sprint. I almost scream, feeling as if someone has thrown me a hundred feet into the air just to see me fall. My eyes catch on the front door of Declan’s small home as it swings open with a deafening creak. I freeze. My muscles lock into place. Everything in me halts. My lungs, the beating in my ears, the blood in my veins... even the small trace of warmth in my cheeks cools instantly as I wait for someone to exit, for someone to find me standing in the middle of fucking nowhere, covered in mud, alongside Declan, my handsome male companion. *A harlot, that’s what they’ll brand me as. A harlot and the man who ruined the governor’s eldest daughter.*

The door slams shut, but I remain frozen for a long second, horror confining me. Nothing. No one exits. My muscles relax a fraction. *Only the wind*, I reassure myself.

“Hurry up!” I look back at Declan who is seemingly oblivious to my near heart attack. If not for the sloshing in my boots, I’d be pacing. I can’t stand still, can’t wait idly until we’re discovered. *Hurry the fuck up, Duskrun!*

“Just a second.” He has his arm almost shoulder-deep in the icy water, his jacket thrown over his back.

“There’s no time to look for it now!” He always has to cross his T’s and dot his I’s. The son of a soldier. A perfectionist.

“They’ll see it’s missing when they do their rounds in the morning. I have to!” he hisses through clenched teeth.

“Not. Now.”

“*What are you afraid of, young one? Getting caught or not being able to silence me for much longer?*” The creature’s voice drips with malice, and I swear something sharp drags up my spine, raising goosebumps in its wake.

"I still have another vial left," I tell it, boldness setting in and taking over. When backed into a corner, what other choice is there but to fight?

"By the gods, Declan, we *need* to get inside *before* they come back from wherever they went. We don't have time!" Not when everyone is awake and not when the path is clear enough to make our way back to our rooms in secret.

"Fine," he seethes, shaking the water from his arm while his shirt remains plastered to his skin. He's next to me a heartbeat later, dragging me across the square, even though I'm perfectly capable of walking by myself. Shrugging free from his grip, I ignore the wave of annoyance radiating off him. He isn't the only one burning with irritation.

We dart across the open square, pressing our backs to the wall on the other side. The drumming in my ears is deafening. I don't bother to leap over the puddles the way I did earlier tonight and march straight through them. Declan ushers me past the empty stables and around the corner. There it is, the door I used on my way out and my only way back in. His hand falls to the small of my back as he flexes his fingers against my dress beneath my cloak, his breath pluming white on a deep exhale, as though he has something he needs to say. Our earlier conversation refreshes itself in my memory. *So I can legitimately claim you.*

"Wait," he whispers, fisting my dress in his palm. I look up at him, and my stomach flutters. In his eyes is a question he dares not voice. A question I dare not answer. Is that even something I want? A romantic relationship with Declan? To be his *wife*?

I hesitate, my heart beating wildly in my chest. Our eyes meet, but I look away. Perhaps it's nerves. Perhaps...

He clears his throat. "We need to get our stories straight. In case anyone asks." The fluttering in my stomach vanishes as quickly as it came.

"I never saw you. Tonight never happened." My gaze falls to his muddy boots. Pressing my lips together, I take a step toward the door and away from him.

"I never saw you." His throat bobs, and he releases my dress. "And neither of us ventured outside these walls." His voice grates against his throat.

I nod and walk away as heaviness settles in my chest, the sound of retreating footsteps holding me captive.

As I reach the door, I'm not surprised to find it ajar. The blue sandbag wedged between the door and its frame is still there to keep me from being locked out. The last thing I need is to be stranded outside with no way to get in. How would I explain that?

Pushing the bag against the wall with my foot, I turn to close the door behind me. *Do I want Declan to ask for my hand?* He has been my friend for as long as I can remember, the only one to not judge me by my stepmother's false accounts. Unclasping my cloak, I hang it on the brass hook by the door before unlacing and stepping out of my boots. Even in the dark, I know where to find it. I cough into the crook of my arm; afraid someone may hear me.

"You know you can do so much better than the stable boy," a sweet voice says from my left. Laoise steps out of the shadows and into the spear of moonlight streaming through the glass pane above the door, her arms folded neatly across her chest.

"What are you doing out of bed this late?" I try to act calm. It's been a wild night, rendering me a nervous wreck. Smiling at her, I hope she doesn't recognise my lack of sincerity, or worse, my attempt to hide what I've been up to.

“He is *the help*, Bryn. Ashglo’s do not frolic with the *help*.” I roll my eyes at her comment. At sixteen years old, she already sounds like my stepmother. Her eyes widen, but I wrap my arm around her shoulders. She’s shorter than I am and feels fragile in my arms. Despite my father’s tall and strong stature, he’s sired three daughters, all slight and finely built, the youngest, a mere four years old and prone to illness. Perhaps it’s a mercy that he never sired a son. Girls get away with being *delicate*. They don’t grant boys the same leniency. Social acceptances are rarely fair and without cruelty. Why can’t a strong woman lead? Why is a sickly boy easily discarded? And why can’t women wear pants?! Women aren’t only meant for breeding alone; we can do so much more. *Should* do so much more.

“He’s my *friend*,” I answer, unsure of my words as I speak them. We’ve never labelled what we are to each other.

“One that spends midnight hours with his arm around your waist? I saw the way he looks at you.” She gives me a sideways glance.

“I promise you; we are only friends.” The truth is that I’m not sure *what* we are.

“Good!” She smiles, seemingly satisfied with my answer.

Lanterns glow from the end of the passage, lighting our way as we continue toward the stairs and ultimately our rooms. I stay behind her, hiding the waterlogged hem of my navy-blue dress. The material is cold against my legs as I walk, a stark reminder of where I’ve been. The shuffling of our slippers echoes through the barren space. Laoise takes her lantern from the small round table at the end of the passage and immediately halts, studying me. Her jaw drops as her eyes roam down my body. I shift my weight from one foot to the other, aware of the mud on my skirt. Aware of the way it may look and the conversation we just finished. Aware that the mud stretches well beyond the hem, as if I had lain flat on the ground.

“Bryn...” My name on her lips comes as a gasp.

“What?” I frown. “I fell.” It sounds unbelievable even to me.

“It looks like you...” She gasps again. “Father is going to... We need to get you to your room.” She grabs my hand, and a smile tugs at my lips. Laoise may be my half-sister, but at this moment, I love her with my whole heart.

A mumbling of voices sound from the hall ahead. I squeeze Laoise’s hand, telling her to wait. I can’t make out the sources, but I hear enough to know they belong to two men. The deep, rumbling baritone of one alludes as much, and the low response of the second confirms it as my curiosity gets the better of me.

Laoise ignores my plea and frees her lace-cuffed hand from mine, tilting back the glass cover of her lantern to blow out its flame. Her smile spreads as the light dims—such a fearless little thing. But then again, she’s never been at the receiving end of my stepmother’s wrath. Not the way I have.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. She rounds the corner, and I follow, ignoring the hesitation in my steps. I watch the delicate lace hem of her white night robe sweep over the floor like a gentle breeze. Her steps are soft, barely a whisper. The voices ahead grow louder, belonging to my father and someone I don’t recognise. I frown, concentrating on their conversation, but their exact words are lost in the distance between us.

We make our way to the stairs, keeping to the wall. Another few feet and we’ll be safe from being seen. The light from the crystal chandelier at the far end of the foyer doesn’t stretch all the way to our wall, so we are still hidden in the shadows, even though they aren’t.

Next to my father stands an exceptionally tall man. He must be six foot six at least, with broad, muscular shoulders beneath an expertly-tailored black coat. Even from here, it's impossible to miss the scowl shaping his brows, promising nothing but danger. His hair is pulled back and tied at the nape of his neck, leaving dampened strands to fall over his face. Towering over my father, he looks strong enough to snap a fully grown man's neck in two. With his bare hands. While reading a book.

My hand touches the carved mahogany balustrade, as smooth as glass beneath my palm, and I pause. Laoise continues up the stairs while my eyes linger on the stranger as I slowly ascend. He turns, snapping his gaze to mine. My heart stops dead in its tracks as he narrows his eyes at me, as if he knew I was here all along. The scowl on his face tells me two things: My presence annoys him, and I will pay for my intrusion.