Elizabeth Drake

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Elizabeth Drake

Chapter one

"Elizabeth!" He called, running into the house. "Elizabeth hurry, there is no time."

"What is it?" She asked as she came out of the parlor.

The look of terror on his face was enough to make the young woman drop her tedious mending. Daniel Drake was normally a laid back, easy going type of man, but his wide eyes and rapid breathing was completely out of character. Daniel wiped the sweat off of his brow as he reached for his daughter.

"Come with me." Taking her hand, Daniel led her to his study.

Elizabeth followed quickly as he pulled her into the small room and closed the door behind him. The study, decorated in a deep green color, had been a room that she had always left to her father. Elizabeth could feel the fear building inside of her. However, she had no idea why. The expression in his eyes and the hurried way that he moved began to bother her.

"What is happening? Are you alright?" Elizabeth asked. It was not even noon, yet he had left his office. Shaking his head, Daniel turned to face her.

"I can't explain right now. Just listen to me." The fear in his eyes caused her to remain silent. "You have to go away."

"Go away?" She asked. The idea seemed ludicrous. "What are you talking about?"

"You have to go, now!" Daniel walked over to his desk and pulled a key out of the top drawer. "Do you remember me telling you about a man named Oswald Roshire?"

As he tried to talk quickly without scaring her, Daniel walked to the wall beside his desk. Elizabeth watched as he pulled the portrait of her grandfather away from the wall. To her surprise a small metal safe was hidden behind it.

"Father, you are frightening me."

"None of that now," Daniel began. "I need you to do exactly as I say." Elizabeth's big blue eyes stared back at him.

"Yes, but what is going on?"

A whirl of confusion swept around her as she tried to imagine what was happening. Daniel was a strong man. He had always seemed

young for his years and maintained a carefree lifestyle. It was not in his nature to act irrationally, yet it was happening.

There was no difference between that day and any other. He seemed fine when he left for his office that morning. However, as he frantically pulled her to his attention, Elizabeth knew that something was very wrong.

"Elizabeth, do you remember Oswald Roshire?" He asked again as she desperately searched for a memory. "Answer me! Do you know Oswald Roshire?" He shook her hands firmly.

"He is the man that you bought this house from." She watched carefully as he used the key to open the safe.

"Yes, and he is a very good man, a fair man." Reaching into the safe, Daniel pulled out a rather large stack of money and a folded envelope.

"Where did that come from?" Elizabeth had never seen so many bank notes before and was becoming more afraid. Dropping his head as he closed the safe, Daniel tried to find a way to explain.

"I have always done right by you," he whispered. "But this is not one of those times."

"Father…" She stopped as he raised his hand.

"I don't have time for this! Listen to me." The sudden raise in his voice made the young woman jump.

He seemed to have aged quite a lot that day. His light hair that had been decorated with a few silver hairs seemed to have almost entirely grayed.

"Take this letter to Oswald Roshire. It is imperative that only he handles it," Daniel instructed. Taking the envelope, Elizabeth began to wonder how much trouble her father was in. "The money is yours." She did not hold out her hand to him. So, Daniel reached for her arm and placed the stack of money in her palm. "Promise me that you will go to your brother's house in Burdery." Waiting for her to nod, Daniel squeezed both of her hands in his. "He will take you to Oswald, but do not tell him why!" Looking at her deep blue eyes, Daniel pulled her close to him. "The less you know the safer you both will be. Let Oswald handle the details. You are to stay with your brother, until I send for you." Elizabeth had not seen her brother in years, and the thought of locating Vincentmade her more than nervous.

"Where are you going?" Elizabeth looked into his gray eyes. Daniel ran his hand over her long golden hair before placing his hands on her shoulders. Then, he gently eased her away from him.

“I love you. Do you know that?” He took a second look at the only woman that had ever held his heart for more than a few months.

“You have to tell me something.” Elizabeth noticed the strange appearance of his eyes. Daniel began to pull her toward the hallway.

“Giles will take you to Burdery.” Entering the hallway, he looked out the window to the man that sat in the driver seat of the carriage. “He knows nothing, and do not trust him!”

“What am I not supposed to trust him with?” Elizabeth asked.

Even though he did not know how to answer her, Daniel opened his mouth to say something when he noticed three men coming toward the house on horseback. Pulling Elizabeth with him, he made his way through the house.

“Stay down!”

As soon as the order was given, Elizabeth looked up to the front window. Giles was raising his head to speak to the approaching riders, but he never got the chance. All three riders were wearing long coats. She could not see their faces, but she was certain that they were the cause of her father’s distress.

The rider on the far left removed a pistol from his side. Gunfire sounded around the small house. Daniel pulled Elizabeth low and swore beneath his breath. She did not see if Giles had been shot. The sound made her cower near the floor as she placed her hands over her ears.

“Damn,” Daniel looked around the small house as he searched for the best way out. “When I tell you to, run out the back door, but stay off the road!” Looking through the hall of the small country house, Elizabeth tried to gather courage from the terrifying moment. Another gunshot rang through the air causing Elizabeth to try to scream. Daniel acted quickly and covered her mouth before any sound escaped.

“What is going on?” She cried softly as he pulled her along the floor to the front door. Raising his hand Daniel cut her off.

“Get into the woods. From there you can make it to the Sanderson house.” He watched the back door as he heard one of the riders call out from the front of the house.

“This is not one of your wiser moves, Drake!” The man yelled. “You should have reasoned with me when you had the chance!”

Looking over at his daughter, Daniel began to sweat heavier as Elizabeth cowered in confusion and fear. “Once you get to the

Sanderson house you should be alright, but do not trust anyone with that letter," he whispered. Elizabeth took her father's hand.

"Will you meet me there?" Seeing the fear in her eyes Daniel decided that it was best not to lie.

"I will see you when I can, but you have to promise not to wait for me." He squeezed her hand gently as he looked toward the gun cabinet in the den. Another shot rang out around them and Elizabeth realized the full extent of their danger.

"What do they want?" She asked. Her father breathed fast and heavy.

Daniel made his way over to the gun cabinet on his knees and grabbed the rifle. The shaking of his hands made it nearly impossible to load the gun, but he somehow managed.

"It is going to be alright. Do as I say. Get to your brother," Daniel instructed again.

"Drake, can you hear me?" The man outside called again. "I can always just come in!" The two other men could be heard laughing, but Elizabeth had no idea who they were.

"Go Elizabeth!" Daniel ordered in a hushed voice as he nodded toward the back door.

"No!" She shook her head. The situation instantaneously became too much for her. "I am not going without you!"

"Go now!" Daniel let go of her hand and pushed her towards the door. Elizabeth took one last look at her Father and shook her head. "Damn it woman, do as I say!"

Staying low to the floor, Elizabeth turned and made her way to the back door. She looked out the window before touching the door to be sure that no-one was there.

"Gatler, I thought you were still in France." Daniel waited for a response as Elizabeth reached for the doorknob. Her father had taken a step out of the house.

She could not see him from where she was. A few more shouts and orders were yelled out by one of the men, but Elizabeth could not hear the details. However, when she finally opened the door, she heard the sound of the rifle, followed by two pistol shots.

Elizabeth threw herself out of the house and ran for the woods as fast as she could. The sound of the gunfire terrified her as it continued to echo around her. With a quick turn, she almost called for her father, but the sound of unfamiliar laughter led her to run forward into the trees.

“Father,” she whispered.

Shock and confusion kept her from crying. Elizabeth did not understand what was happening well enough to become emotional. As she ran further into the forest, there was no way for her to know what happened to Daniel.

Clutching tightly to the envelope and the money, she continued on. The woods seemed deep as she made her way down the slope to the farmhouse that was a mile down the road. The air was thick with fog and the mist clung to her gown.

The Sanderson’s were a kind and young couple that had taken over the farm when old Sam Sanderson died the year before. Elizabeth had gone to the market a few times with Fanny Sanderson, and Jarred Sanderson had helped Daniel fix the leak in the roof that summer.

Once the house came into view, Elizabeth stopped. Lifting some material of her dress she hid the envelope and the money in the waist of her petticoat. She could see Fanny walking toward the house from the barn, but before she stepped out of the trees, a rider approached from the road.

Keeping herself behind a tree, she watched as one of the men with the long dark coat approached Fanny. The woman was not afraid of him. She walked toward him with her arms full of firewood.

“Good afternoon, Sir,” Fanny adjusted the wood in her grasp as the rider came to a stop before her.

“I seem to be a little lost Ma’am. Could you tell me where I could find Daniel Drake’s place?” Elizabeth stepped back behind the tree and hid her face as she listened to the man’s voice.

“What is your name, stranger?” she asked unkindly.

“Layton.”

“Well Mr. Layton, what do you want with Daniel Drake?” Fanny asked. There was a moment of silence as Elizabeth prayed that she would be quiet.

“I used to work with him in Welton. I was hoping to see how he and his boy were doing.” The man spoke. Fanny was unfortunately quick to be helpful.

“Of course,” she offered. “You are only a mile off. Take this road back up that hill a mile and he is at the top.”

“Are you sure? I was just up there and there was no answer.”

“He is probably at his office,” Fanny added.

“What about the family? Is his son still living with him?” Thoughts of her brother invaded her mind as Elizabeth tried to remember the last time she saw Vincent.

There was a hint of uncertainty in Fanny’s voice as she answered, “No, no son has never lived there.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” The man sounded discouraged, and Elizabeth peered slowly around the tree at him.

The man that rode the chestnut mare was even larger than she had first thought. She could not see his face in detail. However, she could easily see the longer brown hair that hung past his ears and trailed down, just past his shoulders. The brim of the black riding hat was pulled low on his forehead, hiding his eyes from her view.

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief as the rider began to turn his horse around. Hiding behind the tree once more, Elizabeth waited for him to leave.

“Excuse me, Sir.” Fanny began again to Elizabeth’s surprise. “I don’t know when Mr. Drake will be back, but his daughter should be there.” Stiffening her back and holding her breath, Elizabeth closed her eyes.

“His daughter?” His voice held a deep curiosity.

“Elizabeth.” The woman volunteered. “She might be out in the barn.” The man held a blank expression. He looked back the way he came and paused for a moment before returning his stare to Fanny. “She may even be on the road.” The simple woman added matter-of-factly. “If you see her, tell her that I have that honey she asked for.”

“Hya!” The man called out quickly just before his horse sped back down the road. The quick turn shocked Fanny, but only for a moment.

Elizabeth moved slightly around the tree to keep herself out of sight. Fear rose within her as she realized that she had been safe up until then. However, Fanny’s kind nature had placed her in the same danger that Daniel was in. Elizabeth did not want to pull the Sanderson’s into her predicament by following her Father’s directions, so she kept to the woods and tried to weigh her options.

Vincent lived in Burdery. The town was about thirty miles from where she was. Placing her hand against the waist of her gown Elizabeth felt the money and the envelope she concealed. The only other people she knew were the townsfolk that ran the market and the men that worked with her father in the glass factory.

She needed to think of where to go. She was not about to bring trouble to her friends. As a mental list of the people in the town began to form, she could not come up with one person that she could turn to.

Her father had a friend that had come to the house a few times. The man owned the pub in town. Elizabeth knew him well enough, and she was running out of options.

The walk was made in haste, but it was not fast enough to keep her mind numb. Tears started to fall as she thought of her father's face. She had no idea if he was dead or alive. However, it was unlikely that he avoided the three men.

Daniel was either dead or wounded. The realization was too much for Elizabeth as she leaned against a tree. The dark brown dress began to weigh on her heavily as the mist turned into rain. She was becoming aware of how her life had altered in a matter of just minutes. She could not survive without her father. Tears started to fall heavily as she held herself against the tree. Praying that Daniel had somehow managed to avoid the shots that rang out, she pressed on toward the town.

The rider would be trying to find her. Once Fanny had said Elizabeth's name, he was in too much of a hurry to return to the house on the hill. He sounded as if he would look for Vincent as well. Elizabeth had to get to Burdery before the man with the long hair and long dark coat.

Mud clung to her boots as she continued on. The two miles to the town seemed more like ten as the rain pelted her relentlessly. Every step was taken with caution as she looked over her shoulder for the men on horseback.

A plan began to form as Elizabeth stepped under the branch and continued down the muddy slope. She would be safe in the town, and her father had at least one good friend there. She could easily find Mr. Lara at the pub and ask him to check on her father, while she took a coach to Burdery.

A rock beneath her boot gave way under her weight and the mud. Elizabeth called out as she reached for a branch, but was unable to keep her balance. Twisting her ankle on the rock, she fell hard to the leaves and twigs that covered the ground. The pain in her ankle surged through her as she sat on the ground and held tight to her boot. She held her eyes closed once the pain began to subside, but when she tried to stand the real agony set in. Easing herself back to the ground Elizabeth held her boot tight once more. Without giving in to the tears

that threatened to fall, she held her composure. Just a foot away was a long branch. Grabbing the wood, she pulled herself up and supported her weight on the make-shift crutch.

Elizabeth wiped her hair away from her face and stood. Fighting the pain, she continued on, putting very little weight on her injured foot. However, the downhill journey was excruciating and seemed to take forever. Finally, at the bottom of the hillside, the Caterwood came into view.

"Lord Beth, what happened to you?" Mr. Lara asked as she entered the empty pub.

Using the stick to her full advantage, Elizabeth walked across the floor of the small establishment and towards him. The short round man stood behind the bar as the woman covered in mud leaned on the staff.

"I need your help." Before she got the words out of her mouth, Jacob Lara had come around the bar to her side. Placing his arm around her shoulders, he led her to a chair.

"Sit down here. I will go get your father."

"No," Elizabeth began, "You can't!" Jacob looked confused as he helped her into a chair.

"Why can't I?" Letting her head fall into her hands, Elizabeth began to cry again.

"My father came home early. Something has happened. I don't know what is going on, but some men came to the house looking for him. They had guns."

"Hold on, slow down there." Jacob pulled up a chair and sat down next to her. The woman was obviously distraught. "Who came to the house?" Shaking her head quickly she tried to explain.

"I don't know who they were, but they were looking for my father, and he made me leave. He said that I needed to get to my brother's house."

Jacob Lara had spent many drinking nights with Daniel. He was not as surprised as he should have been. Daniel had come into the pub a few weeks earlier, and set about to drink like there was no tomorrow. Even though he could easily hold down his share of alcohol responsibly, Daniel made no effort to try. Jacob had asked what the occasion was but Daniel had no intention of answering him. After that, Daniel came into the pub a few more times and drank with less passion. However, he had never been quite the same.

"I need you to see if he is alright." Elizabeth looked around the pub to be sure they were alone. "I don't know what happened to him. I am afraid that…" Placing a hand over her eyes and rubbing her forehead, she continued. "I don't know if they…"

"Alright," Jacob took her hand in his and tried to calm her wave of emotions. "I will go up to the house."

"Do you know what is going on?" She asked. Jacob sighed and shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, but he hasn't been himself lately." Keeping his face turned to the side like he always had, Jacob hid the worst of his scar from her view. "But he made me promise to take you to Vincent if you ever asked to go. So, I'm thinking that he knew something was coming. How long has it been since you left the house?"

"About an hour," she guessed. "I need to get to my brother." She sniffled and raised her eyes to his.

Jacob was a hardened man. His features would have frightened a finer woman, but Elizabeth knew him as a kind man with a good nature. The fact that he was missing an eye would have bothered most people, especially since he refused to wear an eye patch, but the burnt skin that covered the side of his face had never bothered Elizabeth. Daniel had warned her about his accident at the glass factory long before she met him.

"You stay there." He walked behind the pub and picked up his dagger and removed his pistol from a cabinet under the bar. Every few seconds, Jacob would glance at the young woman that sat in the chair. Her face was as muddy as her dress. She looked terrified as well as exhausted. "Did your father tell you anything? Did he say who the men were or what they wanted?"

"No," she shook her head. Elizabeth was not about to give out any more information than she needed to. "There was gunfire," she added. Jacob grabbed his coat and nearly bolted toward the door.

"Stay here! I am going to get Robbie. Then, I am going to head up to the house." Opening the door, Jacob waited for a coach to pass before he crossed the road to the glass factory.

There seemed to be something wrong with the clock on the wall. Even though the pendulum was swinging, it hardly seemed to move at all. Elizabeth tried not to think about her father, but she found herself limping across the room and staring out the window for Jacob to bring him back.

No matter how she tried to imagine the situation, there was no way for her father to survive. The pain in her foot drove her to retrieve her stick and lean heavily on the wood. Elizabeth remembered the layout of the small farmhouse and thought of a hundred different ways for Daniel to avoid the shots that were fired. Unfortunately, her heart felt heavy and she could not evade the probability that he was dead.

Daniel was the only parent she had ever known. He had worked at a manor just north of Burdery when she was born. The woman that lived there was a quiet gentlewoman. She kept mostly to herself while her husband was overseas with the military. The affair was short lived, but the child that was created would have been too much of a complication for the young married woman.

The pregnancy and Elizabeth's birth was concealed to almost everyone, except for the few people that worked at the manor. Most of them were removed from the house after she was born. Daniel left the manor with Elizabeth, and never returned.

Elizabeth was told stories of her mother's beauty and strength. Daniel swore to her daily, that her mother loved her as much as he did. That is why Elizabeth had to be sent away. The story had always seemed painfully romantic to Elizabeth. She remembered how Daniel's eyes would shine as he spoke about her mother. Then, the memory faded with another tear.

Looking at the clock once more, she wondered if the minute hand had ever moved at all. The town seemed practically empty as she stared out the small window. Smoke rolled out of the glass factory as it always had, but the roads seemed unnaturally empty.

The small town of Caterwood seemed to survive off of the small glass factory. In fact the factory, mill, market, and church were the only large buildings in the whole town. The pub and the post were situated on the same street as the others, along with a bank and a tiny Inn, but the town was the center of the farming community. Everyone in it seemed to be barely above poverty, with the exception of a few wealthy families. Even they wanted to escape the cumbersome way of life.

Elizabeth leaned against the bar while she tried to avoid staring at the clock. When the door to the pub finally opened, her heart sank to a low that she could not have imagined. Jacob and a young man walked through the door with horror showing in their expressions.

“We couldn’t find him,” Jacob whispered as Elizabeth leaned more on the bar. A whirl of emotions and ideas surrounded her as she tried to understand what he meant.

“What do you mean?” She asked in a whisper. “Can he still be alive?” The young man walked over to her with an expression she couldn’t ignore. Elizabeth began to sway.

“Hold on there, Miss.” Robbie reached for her arm. Jacob shook his head and looked to the floor. He did not know how to tell the girl what he had seen.

“We looked everywhere. The house is tore apart, but your father was nowhere to be found,” Jacob explained.

“Then he is alive!” Elizabeth stood straight up as she felt hope for the first time.

“Hold her up Robbie,” Jacob said as he took a step closer. His good eye seemed bloodshot, glassy, and bewildered. “There is too much blood, Beth.”

“What?” She did not realize that she had begun to lean on the man that held her arm.

“Damn Beth, I’m sorry.” Jacob did not want to tell her that there was a puddle of blood all over the front porch. He did not want to mention that it was smeared across the grass, the drive, and the road as if a body had been drug behind a horse. “He’s gone.”

Pushing away from the man that held her, Elizabeth started to walk toward the door. Her only thought was that they did not look hard enough. She could not believe that he was dead, even though her heart told her it was the truth.

There was no pain in her foot as she tried to reach the door. Her body still limped, but her mind did not recognize the physical pain. Jacob reached out to her and stopped her from walking out. When his arms encircled her, Elizabeth gave into the scream that overtook her.

Jacob held her tightly as he looked over at his son. Robbie had never seen a gruesome mess like he saw up at the old farmhouse. The blood spanned across the grass, but the tracks and the gore, led them most of the way down the opposite side of the hill. The blood all over the driver’s seat of the carriage proved that Giles had suffered as well, before he was dragged away. Robbie was not a boy nor did he have a weak stomach, but what he saw at the farmhouse caused him to vomit more than once.

“Beth, do you know who did this?” Jacob asked again. When she shook her head, he decided to continue. “Beth, you might not be safe here.” Raising her head, Elizabeth looked into the deeps set blue eye.

“I have to go to my brother,” she whispered.

Elizabeth could not handle the thought of her father being dead, or being away for more than a day. In her mind, she wanted to go home at that very moment. Pushing the thought aside, she wiped her tears as they fell uncontrollably.

The words were almost silent as she spoke, “I have to see Vincent.”

Vincent was twelve when Elizabeth had first met him. His mother had brought him to their house in the city and said that she could not take care of him anymore. Daniel did not even know that he had a son, but the similarities between them were uncanny.

The three of them lived together in the cheap side of the city, in a one-bedroom apartment. Vincent took care of Elizabeth, while Daniel worked at the mill and any other odd jobs he could find. The two children were very close for the years that Vincent lived with them. Then when the boy turned fourteen, he received a letter from his mother. She was dying of smallpox. After a long argument with Daniel, Vincent left and Elizabeth never saw him again.

“Are you sure?” Jacob asked.

“My brother was always kind to me.” Elizabeth held firm to her belief. “No matter what happened between him and my father, he would never turn me away.” Jacob looked over to Robbie as he ran his hand through his hair.

“Go get one of your mother’s dresses. Once she is changed, I am taking her to Burdery.” Elizabeth wiped her eyes before the tears overtook her once more. “As soon as we are gone, I want you to go to the authorities.” Robbie nodded his head in understanding. “Tell them what you know, but do not tell them where Beth is going. We have no idea who we are dealing with. The further away she is, the better it will be for her.”

Chapter two

"Here..." Ryan dropped a fistful of money onto the desk. The cuts on his knuckles proved that he had to work for the payment.

"Is that all of it?" Vincent asked as he sat forward in his chair and flipped through the money.

Running his hand along the back of his neck, Ryan answered, "I caught him hiding half of it. He gave some sob story about his daughter getting married." Vincent smiled and looked up.

"Then he should take out another loan." A devious smile inched across Ryan's face as he walked over to the window. Vincent picked up a large portion of the cash and handed it over. "I need you to see Abram Cunning. He has not made his payment yet, and I am getting impatient."

"That is strange. You are not the impatient kind." Ryan turned away from the window toward the main room of the bank. A short and horribly scarred man walked into the building and headed up to one of the clerks. Although his face took Ryan's attention for a second, he was quickly forgotten.

"Apparently, he was seen at the Brag table last night. If he has money to gamble with, he should have no problem making his payments." Vincent stood up and walked around the desk. The cherry wood of the office gave it a deep maroon hue. Even the floorboards seemed to have a dark red tint.

"Which one is Cunning?" Ryan asked.

"What is the matter, Hawke? Are there too many debts for you to remember?" Vincent lifted an eyebrow and smiled.

"Business has been picking up lately."

"He's the chimney sweep," Vincent answered.

"We leant money to a chimney sweep?" Ryan looked confused. Giving a slight smile, Vincent picked up his pen and shook the ink down to the tip.

"It was a risk. I had to distort the paper work a little." Lifting his hand and waving it toward the desk Vincent sounded professional. "He seems like an honest man to me. He was in desperate need of the funds." Writing an address on a piece of paper, he handed it to Ryan.

"You leant money to a gambling chimney sweep?" Ryan took the paper. An evil smirk came across his face once more. "That is what I like about you. You are never afraid to help the little people."

"And he will pay every red cent back."

When Ryan stood next to Vincent, it was obvious whom the brute force of the operation was. Vincent was a nearly a half-foot shorter, and although they had similar features with dark hair and dark eyes, Ryan was far more menacing.

All conversation ended as a familiar sound approached the office door. By jingling a set of keys in his pocket, the young clerk always seemed to foretell his arrival. The door opened after a soft tapping, and the young man entered. Vincent acknowledged him briefly, but Ryan paid him no mind at all.

"Mr. Drake there is someone that would like to see you," the young man announced. Less than eighteen years old, Mr. Thatcher was small in stature and frame. His hair was reddish brown in color with tight curls at the end.

"Have him make an appointment." Vincent used a stern tone. The young man seemed to be a little uneasy.

"I would, Sir," he began. "But she says that she is your sister and it is urgent that she sees you."

"You have a sister?" Ryan asked. Vincent walked near the door but stopped short.

"Beth is more like a sniveling little rat." He looked back to the young man that had entered his office. "Send her in, and stand by the front door. You can close it behind her when she leaves."

"Yes Sir." Mr. Thatcher was glad to be leaving the strangely tense office, but he did not know if he was actually supposed to follow Vincent's order or not.

Ryan stepped closer to the door to take a look at the woman next to the scarred man. She looked nothing like her brother. Though her height and figure were decent, the woman was obviously a wreck.

"Now that is just mean," Ryan stated in his thick voice. Vincent picked up the money off of his desk.

"If she were your sister, you would understand the pet name," he offered. "I have no use for her." Walking over to his bookshelf, he lifted a book and opened the cover. It had no pages. The book was simply a decorated box that he stashed a large amount of money in. "I am sure she is either here for money or her father is sick."

“I was not talking about that.” Ryan looked at the man next to her. “I was talking about her husband.” As he glanced at the older man with one eye, Ryan shook his head. “They are kind of an odd couple.” Elizabeth left Jacob’s side and walked with the young clerk toward Vincent’s office.

“He’s not her husband,” Vincent replied quickly. “At least I don’t think it is.”

Elizabeth was led into the room with the clerk closing the door as he left. She had tried to imagine that very moment all the way to Burdery. However, as she stood in the room, she had no idea what to say. Looking at the two men before her, Elizabeth was more than afraid. She had not seen Vincent in twelve years. Even with her perfect memory she was at a loss for words. Neither of the men looked like her brother. She waited quietly for one of them to speak. It was almost as if she would recognize him from the sound of his voice.

Her mind was fixed on her memory of Vincent. He had common brown hair with simple dark eyes. Both of the men in the room had those features. The moment became awkward for all of them, but Ryan was ready to take his leave. The woman looked more than distressed, and he had no desire to witness the family reunion.

“Beth,” Ryan stepped forward to shake her hand before he left. The instant he did and said her name, Elizabeth felt a wave of relief.

“Vincent.” She bowed her head briefly and stepped forward.

Ryan was not prepared for the embrace that she was quick to give. The woman held on to him as if he was her savior. With his hands out to the side, Ryan glared at Vincent. He was expecting his colleague to remove the clinging woman from his chest, but the bastard only smiled. Turning his palms upward, he waited for Vincent to say something. When Vincent silently mouthed the words ‘*get rid of her*’, Ryan placed his hands on the woman’s shoulders and eased her away from him. Not wanting to involve himself, he offered the introduction.

“Beth, this is…”

Taking full advantage of the moment, Vincent stepped forward and held out his hand. “My name is Ryan Hawke. It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Drake.” There was no expression on Ryan’s face as Elizabeth turned to face her lying brother.

“It is nice to meet you. I am sorry if I have interrupted anything,” Elizabeth offered politely.

It was astounding to Vincent that she could not tell the difference between them. However, he would not have recognized her either if she were not introduced.

"Oh, it's alright, I have to get some papers for Mr. Drake to sign," Vincent said as he patted Ryan on the back. The blank expression on Ryan's face was both comical and threatening. "Just remember, we need to get to that meeting." He reminded Ryan before he stepped out of the office and closed the door.

Thankfully that a beautiful woman that had entered the bank to distract Jacob, Vincent slipped into a back hallway. Elizabeth stepped back from Ryan and compared her memory to his features, admiring him from head to toe.

"Look at you. You have really done well for yourself." The awkward situation was the perfect excuse for Ryan to remain silent. "You have really grown handsome, haven't you? I don't remember you being so tall."

Ryan was hardly flattered by the compliment. The woman walked with a limp, wore a dress that was two sizes too big, and had traces of mud caked in her hair and clothes.

"You look…," he whispered as he swallowed hard. "Thank you." Elizabeth blushed and ran her hand along the bun in her hair. She knew that she looked horrible, but she tried not to dwell on it.

"I am sorry to just show up like this, but something terrible has happened."

The woman had no idea how right she was. He had appointments to keep and books to balance and he was stuck playing catch-up with a woman he had never met.

"Beth, I really don't…"

"Father has been murdered," she whispered.

Once the words were out of her mouth, Ryan sighed and looked toward the door. He doubted that the news would affect Vincent that much, but he had gotten stuck trying to console the sister.

"I'm sorry to hear that," he offered without emotion. The lack of concern in his eyes did not surprise Elizabeth, but she was still distraught by the news.

"He was murdered, Vincent. Some men came to the house with guns." She had begun to talk faster, trying to get all of the details out as quick as she could. "He gave me an envelope and some money and told me to find you. I heard shots fired before I ran out." Before she could explain further, Ryan held up his hand to stop her.

“Wait here.” He interrupted.

He was not about to listen to the dramatic details that her brother should be hearing but as he stepped out of the office in search of Vincent it was clear that he had disappeared. Ryan looked back at the woman before he closed the office door on her. Once she was secluded he walked to the back hall to find Vincent.

“Mr. Thatcher,” Ryan called to the teller with the jingling keys. “Where is Drake?”

The young man nodded his head eagerly, delighted to be of help. “He just left, Mr. Hawk. He asked for you to meet him at his residence at seven o’clock.”

“Wonderful,” Ryan said as he looked back to the small office with the woman inside.

“He also asked you to take care of this man here,” Mr. Thatcher stated as he motioned toward Jacob. Instantly after, he took his keys out of his pocket and began to toss them gently. The trait that had started out as a nervous habit had grown to annoy Ryan immensely.

“And you are?” Ryan asked the man with the wicked scar spanning the side of his face.

“Jacob Lara, Sir.” The man stepped forward. “I brought the young lady from Caterwood.” Nearly exploding with anger, Ryan thought of the mess that he was in.

Ryan took an additional moment to inspect the scar as he spoke to the man, “I suppose I should compensate you for your troubles, Mr. Lara.” Jacob was eager to help in any way he could, but he was not about to turn down anything offered. Ryan reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple thick coins. “There, that aught to cover your expense.” Jacob graciously accepted the coins and returned his eye to Ryan.

“Will you be taking her to her brother then?”

“I will see that she gets there.” The idea seemed solid in Ryan’s mind.

“I don’t want to seem over protective about the lady, but she has had a rather rough time. I would like to know that she gets to Mr. Drake.” Jacob did not feel comfortable leaving Elizabeth in the city alone. Especially, since the man that he was looking at was obviously not sociable. Nodding his head in understanding, Ryan tried to get rid of them both.

“Would you be willing to take her back to Caterwood?” He asked. “Vincent could easily ride out there tomorrow?”

“I can’t take her back there!” Jacob was not liking Ryan at all. “She has nowhere to go, but if you tell me where Vincent is, I would be glad to talk to him about it.” Ryan ran his hand across the back of his neck.

“Don’t worry about it, just go,” he said as he looked at the scar along the man’s face. “I will take her to Drake.”

As he lifted the coins in his hand, the man’s personality struck a nerve in Jacob. He did not want his money, regardless of the need.

Placing the coins back in Ryan’s hand Jacob replied, “See that you do.” Ryan walked back into the office, once Jacob left the bank. Although his day was ending soon, his patience was ending sooner.

“All right Elizabeth,” Ryan sighed. “I know that you are in some kind of trouble and that you need help.”

“I just need to find…” She tried to cut in, but he held his hand up to silence her. Ryan did not notice the light shade of blue in her eyes, until she closed her mouth and waited for him to continue.

“Mr. Lara is returning to Caterwood. I am going to take you to Vin… to my house.” Ryan wiped his hand across the back of his neck. “We will figure this out there.”

“Yes, this is probably not the best place to talk.” Elizabeth agreed as she looked out into the large room of the bank.

“No, it is not.” Ryan added as he opened the office door. “Mr. Thatcher, I need my carriage.”

As Elizabeth watched her brother order the young man carelessly, she could not help but notice his hair. Vincent had always seemed to have such thin hair in the front of his face. However, now the hairline seemed more definite and higher.

“You have changed your hair,” she whispered as they waited for the man to return. Ryan looked back at her and wondered if she actually had a working mental capability.

“Is that all?” He asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “Well no, not really. You are obviously a lot taller.”

“How long has it been since you have seen …me?” Ryan looked toward the window as his carriage pulled up to the building.

“Twelve years.” Elizabeth did not understand why he could not stay still. He continued walking back and forth, avoiding eye contact with her as much as he could. “Do I seem different to you?”

Wondering how he had got himself into this position, Ryan turned to look at her. “Taller,” he guessed. The shortness in his voice was making her concerned. She could not understand why he was avoiding her.

“Vincent,” Elizabeth called as he began to move toward the door. Without asking what she wanted, Ryan turned to face her with a very annoyed stare. “I don’t know what happened between you and Father. I do need your help right now, but it won’t be for long. I am not here to complicate your life.”

“Good,” he said as he looked back to the door. “Can we go?” The woman would not complicate his life at all. Once he got her to Vincent’s house. He planned on forgetting they had ever met.

Despite the warning that went off in her mind, Elizabeth followed Ryan out of the building and to the carriage. Four large horses were hitched to the tall coach. She had never seen such magnificent animals. Their coats were dark and glossy and their heads were decorated with black tassels and silver buckles.

Behind the horses was the most impressive carriage that she had ever seen. The outside was black with silver lanterns and handles. The polished steps unfolded from beneath the door leading to an even more spectacular interior. The plush red velvet seats seemed almost too beautiful to sit on.

“You really have done well for yourself.” Elizabeth stood with her hands clasped together while Ryan opened the door for her.

“It is a carriage,” he shot at her with little patience. The poor country girl routine was getting on his nerves. Taking out his pocket watch, Ryan checked the time. “Would you like to get in?”

She was unable to smile. Her brother did not seem like the young man that had taken care of her in her childhood. Now that she was stranded in a city with him, she was almost afraid. He didn’t seem to care one bit for her or their father. In turn, Elizabeth hesitated before getting into his carriage.

“Let me take you to the house. We will talk when we get there. Then, we will figure something out.” He still sounded short and annoyed.

The day was coming to a close and Elizabeth was miles away from anyone that she knew. Her only option was to go with him, until she could find Oswald Roshire. Even though he was acting as sensitive as a rock, her brother was all that she had at the moment. He opened the carriage door wider as Elizabeth finally stepped up. Drawing his

hand across the back of his neck, Ryan looked down the street to see if anyone noticed him with the mud caked, country girl.

"I'm sorry," Elizabeth whispered as he climbed in the carriage and sat across from her. His silence led her to feel a heavy guilt. "I would not have come if Father had not asked me to." When he did not reply she began to feel even more alone.

She was not a weak woman. Elizabeth had spent much of her time alone in her father's house with only a few other people in her life, but she had lost all normality in one day. Without warning, her emotions threatened to give way. Removing a handkerchief from the pocket of her dress, Elizabeth tried to hide her tears.

The roof of the carriage became very interesting to Ryan at that moment. While the woman tried to silently sniffle before him, he wondered why he had let Vincent get away with dumping his kid sister on him. Still, the more she cried, the more he wanted her to save it for Vincent.

"Beth, it is going to be all right." He failed miserably at his first attempt at compassion. His voice seemed very quick and unfeeling, but as the carriage moved slowly through the city he tried once more. "It's going to be fine." Ryan leaned forward as he spoke in a quieter voice. However, he still would not look at her. "You are going to get through this."

Lowering her handkerchief, Elizabeth glared at him for a moment. He had no idea what she was going through and he had no idea what she had to face. In the twenty minutes that she had been near him, he had hardly looked at her three times. One thing that Elizabeth held to was the fact that she was fairly intelligent. The distain in his eyes was far too obvious to ignore, but Elizabeth held her tongue as they moved through the city. However, before she could let loose with the rage that was building, he motioned toward the window.

"Here," Ryan nodded as they pulled up to Vincent's house. "Things will all be clearer in a few minutes.

The house was tall and narrow. With orange brick and white trim, it seemed to be identical to all of the houses on the street. She could not tell where one home ended and another began. Ryan stepped out of the carriage and offered Elizabeth his hand. Her first instinct was to refuse his help, but as she looked up toward the grand house she automatically raised her hand.

"This is where you live?" She asked, stepping onto the walkway.

Ryan did not answer as he released her hand and walked up to the door. He was not concerned about knocking. The butler was usually very good about anticipating his arrival.

"Come right in, Sir." The elderly man bowed as he saw Ryan. It was pure luck that kept him from saying Ryan's name. "We have been expecting you."

"Is he in the study?" Ryan asked as Elizabeth followed.

"Where are we?" She asked.

Lowering her eyes away from the butler's evaluating glare. Elizabeth knew that she must have looked horrible in the dress that Jacob had given her. Her hair needed to be washed. Her limp had become nearly crippling, but neither man offered her any assistance.

"Beth, this is Mr. Halis. He will take your coat and get you something to eat." Ryan nodded to the steward as Elizabeth tried not to point out that she was not wearing a coat.

"Thank you anyway, Mr. Halis. I am not hungry," she spoke in a whisper. The butler was the first to smile at her as he took Ryan's jacket.

"Alright," Ryan tried to find a place to pawn her off. "Why don't you have a seat and I will be back in a minute?" He tried to keep his voice as quiet as hers, even though he was barely holding his patience. Once Elizabeth followed the gray haired man into the parlor, Ryan strode into Vincent's study. The smug look on his partner's face nearly struck his last nerve.

"How did things go with my sister?" Vincent's smile was irritating.

"Oh, rather well I think, considering that your father was apparently murdered this morning and she has nowhere else to go." In his eyes, Vincent deserved the harsh information without any sugarcoating.

"Murdered?" The irritating smile faded quickly. Vincent set down his glass of brandy and cleared his throat.

"Well, I am not really sure." Walking over to the brandy decanter, Ryan poured a large drink. "I stopped listening to the details. Once she opened her mouth. I figured it was a family affair."

"Where is she?"

"In the parlor." Ryan took a large drink and then reset the glass on the table. The look of surprise on Vincent's face was exactly what he expected.

"You brought her here?"

“She’s your sister. If you want to get rid of her, you do it.” Ryan took another drink. “I am not your nanny.”

“What in the hell were you thinking?” Vincent turned around and walked over to his large brown upholstered chair. Once he sat down, he held his hand up to his forehead. He had no idea that Elizabeth had really needed him.

When she showed up at the bank, Vincent simply figured that she was there for money or even possibly that Daniel was sick. He never imagined that she would be in trouble, let alone their father had been murdered.

“Well, I tried to send her back with the old man, but he wouldn’t take her either. Turns out no one wants your sniveling little rat.” Ryan leaned against the table and continued to savor the brandy. “And I am dumping her back off with you,” he finished. Vincent thought for a moment before he looked back at Ryan.

“Did you tell her who you were?” He asked.

“No, but you are going to.” Ryan warned. “She has tried to tell me the details of your father’s death, but I made her wait till we got here.” He could see that Vincent was not exactly pleased. “I figured it was none of my business.” Setting down his glass once more, Ryan stepped toward the door. “I have a non-paying chimney sweep to deal with.”

“Hold on there.” Vincent stood up as if he had another thought. “Abram Cunning can pay up tomorrow.” It was obvious that Vincent was going to try and involve him further.

“Your sister is your problem,” Ryan reminded him. “She said that she only needs some help.” Taking his hand off of the doorknob, he faced Vincent with a daring look. “Give the woman some money and find her a place to stay. This is your mess.”

Placing his hand on the door, Ryan pulled it open and stepped back into the entry room of the house. Elizabeth stood near the parlor and watched Ryan as he reached for the coat that the butler had brought back.

“Are we leaving?” She asked as she limped towards him. Ryan pushed his arm through the sleeve of his jacket just as Vincent stepped out of his study.

“I am,” he told her. “This man will help you with what you need.” Panic rose quickly within Elizabeth as she watched him pull the coat over the other arm.

“What?” She asked in disbelief. “Our father was shot to death this morning, and his body has not been found.” Limping quickly towards him, Elizabeth was desperately angry. “I ran through miles of mud and rain to find someone that could bring me to you!” Looking down at her oversized dress, she held out the material. “I may have broken my ankle! I am covered in mud, and you are just going to leave me here with a man that I don’t know?” When Ryan turned to face her with a blank expression, her eyes welled up with tears. “You told me that I could always come to you if I needed to!” Reaching into a pocket in the side of her dress, she pulled out the money and the envelope that her father gave to her. Her desperation was driving her insane. “I have money, if that is what you are worried about! I only need an address for Oswald Roshire!”

Showing him the envelope, Elizabeth could hardly contain her tears. Ryan could not look away from her either. Her eyes were a vivid blue that he had never seen before. Even though he was as compassionate as a shark, the look on her face started to pull at him.

“Father said that you would help me. I believed that you would!” She stepped closer to him as she spoke, but did not offer him the envelope. Ryan looked towards Vincent before returning his eyes to hers.

“Miss Drake, I honestly don’t know who you are.”

“I am your sister, you pompous, arrogant, man!” Cringing with anger, Elizabeth lost what was left of her control. The tears began to fall steadily. “However, I will deliver this letter with or without your help!” She began to limp toward the door when Vincent quickly raised his hand up to her shoulder.

“You need to sit down,” he said as he noticed the severity of her limp. Glaring at Ryan, Vincent looked down at her ankle. “You let her walk around like this?”

“Not my affair,” Ryan repeated.

“I need to get out of this house!” Elizabeth tried to step past them both. The pain in her foot caused her to falter, and Ryan’s large arm wrapped underneath hers as she nearly fell. A second attempt was made to right herself, but Elizabeth winced in pain and leaned against Ryan’s sturdy hold.

“No,” Vincent said as the woman nearly fell to the floor. “Alright Hawke, let her go.” Taking Elizabeth by the arm, Vincent held her upright. Her eyes looked glassy and she was obviously weak and in pain. “It’s me, Beth,” he whispered. Elizabeth looked up at him,

realizing that his features were more familiar. “He is not your brother…I am.” Elizabeth looked into his face and tried to see the boy that she knew twelve years ago. The similarities between the two men were outstanding, but the differences were nearly as dramatic.

“Vincent?” She whispered with uncertainty.

“Yeah Beth, it’s me.” He could see her eyelids start to flutter.

Vincent wrapped his arms around her tighter as her body began to slowly collapse. Within less than a second, she had lost consciousness against her will. Lifting her off of the floor, her brother cradled her in his arms.

“Mr. Halis, help me get the lady to the back of the house.” Vincent looked back towards the door but in the few seconds that he was helping his sister, Ryan had left the house.

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“There you are,” Vincent said as he knelt in front of her. It was only a few seconds before Elizabeth opened her eyes. She was in a strange room with a light mist of steam around her. “I figured you would not stay out for long.” Elizabeth raised her head off of the couch and looked at her brother. “Yes, I lied to you. I was a cad, and I should not have done it.” While Vincent knelt in front of her and unlaced her boot, Elizabeth looked around the room.

“I want to get out of here.” She sat up and pulled her boot away. Vincent shook his head and held her foot tight.

“No, you’re going to let me look at your foot, you’re going to take a bath, and then you’re going to tell me what happened.” Elizabeth could not believe that he was ordering her around after what he had done.

“I have no intentions of taking up more of your time. If you will just give me an address for Oswald Roshire, I will be out of your way.” As she tried to stand up, Vincent gently pushed her back onto the small sofa.

“You need help, Beth.” Vincent whispered.

“Not from you!”

Lowering his head, Vincent wondered how long it had been since he was kind to anyone. “Listen to me,” he began, “You have always been very smart. Now you need to use that ability. I am not the boy that you grew up with. I have very little charity and I am using it all on you right now.” The tone that he used made her sit back and

remain quiet. “If you want to get clean, sleep, and figure out what happened to your Father, then be quiet and take advantage of my generosity.”

Holding her boot still with one hand, Vincent began to unlace it. It was nearly impossible to pull the contraption off of her ankle. However, once it was free, the skin that was already deep purple began to swell more. Elizabeth closed her eyes as she thought about his words. The lack of compassion and harsh tone was very familiar to her. He was indeed the brother that had left her so many years ago.

“Now,” he began again. “Do you want me to carry you into that room?” He asked as he looked towards the bathroom.

“No.” Shaking her head, she could feel fluid rushing to her injured joint. “Just help me up.”

Chapter three

"Why do I have the feeling that your sister is still at your house?" Ryan asked as Vincent walked into the office at the bank.

Although he wore the tailored suit and was dressed better than most gentlemen, Vincent was visibly tired. There were dark patches below his eyes and his complexion looked grayer than usual. Vincent sighed heavily and closed the door to Ryan's office behind him.

"Apparently, my father was not the only one in danger. According to my sister, there may be some trouble for us as well," Vincent offered.

Ryan remained in the comfortable position he had been in. Vincent did not understand how anyone could be so improper, but he was sure that it had to do with Ryan's American upbringing. With his shoes rested on the corner of his desk, Ryan twirled the dry pen around his fingers, questioning Vincent with his eyes.

"By us, you mean you and her, right?"

"I would like to say that." Vincent stepped across the floor and took a position in a large wooden chair. "As it stands, I don't know for sure." Ryan stared at the pen while he thought of possibilities.

"Did you learn your moralistic values from your father?" When Vincent remained silent Ryan continued. "You have made a few enemies over the years."

"I don't think that there is any connection between us and my father," Vincent added. Ryan tilted his head to the side as he realized what he had just said. "I have a few enemies."

"Not as many as I have, but you are still quite well-known."

"This is serious Hawke." Vincent ignored his humorous smile.

"Not for me it isn't."

Ryan was good at what he did, but he could be irritating at times. Vincent had come across him in a rather odd way. When he had started out in the banking business, he was as legitimate as he could be. His morals were steadfast and his methods were perfect. However, there was no money in being honest.

After several failed attempts to make his fortune, Vincent found himself broke, but on the verge of a financial breakthrough. His only option was to take out a loan from a very dangerous man, someone that had a reputation for making their money back with twice

the interest. Unfortunately, the financial gain that Vincent was expecting fell through. The man that came to collect the first payment was Ryan Hawke.

After a few broken ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and a fractured leg, the debt was paid. It was then that Vincent saw where the real money was. When Ryan came back for the rest of the payment, Vincent did not have a dime to his name. After a severe beating, he told Ryan that he was going to have to kill him, because he didn't have the money. Ryan, who had a sick sense of humor, admired the man for his bravery. He let Vincent live. However, he pointed out that Vincent had the perfect cover for a loan business of his own.

Vincent took his advice and propositioned the partnership. Ryan was quick to accept the offer. Within a few months the two men were beyond wealthy. Vincent's morals were quick to fade, as his pockets grew full. They began to make a name for themselves, both professionally and privately.

Within the bank, Vincent and Ryan were renowned for their professionalism and welcomed into any circle of society that they chose, but with the promotions that followed, Vincent had most of the banks money at his disposition. The real fortune came from the people that could not walk into the bank with collateral for a loan.

"Was your father rooted in society?" Ryan tossed his pen onto his ledger and pulled his feet off of his desk. "Obviously he has enemies of his own, do you know who it could be?" Vincent shook his head as he remembered the man that he lived with for a short time in his life.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "Beth said that she went to a friend's house just after she heard the gunfire. Someone got there just before she did. From the sounds of it, the man was not only looking for Daniel Drake, but his son too."

"You have a brother?" He asked.

"No, but the man did not know that." Vincent looked out the window as he finished the retelling. "To make matters worse, Beth's rather intelligent friend was quick to offer information about her."

"So, now they can look for Elizabeth and you," Ryan surmised. When Vincent stood up and began pacing, Ryan tried to piece the puzzle together. "What is in the envelope she held out?"

"I don't know." Vincent turned to face him. "She won't give it to me."

“That’s a woman for you.” Ryan opened up his desk drawer and took out an envelope. “She will tell you that you could be in danger, but she won’t show you why.” Without realizing it, Vincent took offence to the comment.

“She’s been through hell.”

“You didn’t seem to care when the sniveling little rat showed up here yesterday.” Ryan threw his own words back at him.

The vacant stare on Ryan’s face could have either been taken as toleration or annoyance. Even though they had worked together for quite a few years, Vincent still could not decipher his expressions. Raising his hand out in front of him, Vincent offered his guilt without seeming over compassionate.

“I didn’t know what happened,” he admitted. A faint smile spread across Ryan’s face as he watched Vincent struggle with his guilt.

“And yet, as entertaining as this is, I still don’t care.” With a flawless transition, Ryan brought the subject around to a more pressing matter in his mind. Lifting the envelope once more, he placed it on his desk closer to Vincent. “Here is the payment from the chimney sweep.”

The temptation of the money was almost enough to sway his train of thought. However, Vincent picked up the envelope and did not ask the same questions that he normally did.

“She said that she needs to get to Oswald Roshire.”

“Oswald Roshire, does she even know who the hell he is?” Ryan jerked his head back quickly.

“No,” Vincent answered. “She has been brought up over thirty miles from here. She has no idea who anyone is.”

“You would think that one of the richest men in the country would be well known, even so far as thirty miles away.” Ryan watched Vincent put the envelope in his inside vest pocket. “Actually, this is getting kind of interesting.” Placing his feet back on the edge of the desk, Ryan picked up his pen and began to twirl it again. “I am having a hard time imagining what your boyhood must have been like. You were quite the gentlemen when I first met you. I just can’t see you as a back wood’s farm boy.” Vincent put up his hand to stop him.

“I was never on a farm in my life. Just because she is my sister, does not mean that we have anything more than our father in common.” Showing a loss in his patience, Vincent lowered his voice slightly. “We did not have the same mother. I spent two years raising a

little girl and living off of the streets, while Daniel Drake drank away every cent he made." Ryan looked toward the door before returning his attention to Vincent.

"That's a pretty sad story, but unfortunately I have a meeting." The sound of jingling keys was soft but unmistakable as Mr. Thatcher came to the door as Ryan looked up at him.

"Give me one more moment," Vincent said to the clerk. When the door closed behind the young man, he continued. "I am going to need your help with this."

"With what?" Ryan stood up from his chair and adjusted his deep gray coat and gold cufflinks. "You have no idea what happened, who did it, and if they even know where to find you." Vincent held his glare on Ryan as he rubbed his hand along his short beard. Ryan looked toward the door again and saw that his ten o'clock appointment had brought his lusciously beautiful wife. "Get the letter."

"I have tried," Vincent admitted. "She still won't give it to me."

"Then take it from her," Ryan offered impatiently.

"I can't find it." Vincent knew that Ryan was ready to kick him out of his office. Taking him by the shoulder, Ryan led him slowly to the door.

"Do you want my help?" Ryan asked. "Then get the letter." With an over expressive smile Ryan nearly pushed Vincent out of his office.

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Elizabeth had begun to use sleep as an escape. Her ankle was still swollen, but she did not need to stay in bed as much as she had been. Vincent had come to see her once each day, but she had hardly spoken to him since he had deceived her.

The anger and the hurt were much too deep for her to deal with. Elizabeth had begun to live in the dark robe that Vincent had given her. A maid had been sent to buy her a dress. Despite the fact that it was the most expensive gown she had ever seen, Elizabeth refused to wear it.

After days of hiding in the small room, she had finally formed a plan. Once her ankle had healed, she was going to find Oswald Roshire. When she had delivered the letter, she would return to Caterwood, stay with Fanny, and try to get a job at the glass factory.

“Beth, can I come in?” Vincent asked after he knocked on the door. Knowing that she still would not answer him, he walked in anyway. “How is your foot?” Elizabeth remained silent and rolled over to face the wall. “Look Beth, you are going to have to talk to me sometime.” He did not walk around the room to face her. He simply stayed near the door. “The maid told Mr. Halis that you are walking much better. Are you ever going to leave this room?”

When she still did not answer him, Vincent began to lose his patience. Taking a step into the room, he looked on the table and the dresser for the letter that she had kept hidden. The small bedroom had one large window that overlooked the street. It allowed a lot of light into the room, but he had been getting home late in the evening. The light had nearly faded.

“I am not sending food up here again. If you want to eat, you are going to have to come down stairs.” He did not expect the threat to get a response.

“Where do I find Oswald Roshire?” She asked in a clear voice.

“Did you read the letter?” He watched the bedcovers expand and collapse as she sighed.

“It is none of my business.” Elizabeth was getting tired of the question. “I was told to give it to a man named Roshire.” Vincent ran his hand through his hair as he wondered what was wrong with her.

“If someone is after you, don’t you think you should try and find out why?”

“Stop asking me questions!” Elizabeth turned to face him. “Don’t you think I want to know the answers too? I am doing what my father told me to do.”

“He is dead Beth,” Vincent began. She did not want to face the truth, even though she could not deny it.

“I am not giving it to you. As long as no one has come looking for either you or me, I am not giving it to anyone other than Mr. Roshire.”

“I would like to avoid having someone look for me.” Vincent pointed out. “And if I were you, I would try to stop trouble before it lands on my doorstep.”

The deep blue striped suit looked nice against his dark hair and his dark eyes, but Elizabeth wondered if he had anything other than his money.

“Will you take me to him?”

“We don’t even know why! What would Daniel possibly have in common with a man like Roshire?”

“I don’t know!”

His annoyance was very apparent as he looked down at her. Vincent actually felt uncomfortable in the small room with Elizabeth. She had changed so much that he hardly felt like he knew her. The more she tried to protect Daniel, the more Vincent was beginning to dislike her.

“Just tell me what it says, and I will take you to him tomorrow,” he whispered. There was no way that Vincent could get in to see Oswald Roshire. The man was so busy that he practically saw his own family by appointment only. However, Vincent had lied to his sister before, and he saw nothing wrong with doing it again.

“No,” she replied flatly.

“Get dressed. You are eating downstairs, or you are leaving my house,” he ordered. Vincent had lost his patience. The woman was as stubborn as he was and it was a very dislikable quality.

As soon as he left the room, Elizabeth threw back her covers and looked at her ankle. The swelling had nearly subsided, but it was still difficult to put weight on. Standing up from the bed, she reached into the inside of the robe and removed the letter that was next to her chemise. She looked at the writing on the paper. Though it had not been addressed to her, it was her father’s hand that had penned the words.

Vincent was naive to think that she did not want to know what it said. Every bone in her body wanted to know what was in her hands, but Elizabeth loved her father dearly. He had warned her that the less she knew, the better it would be. She had already defied his wishes by showing the letter to Vincent, but she would not betray him any further.

Elizabeth knew that she needed to face her situation, but the more that Vincent pushed her, the more she wanted to resist him. Leaving the bed she picked up the pastel green gown that hung on a form in the closet. It was far more beautiful than anything she had ever worn before, but she did not feel right wearing it. It was trimmed with white lace and had a small pink rose in the center of the chest. With layers of material within the skirt, she eyed the dress and longed to put it on. The small white shoes that sat at the bottom of the closet had the same light green embroidery on the toes. If she were going to find Oswald Roshire, she would need to look decent.

Taking the gown and the shoes out of the closet, Elizabeth began to dress. Her chemise and corset were freshly cleaned, and her hair still smelled like cinnamon. Pulling the material over her arms, she slipped into the gown. A sentiment that she could not have expected swept over her as she got dressed. Elizabeth no longer felt like a poor farm girl from Caterwood.

The shoes were a little small and uncomfortable, but she was not about to complain. The tightness of the swollen ankle made the event less pleasant, but the shoes were beautiful and Elizabeth was going to wear them even if they made her bleed.

Instead of pulling her hair up into the bun that she had become accustomed to, she let her golden curls fall down her back and fashioned only a small portion of the sides on top of her head. Having the same high forehead that Vincent had, she allowed the shorter pieces of hair to curl just above her light blue eyes. When she had completed her task, Elizabeth could hardly believe the change in her appearance.

She walked down the staircase slowly, due to her sore ankle. However, when she reached the small dining room the man that she had first thought was her brother, stood next to Vincent.

"Beth, I didn't expect you to come down," Vincent said as she stood in the doorway. Ryan looked toward the door. The woman stood angry and slightly embarrassed.

"I did not realize you had a guest," she whispered uneasily.

"Ryan is not a guest. He is here nearly as much as I am," Vincent explained.

The woman was obviously embarrassed by his presence. However, Ryan found her expression entertaining. She clearly wanted to run out of the room and if she could have talked her feet into moving, she probably would have.

"Perhaps I should take my meal upstairs?"

"Not at all," Vincent said gently. "Beth, this is Ryan Hawke. He has worked with me at the bank for a few years now."

There was no way for her to show how much she hated her brother at that moment. The first time she decided to give him a chance, he invited the one man that she had chosen to hate.

For days she had been embarrassed about what she was put through. The stranger had no right to deceive her on the worst day of her life, but the uncaring pig had the nerve to let her believe he was her brother.

As Elizabeth stared at the man that she had first trusted, he nodded in her direction. The only thing that kept her from running out of the room, besides her foot, was the fresh cut just above Mr. Hawke's eye. She had hardly been able to look in his eyes when she had first met him. He avoided eye contact almost completely, but she was sure that the wound was not there before. Looking at the floor and then over to Vincent, Ryan waited for someone to say something.

"Beth," Vincent broke the silence. "Mr. Hawke was not responsible for what happened. He feels worse than I do." Ryan looked over at Vincent with a blank expression, completely unaffected by what the woman was put through. "Please, just come and eat. You have been up there for days."

"Excuse me, I am not feeling well." Even though she hated Vincent for lying to her, she hated Ryan Hawke even more, and she was not about to tolerate a meal with him. Turning on her heals she walked out of the room and took to the stairway once again.

"That went well," Ryan smiled and pulled out a chair to sit down. When Vincent stood still, Ryan remained standing. "Don't tell me that you want to go after her."

"I was hoping that you would check her room for the letter, while I kept her down here," Vincent admitted.

"You want me to check her room?" Ryan asked with the same blank stare. Vincent placed his hands on the back of the chair and looked at the table.

"Well, it is better than me looking for it while she is sleeping."

The smile that would seem like a common act to anyone else looked seemed dangerous to Vincent. When Ryan stepped away from his chair and began walking towards the hallway, Vincent apprehensive.

"What are you doing?"

"I am going to check her room," Ryan said as he walked away.

"Damn," he whispered. "Not while she is in it!"

Ryan gave no answer as he started up the stairs. The woman in question was not even half of the way up when she turned to see Ryan's large form brush past her on the steps.

"Excuse me?" She asked as Ryan reached the landing and headed toward her room. "What do you think you are doing?" Elizabeth hobbled up the stairs while Vincent came up behind her. Without paying attention to either of them, Ryan walked straight into her room and began searching through the drawers.

“This is how it works, Vincent. You talk about things. I get them done.” Looking through people’s personal belongings did not bother him. Ryan had made them both quite wealthy by doing just that. As he opened the drawers and rustled around in the few things that were there, he ignored the protest of the woman that stormed in behind him.

“Who do you think you are?” Elizabeth asked as the inconsiderate man opened every drawer in the dresser and searched the closet shelves. “Excuse me? Are you in the habit of barging into people’s private rooms and looking through their things?”

“This is not your room,” Ryan reminded her. “And if you want me to stop, give your brother the letter and I will be on my way.”

“Vincent!” Elizabeth yelled as Ryan emptied the flower vase onto the floor and looked in the bottom of the ceramic pot. She was more than insulted as the man continued to search every crevasse of the room.

“Just give me the letter Beth,” Vincent ordered. He had seen Ryan tear through a room before. He knew it was unlikely that the American would stop until he found what he was looking for.

“I am not giving you anything!” She was furious at her brother as he allowed the man to ransack his house.

Paying no attention to her, Ryan pulled back the covers on her bed and checked under the pillows before lifting the mattress. When he was satisfied that the letter was not anywhere in the room, he walked straight up to Elizabeth and looked straight into her eyes.

Elizabeth had never felt as intimidated as she did at that moment. Ryan actually leaned closer to her with his wide brown eyes staring into hers. A chill ran down her spine as she looked at his features. The height of his forehead and the dark beard that ran along his narrow jaw was menacing. Elizabeth stared at the thick cut just above his eye, while he leaned closer to her.

“She has it on her.” His voice was deep and dangerous. Elizabeth had no doubt that Ryan was going to take it from her.

“Alright that’s enough,” Vincent stated as he pulled Elizabeth to his side. Elizabeth forced herself to look away as Ryan continued to stare.

“You told me to find it. She has it hidden in her clothes.” Ryan stood up straight and returned to the nonchalant personality that Vincent was use to.

“Beth, just give me the letter,” Vincent said. He could see the pain in his sister’s eyes as she looked up at him. Shaking her head slowly, Elizabeth feared what they were about to do.

“I won’t give it to you.” Her voice cracked. Raising his eyebrows as if he were considering the option, Ryan looked at Vincent.

“Alright, keep it then.” Vincent moved past her and walked out of the room. Ryan wasn’t accustomed to not getting what he wanted. With the charming personality that he clung to, he decided to offer her some information.

“The only thing that keeps you in danger is that letter. That is why your father got rid of it, and that is why he wanted you to get rid of it.” Standing to his full height once again, Ryan winked his eye at her and clicked his tongue twice, before offering an almost invisible smile. Then he walked out of the room as if nothing had ever happened.

After she had been left alone, Elizabeth placed her hand to her chest and began to breathe at last. Her temporary sanctuary had been destroyed. The one room that she had felt safe in had been turned upside down. Walking over to the dresser, Elizabeth grabbed the dress that Jacob had given her and her boots. She had no idea where she was going to go, but having her father’s money at her side with his letter made her feel a little more confident. She stormed out of the room and walked down the steps hardly feeling the pain in her ankle at all.

“Mr. Halis,” Vincent called once he saw her on the stairs. Elizabeth walked up to him without fear, since Ryan was not standing near him. Vincent knew that she would leave. He could hardly blame her. “See that Miss Drake is taken anywhere that she wants to go.”

“Yes, Sir,” the butler agreed as Elizabeth chanced a glance at the man that had ransacked her room.

“If she stays at a hotel, make sure it is at my expense,” he added.

“No, thank you,” she was quick to reply. “I am better off on my own.” Mr. Halis went into another room and rang the bell for the carriage. When he returned, Elizabeth had walked out of the house to wait on the step.

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“Here you are, Miss. We were wondering if you would be hungry today,” Lewis said with a smile.

The Innkeeper was slightly shorter than Elizabeth. He had an olive complexion that was framed by his dark slicked hair and a thick mustache.

Elizabeth was quite upset when she arrived at the Inn the night before. The Innkeeper seemed genuinely concerned about her state. After introducing himself, he had his wife situate Elizabeth in one of his nicest rooms that they had. It was in the back of the Inn. So, she did not have to worry about the noise from the street below.

The Inn was located in a retail area of the city. Elizabeth was right across the street from the ladies shop’s and the post. The baker and a mercantile were just down the road. Everything that she needed was within walking distance including the florist and the shoemaker. Until she could deliver her letter and get out of the city, Elizabeth would be fine where she was.

“Anna thinks you need to eat more. I think she is right.” Lewis placed a large plate of eggs and bacon in front of her when Elizabeth sat down in the small parlor. His accent was something that she had never heard before, but he was kind and friendly. The man had worn a smile since she walked in the door of the Inn, and had not removed it yet. “My wife does not normally like to cook so much, but for you, she has been in the kitchen a long time.”

“Please, tell her I said thank you.” Elizabeth smiled up at the man as she placed a napkin on her lap.

“No, you must tell her yourself. My Anna would like that very much,” he continued, “But I will go and let you eat. You need that, yes?” Lewis held his hands on his little round belly. “You need a little meat on your bones.” His smile was contagious, and Elizabeth felt very comfortable. “Go on now… eat,” he added before leaving the small room.

The food smelled delicious. Elizabeth consumed nearly all of the meal before she looked around the room. The small round table was situated near a window that looked onto the street. There were two other tables in the room. All of them had a decorative lace cloth in the center of the table, with a small vase of flowers. The walls were mostly a dark wood, but the top of the walls and the ceiling were painted white. The couple that ran the Inn had kept the decoration simple and elegant.

“You are up late this morning, Miss?” Anna asked as she came into the parlor. “We were beginning to worry about you.”

Lifting her cup of tea, Elizabeth raised her eyes to the woman. Her raven black hair was coiled on top of her head with a beautiful jeweled comb holding it in place. Her eyes were soft and kind.

“Thank you for the food. It was very delicious,” Elizabeth offered.

“I am not a very good cook. So, I try to avoid it as much as possible,” Anna shyly admitted. “Lewis usually prepares the meal.”

“I think you did just fine.”

Elizabeth had met the woman when she checked in, and was not expecting to like her so quickly, but Anna showed her to her room and was very kind and considerate. However, what Elizabeth did not know was that the walls were very thin. When Anna walked by her room that morning, there was little to hide the quiet sobbing inside.

“You will be staying with us for a while.” She spoke the words between a comment and a question.

“I’m not sure. I have a few things to see to before I return to Caterwood.” Emptying her cup, Elizabeth watched Anna stand up and take a warm pot off of the table by the fireplace. The woman smiled and filled her cup once more before sitting down next to her.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth smiled. “I would like that.”

“We do not seem to have that many guests this week. I can afford to take a small break.” Pouring herself a cup of tea, Anna set out to learn more about the young woman. “What brings you to the city?” Keeping her focus on the small white cup, Elizabeth sighed as she thought of her answer.

“I have some things to take care of for my father.”

Anna could see her eyes soften for a moment and the sadness showed on her face. Though the young woman in the beautiful green dress seemed troubled, Anna did not want to pry too much.

“It is a beautiful city. You should take time to see some of it before you leave,” she offered. “There is a lovely park over by the river, but I would not venture that way after dark.”

“I don’t plan on venturing very far at all after dark, but I am sure that I will see some of the city while I am here.” Elizabeth remembered the tall buildings that she had past, as she rode through the town with Mr. Hawke. “Have you lived here all of your life?”

“No,” Anna replied as she smoothed out a wrinkle in her violate colored dress. “My husband and I came here about three years ago from Italy. He had friends here and I was ready for a change in scenery.”

“Italy, that must have been wonderful,” she replied.

“It is. We go back every year in the summer to visit, but we have made our home here in Burdery.” Lifting the cup to her lightly painted lips, Anna looked up at Elizabeth’s stunning blue eyes. “What about you, do you have family here?” Elizabeth shook her head as she remembered her brother in a rather unkind way.

“Yes, though we are not close.”

“I am sorry to hear that.” The silence was brief before the woman patted her hand. Anna recovered the conversation easily. “You will just have to stay with us while you are here then.” Her smile was contagious as Elizabeth welcomed the friendship. “I am rather looking forward to having a guest of the female kind. It gives me a break from all of the stuffy businessmen that come here during the week.” Admiring the gown that the beautiful woman wore, Elizabeth decided that Anna could be very helpful to her.

“Actually, I am in need of a little help.”

“Good,” Anna said as she rested her elbow on the table and placed her chin against her palm, “Because I need something to do.” Elizabeth liked her smile and the easiness about her.

“I need some clothes, but I do not want to spend a lot of money.”

“You have asked the right woman,” she admitted. Anna reached over and patted her arm as she sat up straight. “I know just the place. If you want, I could go with you.” Nodding her head quickly, Elizabeth seemed relieved.

“That would be perfect.”

Money was not an issue. The amount that her father had given her was quite substantial. However, Elizabeth had no idea how long it would have to last.

“I have to find a man named Roshire. I don’t know how long it will take to find him, but I only have this one dress with me.”

“Oswald Roshire,” Anna looked confused. “You can’t mean ‘The’ Oswald Roshire.”

“Do you know him?”

“Everyone knows him. He is the richest man in the city, possibly the richest man in the country.” Anna began to whisper as she

poured a little more tea in Elizabeth's glass. "You have never heard of him?" Shaking her head slowly, Elizabeth wondered why someone so famous would be difficult for her brother to find.

"No, I haven't."

"He is quite the man. He is the owner of several coal mines and a very wise investor." Anna looked over her shoulder as Lewis walked past the parlor. "He is also very charitable from what I hear. He is holding a fundraiser this evening to establish a school for the blind."

"A fundraiser," Elizabeth perked up with interest. "Do you know where?"

"Of course, it is only going to be the most impressive event this season." The steam rose from her tea as Anna stirred in a drop of honey. "It is at his estate near the river. However, it is by invitation only." The hope vanished quickly for Elizabeth.

"Well, I only need to see him for a couple of minutes. Does he have an office, or someplace I could make an appointment to see him?" Anna tilted her head and considered the thought.

"You would never get to see him. The man is horribly busy. He even makes his grandson schedule appointments."

"Anna, I need to give him something that could be very important. How can I get to him?" Elizabeth was not about to give up. She had one small thing to do for her father and she was bound to do it. After a moment of contemplation, Anna smiled deviously at Elizabeth.

"There is a way, if you are willing to take a risk."

Chapter four

"That is perfect," Anna said as Elizabeth stood in front of the mirror.

The gown was uncomfortable to her, yards of lace and satin wrapped around Elizabeth as if she were a mummified Egyptian. White and light pink rolls of fabric were pulled tightly, until it puffed-out on her backside. The front of the gown was form fitting on top, with plain white satin and a little pink rose in the center of her bodice. The skirt was straight down in front. Mainly white satin flowed down to her toes, but there were nearly a hundred light pink flowers that trailed down the length of the train with a little hint of red showing in the center of each flower.

Elizabeth was in mourning and she should have been wearing black, but the event and the plan did not have any room for her emotions or propriety. If she was going to sneak into Mr. Roshire's fundraiser, without an escort or an invitation, Elizabeth had to look as inconspicuous as she could.

Anna had proven to be an angel as she trimmed and styled Elizabeth's hair to match the dress and the fashion of the season. When Elizabeth saw the final product, she could hardly recognize herself.

"I would have never imagined…" Elizabeth began.

"Oh I could," Anna began, "With your light features and tall frame, I knew this was the dress for you."

"Are you sure you don't mind me borrowing it." Elizabeth admired the satin and lace gloves as she looked down at the stunning ensemble. Anna placed her hand on Elizabeth's glove and lifted her arm out to the side.

"It saves money! Besides, what on earth am I going to do with it? I bought it for a ball that I went to over in Hampstead," Anna stated as Elizabeth admired her own appearance. "I will probably never wear it again."

It seemed strange to Elizabeth that two people, as seemingly common as Anna and Lewis, could be so financially well off. They were accepted in all societies and had almost no employees. They were a self-sufficient couple that seemed to have the perfect life.

Elizabeth looked at her reflection and placed her hand over the gorgeous jeweled necklace that Anna had lent her. None of the gems were real, but the skill and patience that went into decorating the pink glass and crystal beads was phenomenal.

"I will be sure to return it as soon as I get back," Elizabeth assured her.

"I know you will." Anna twisted her finger around one of Elizabeth's golden curls. "I trust you."

Daniel had warned his daughter not to trust anyone. He had also told Elizabeth not to tell Vincent about the letter, but the woman in front of her was not like the immoral men that she had spent the last week with. Anna was helping Elizabeth for no reason at all.

"Now listen carefully." Anna took her hands for a moment. "Lewis has agreed to take you over to the banquette. When you get there, tell them that you were running late and that your name was on Mrs. Colter's invitation. She always arrives at these functions very early, and she has a horrible memory." With a look of annoyance, Anna held her hand to her forehead. "She has been known to forget her own name at times." Taking a large breath Anna sighed. "You will know her by the large red birth mark that covers most of her brow."

Lifting a small pink bag off of the bed, Elizabeth started to fill it with necessities for the evening. The letter was tucked safely within the petticoats of her gown, along with most of the money. Then she placed one handkerchief, an extra comb, and the rest of the money in the small draw-string sack.

"When you find her, introduce yourself as my friend. Tell her that we had tea together on Thursday last week." Once Elizabeth turned to face the woman again, Anna took her hands. "You will be fine once you get to her. Her name is Vivian Colter."

"Vivian Colter," Elizabeth repeated as she nodded her head in understanding.

"From there, you are on your own." Anna smiled as she admired the woman once more. "Do not walk back here no matter what you do. Take a carriage." Elizabeth's appreciation was immense as she squeezed Anna in a huge embrace.

"I will. Thank you so much. I will return the dress and the jewelry as soon as I get back." Anna stepped away from her.

"You are going to be at a charity banquette. Eat, drink and have fun. You can return the dress in the morning."

"Are you sure?" Elizabeth asked.

“Of course!” Anna hugged her once more before she took her out to the parlor. When the women entered the small room, Lewis placed his hand above his heart.

“Ah Miss Drake, you are a vision of loveliness,” he offered. “I think you will have a grand time this evening.”

Neither of the women had told Lewis exactly what was going on. As far as he knew, a friend invited Elizabeth to the fundraiser. He had no idea that his wife was in on the slight deception.

“Thank you Lewis,” she replied.

“Your chariot awaits, my dear.” Giving a glorious smile, Lewis held out his hand and led Elizabeth out to the carriage.

She could feel her palms becoming moist as she rode through the city. Her heart was pounding in her chest. Elizabeth prayed for strength as she watched the buildings pass by. The carriage was not nearly as grand as Mr. Hawke’s, but she was grateful that she did not have to pay for a cab to take her to the benefit.

The streets became very busy after a few stressful minutes. When she first laid her eyes on the grand building at the end of the street, Elizabeth nearly panicked. It seemed to be as large as a castle. With glorious white pillars that extended to the top of the roof, the manor was far more magnificent than she could have imagined.

Elizabeth held her breath as Lewis opened the door in front of a crowd of people. To Elizabeth’s delight, with the beautiful gown and accessories, she blended in quite nicely.

“Here you are, Miss.” Lewis said as he helped her down out of the carriage. “Will you be alright from here?”

“Yes, thank you.” Elizabeth cautiously hid her fear. In her mind, she had contemplated the worst possible scenario. If she went to the door and was not allowed in without an invitation, she would simply take a carriage back to the Inn. No harm would be done. She would then have to find another way to see Mr. Roshire.

“You look very nervous.” Lewis leaned a little closer. “You will find your friend and have a wonderful evening. You will see.” Elizabeth smiled through her fear.

“I am sure that I will.” With a nod, Lewis watched Elizabeth as she swayed up the steps to the large house.

The sound was nearly deafening. At least fifty people were talking at the same time, and that was only on the steps of the house. Elizabeth remained silent as she waited for the people to file inside. Admiring the beautiful gowns and suites of the group around her, kept

her occupied while she figured out exactly what to say to the man at the door.

"Invitation please," the man held out his hand to Elizabeth. With a gracious smile, she tilted her head to the side and gazed up at the man.

"I'm sorry, Sir. My companion has already gone inside," she whispered.

"Who are you with?" The tall skinny doorman asked very impolitely. Elizabeth looked behind her as the people began to take notice.

"Mrs. Vivian Colter," she answered with a shake in her voice. The man appeared to be as thin as a stick and as tall as a tree, but he did not seem interested in her plight. When Elizabeth thought he was going to refuse her from entering, she tried to convince him with all of the charm that she could find. "Oh please, Sir," Elizabeth began. "I was running late this evening. You can imagine how long it takes to get ready for an event like this." When she seemed to have his attention, her voice softened sweetly. "If you won't let me go and find her, please see if someone could bring her to collect me."

She was simply irresistible with her large blue eyes and her quiet voice. The doorman looked behind her and saw that the guests were becoming impatient with the delay. The stunning combination of attire and natural beauty on the lady before him was impossible to refuse.

"Go on in," he said in a whisper. "Thank you, Invitation please," he went on to the next guest.

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped through the door and into the grand entryway. Two marble staircases extended around the outside of the entryway and led up to a glorious ballroom above them. Her eyes glanced around the room toward all of the elderly ladies. Although she could see a few facial markings on some of the women, none of them had a large birthmark across their forehead.

Conversations formed around her. Most of them were about the ideas for the blind school, but some ranged all the way from politics to plumbing. However, Elizabeth only listened for hints about Oswald Roshire. She had picked up some details about his health and his family, but she did not hear anything that would help her figure out how to find him in the huge crowd.

At the top of the stairs, she peered into the large room that held the benefit. The walls were painted in a bright red color with chandeliers that covered the view of the ceiling. The chairs that lined the wall were upholstered in beige and gold with gold colored trim on the legs and the arms.

A large string orchestra played a melancholy tune from the front of the room as couples took to the open space to dance. Elizabeth excused herself as she accidentally bumped into a man that was leaning heavily on his cane.

"That's alright dear. It is nearly too crowded to walk in here this evening." The man leaned down to her ear and spoke clearly.

"Quite right," an older lady agreed as she turned to face him. "I don't know how in the world we are supposed to be comfortable in such close accommodations."

Elizabeth was surprised that the woman would consider the room small, but she was even more surprised at the large red birthmark that spanned the length of her forehead.

"Mrs. Colter," Elizabeth began. "How are you?"

"I'm fine dear, just fine, though I cannot seem to find my spectacles." The woman searched her handbag for a moment before Elizabeth stepped forward.

"They are around your neck," she offered in a whisper.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Colter lifted the glasses by the delicate chain. "Sometimes I wonder how I get anything done."

"It's lovely to see you again," Elizabeth said as she swallowed hard. When the woman looked at her with an indifferent expression, Elizabeth went on with the lie. "I met you last Thursday. We had tea with Anna Flourtier." Her pronunciation of the name was nearly exact to how Anna said it.

"Oh yes, how is dear Anna?" It was obvious that the woman could not remember a thing, but her personality was as gentle as a lamb.

"She is wonderful," Elizabeth added as she looked to the man with the cane. The ride to the benefit gave her sufficient time to consider the use of her real name. It could have been very dangerous to say the name Drake. However, she was at Mr. Roshire's house. Although there was no way to know who was after her, the idea that they would be at the benefit seemed ludicrous. "My name is Elizabeth Drake." The man looked very impressed by her.

“Miss Drake, you look absolutely stunning this evening. I am Mr. Terrington,” he offered.

“He is out to find his third wife dear,” Mrs. Colter whispered to Elizabeth. “If you are unwed, I would stay far away.” Mr. Terrington seemed humorously annoyed by the comment.

“I am not about to wed a woman that is a third my age,” he added loudly. When he turned his eyes back to the lovely Elizabeth, he smiled politely. “I do have to admit, that I would be honored to consider the fact. Though, I would not presume that you would be just as honored.”

“I am flattered all the same.” Elizabeth smiled as she glanced behind him. Oswald Roshire had to be there somewhere. She was not sure how to go about finding him. “Where is our host for the evening?”

“Where is Mr. Roshire?” Mr. Terrington asked as he glanced around the room. Vivian Colter waved her hand in front of her.

“He is here somewhere. Young Andrew Roshire is right over there.”

As Elizabeth glanced in the direction that the woman was looking, she seemed eagerly interested. Andrew Roshire stood next to a beautiful woman in a bright yellow gown. Elizabeth assumed, by the way that Vivian referred to him, Andrew was obviously Oswald’s son.

The man was not as young as she would have expected. He had to be at least near his thirties, much taller and larger than most of the men in the room. Elizabeth wondered if she should introduce herself. It would be easier to meet his father, if Andrew would point him out, but for some reason she stayed where she was and continued to watch the other guests.

“Excuse me Miss,” a well-dressed man in a blue jacket came next to her.

“Miss Elizabeth Drake.” Mr. Terrington introduced her, causing her to cringe at the ease in which her name was given out.

“Miss Drake, would you care to dance?” With a confidant attitude, the man held out his hand.

“I’m sorry. I am not dancing this evening.” A slight blush rose to her cheek as Elizabeth smiled shyly.

“You cannot tell me that you have come here to give all of your money away without enjoying yourself,” he persisted. Before she refused him again, Elizabeth considered the slight smell of alcohol and the sway to his stance.

“Of course not, I am enjoying myself immensely. I am just not free to dance.” He was not a handsome man by any means, but she could not exactly determine exactly why.

“Well, my name is Mr. Fening,” he smiled as he looked at another woman behind Elizabeth. “If you should change your mind,” he spoke as he walked away.

“Now, why are you not dancing?” Vivian Colter removed her glasses as she looked around at all of the finely dressed young men. The old woman did not know if Elizabeth was married or not, but it was still no reason not to enjoy the music. Elizabeth continued to search the room where Andrew Roshire stood.

“I am enjoying our conversation,” she stated simply. Mr. Terrington gently tapped his cane on the floor.

“Do you see, Mrs. Colter? Here is a fine specimen of the younger generation. Polite, considerate, and she honestly believes that we are still valuable in our old age.”

“Poppycock,” Mrs. Colter added. “I bet if she found the right man to ask her, she would leave us in a heartbeat.” Elizabeth tried to silently deny the accusation, but Vivian looked past the young woman too quickly. “See here,” she pointed to a gentleman behind Elizabeth. “That young man there,” she added. “Excuse me?” Vivian called to the man that had his back to their small group. “Mr. Hawke,” she called. Every muscle in Elizabeth’s back tensed up as she heard the name. “Mr. Hawke, will you please do me a service?” Ryan slowly turned around at the elderly woman’s request. “Will you please dance with our young Miss Drake here? She seems to be in the habit of refusing young men.” Coming to stand next to Elizabeth, Ryan did not look nearly as surprised as she did. “Be sure that you return her to me,” Vivian demanded. “She is quite delightful, and I do not wish to forget where I put her.”

“No,” she said very clearly with a quick shake of her head. “I have no intention of dancing.”

“Don’t be so old at your age. Have a little fun.” Mr. Terrington chuckled. “Mr. Hawke, please. We insist.” When the kind man raised Elizabeth’s hand and handed it to Ryan, she did not have a choice.

“Of course, Miss Drake is almost like a sister to me.” Ryan smiled as he held on to her fingers.

Fury burned within Elizabeth as she was led away from the couple and taken to the dance floor. Ryan placed his palm against hers while Elizabeth gently lifted the train of her gown. Without even

realizing it, she avoided eye contact at all costs. However, when the music started and Ryan's hand went to her side, her eyes shot up at him.

"So, you have still not taken it out of your clothing?" Ryan asked as his deep dark eyes stared into hers.

There was no way for him to know that his hand was directly above the letter. She had so many pieces of clothing on that she could hardly tell it was there herself. Elizabeth wanted to retaliate, but she could not think of anything to say.

"Relax." Ryan could feel the stiffness in her back. "I am not going to bite." The comment did not make her feel any more secure. In fact, Elizabeth found herself wanting to close her eyes to ignore the situation.

"I was not expecting to see you here," she said as she watched the room around her while Ryan led her through the steps.

"That is understandable." His tone was sharp and annoying. "Just like you, I am not supposed to be here." Ryan waited for her to look at him. When Elizabeth finally raised her eyes to his, she saw the same annoying smile on his face. "So, how did you get here?" He asked. Ryan could not get over her appearance. She was absolutely stunning in the white and pink gown. With the long golden curls and the subtle hint of jewelry, she looked far more beautiful than any other woman in the room.

Elizabeth avoided his emotionless stare as she glanced over toward Andrew Roshire once more. The first gentleman that has asked her to dance, Mr. Fening, was motioning toward her and Andrew looked her way. Elizabeth tried to seem very interested in Ryan at that moment, but it was obvious that Andrew Roshire was questioning Mr. Fening on who she was.

"What happened to your eye, Mr. Hawke?" Elizabeth found herself interested in Ryan's wound while she avoided any eye contact.

"Does it make me less attractive? I tried to hide it, but I just don't wear powder as well as you do." His sense of humor was not appreciated. "It is nothing, just a scratch." Instead of informing him that she did not wear powder, Elizabeth turned the conversation back to him.

"I can see that it is nothing," she said without compassion. "I was simply wondering how it happened."

“Banking can be a very dangerous business.” Ryan readjusted his hand closer to the middle of her back. The movement brought them closer. Elizabeth looked toward his arm before looking up at him.

“Of course,” she responded. “I did not realize how you and my brother place yourselves in harms way every day.”

“You did not answer me.”

“I don’t recall a question.” Elizabeth looked up at him and tilted her head slightly.

“I asked you how you got here.” Ryan leaned closer to her ear and noticed her pull away.

“The same way you did. I took a carriage.” Knowing that it was impossible to ignore his intimidating smile and the powerful embrace, she chose to outsmart him.

When she looked toward Andrew Roshire, Elizabeth noticed him staring at her. A cold shiver ran down her back as Andrew’s eyes met hers. A few more men had gathered around Andrew as he continued to hold his stare on Elizabeth.

“What is it?” Ryan asked as he sensed her uneasiness.

Andrew turned slightly and faced away from her for a moment. The long brown hair that hung down the back of Andrew’s neck held Elizabeth’s attention. She knew that she had seen him before. Even when an older man walked toward him, Elizabeth could not tear her eyes away from Andrew’s hair. As she watched his large form lead the older man away, Elizabeth knew Andrew was the rider that came to her house.

“That’s him,” she whispered as she stopped moving to the music.

“Yes, that is Oswald.” Ryan looked behind him.

“No!” She shook her head and noticed the older gentleman for the first time. “The younger one… that is one of the men that came for my father.” Elizabeth was frozen with fear.

“Are you sure?” Ryan asked as he turned to face her. “You can’t just accuse a man like Andrew Roshire.” Elizabeth looked up at Ryan with an unwavering stare.

“That is the man that I saw at my home and at my neighbor’s farm.” Looking back over his shoulder, Ryan noticed the young Mr. Roshire return to the room and begin to walk toward them.

“Damn,” he said.

It was very possible that Andrew could know something about Daniel Drake. In fact, it did not surprise Ryan at all. Andrew was not

as pure-hearted as his father. The expression in Elizabeth's eyes was legitimate. She believed that she was in danger. Looking up once more, Andrew's expression seemed to confirm Elizabeth's theory, and he did not appear to be in a patient mood.

"This is about to get more interesting than I had originally intended," Ryan spoke quietly. Before he had a chance to warn her to stay still, Elizabeth tried to break away from his grasp.

"I have to go."

"If he wants you dead, you are only safe as long as you are in this room." Holding her with a firm arm, Ryan looked down at her. Elizabeth wanted desperately to run.

"Let go of me," she whispered.

"Miss Drake, I don't like you any more than you like me." Ryan kept his voice soft as he tried to explain. "But I swear to you, if you leave right now, he will hunt you down and you will be dead by morning." The vicious depth of his eyes seemed to soften slightly as he spoke in a quiet voice. Although Elizabeth hated Ryan, he seemed to know what he was talking about.

"He is coming," Elizabeth whispered as she closed her eyes and forced herself not to run. "I have to get to Oswald."

"Not tonight," Ryan did not look over his shoulder. Making a path through the couples that were dancing, Ryan calmly made his way to the far side of the room. "I think it is a little late to use the front door." Elizabeth managed to pull her hand out of his.

"I am not leaving here without seeing the man intended for my father's letter!"

When Ryan turned around, Andrew was looking across the room, but he had not seen them. Two of his henchmen came up to him and Andrew held a deadly stare as he spoke to them briefly. Then, as quickly as they came to his side, the two men left in separate directions. Both of them were searching the crowd. At the same time that he kept his eye on Andrew, Ryan searched for Oswald.

"He is over there," he nodded toward the opposite side of the room. However, as soon as Elizabeth looked toward him, her eyes met Andrew's once more. "Can we go now?"

"I thought you said, the only way I was safe was if I stayed here?" She asked as the huge longhaired man began to walk toward her again. Ryan knew the look on Andrew's face. There was nowhere that Elizabeth was safe at that moment.

“I lied,” he said as he pulled her along the edge of the room to the nearest doorway. Elizabeth looked terrified, but Ryan knew that by avoiding eye contact, moving at a calm speed, and smiling nearly all of the time, Andrew might have no idea that he was looking for an escape for Elizabeth.

“Where are we going?” She asked as she wondered which devil was less evil. Ryan Hawke was the cruelest person that she had ever met, but there was no doubt in her mind that Andrew Roshire killed her father.

Ryan continued to search the faces of the crowd as he weaved his way through the room. Having nothing but his broad back to look at, Elizabeth concentrated on the long black swallowtail suit that he wore. He was a very muscular man. It was impossible to ignore, and Elizabeth wondered how someone that sat behind a desk the whole day could get into such a solid shape. However, the thought was brief as she almost smacked up against his back. Ryan had stopped suddenly in front of a middle aged man and a very uptight looking woman.

“How is your evening so far?” Ryan asked the man. A look of surprise came over the gentleman.

“What are you doing here?” The man asked with a stutter.

“I was worried about you,” Ryan answered as he walked around to the side of the man. “You missed our appointment today.”

“Was that today?” The man sounded surprised as he slowly stepped away from his wife. Glancing behind him for an idea of how far away Andrew Roshire was, Ryan walked with the man by his side.

“It is strange that I would find you at a charity fundraiser when you have still not paid your debt to me,” Ryan noted.

Elizabeth did not like the menacing tone of Ryan’s voice and began to slow her step. Beads of perspiration began to form on the man’s brow when he turned to speak, and Elizabeth knew that he was more than a little nervous.

“This is not what it looks like,” the gentleman offered nervously. “I am simply making an appearance, and then I was going to leave.” He hurried his step to get away from his wife as Ryan continued to stay by his side. “I was not going to donate anything.”

“I know that Ed,” Ryan answered as he placed his hand on the man’s shoulder. Elizabeth looked at Ryan’s hand. Wrinkles had started to form in the man’s jacket as Ryan applied a firm amount of pressure. “I knew you weren’t going to give my money away.”

“Not at all,” Ed whispered as he tolerated the firm grip that Ryan had on his arm. After he looked around the room for Mr. Roshire, Ryan turned his attention back to Ed.

“Why don’t you just give me what you have right now? And I will give you a few days grace period on the rest of the payment.”

“Alright,” the man said as the grip on his shoulder became more uncomfortable. “That is very kind of you.”

Elizabeth watched as the scared man reached into his billfold and took out every piece of currency that was in it. Ryan stood as still as stone, until the man handed over the money.

“I am a generous man,” Ryan added.

“Yes, very generous indeed,” Ed agreed as Ryan took his hand off of his shoulder. “Thank you,” he added as Ryan placed the money in his inside coat pocket.

“I will expect the rest in forty eight hours,” he said as he began to walk away.

Elizabeth took in the whole situation, and could easily comprehend what was happening. Even though she had just witnessed the specifics of Ryan’s business, she was too aware of her own situation to confront him.

“I think it is time to go,” Ryan added as he sensed the approach of one of Andrew’s friends. “Here,” pushing Elizabeth into a hallway, he looked at the other guests. “Stay right there,” he commanded. “Excuse me Miss,” he called to a lady with a large form. “Did you know that I have not seen a woman in here this evening that is quite as handsome as you?” The lady turned to see Ryan behind her and blushed immediately. “Would you do me a favor?” He asked. “Would you stand over here for a moment? So, I can get a better look at you.”

“Well, Ryan Hawke!” The well-rounded woman exclaimed as she stepped around him and put herself directly in front of Elizabeth like he asked. “What brings you here?”

“I came to see you, Guinevere.” The smile on his face was genuine as Ryan looked down at her curvaceous body. The large hoop skirt practically devoured Elizabeth as she pushed herself up against the wall.

“I am sure you did.” Guinevere answered as she looked at him.

“Hawke!” One of the men that Ryan was avoiding came to his side. “Did you just see a woman in a white dress with flowers all over it?” Ryan looked down at Guinevere and then glanced around the room.

"I have seen a lot of them Harland. Which one do you want?"

"Elizabeth Drake," Harland answered. "Roshire said that you had danced with her." With a smug smile, Ryan looked down at Guinevere.

"I have danced with quite a few women tonight," he replied. "I can't be held responsible for them all."

"I guess not." Harland related to Ryan very well. "But if you see her, take her to Mr. Roshire. He will be sure to make it worth your while."

"Absolutely," Ryan agreed, smiling back at the beautifully full-figured woman with a gorgeous face. Once Harland had walked away, Ryan gave his attention fully to Guinevere. "You have saved me again," he whispered. Turning her gaze up to the ceiling, Guinevere waited until Ryan leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on her cheek. "What would I do without you Guin?"

"You would probably shrivel up and die," she added with a smile.

"You are probably right." Ryan looked behind him before reaching around Guinevere and pulling Elizabeth out of the hallway.

Her heart was pounding in her chest so hard that she could scarcely breathe. Elizabeth was terrified. The man was clearly looking for her, and she knew that she was in more danger than she had ever expected. Ryan ignored her pale complexion and continued to pull her along the room, until he came to the stairway that led to the front door.

"Walk quickly," he ordered as he released her hand and made his way down the stairs. Elizabeth ignored the constant ache in her foot that had slowed her down all evening. Ryan looked at her over his shoulder and saw that she was moving as fast as she could.

It was still surprising to him that Elizabeth would appear completely stunning. When she had entered the room at Vincent's house, she had been transformed. The mud had been washed out of her hair and the caked brown color had been transformed into a beautiful shade of gold.

It was a painful relief to reach the bottom of the stairs and walk out the front door. She had desperately wanted to deliver her father's letter that evening, but once she seen Andrew, Elizabeth just wanted to get out.

The same amount of people that were inside the grand house, collected on the front steps, as well. Some of them were leaving and some were just arriving. Ryan quickly blended in with the crowd until

he reached the walkway. Then, with Elizabeth in tow, he started to walk down the pavement.

"Where are we going?" She began to favor her foot once more.

"Keep up," Ryan ordered. "I am not going to save you again tonight."

Trying to ignore the pain, Elizabeth found herself concentrating on the man that had killed her father. It was strange that she did not recognize him at first, but the more she pictured Andrew's build and his hair she knew that it was him. However, she could not understand how a wealthy man that lived thirty miles away could have anything to do with her father.

Elizabeth stared at the stone patterns in the walkway as she concentrated on not stepping in any of the cracks. Her ankle hurt enough, without getting the heel of her shoe broken.

"Can you walk any faster?" Ryan asked as he waited for her to catch up.

"No, I can't." The tight shoes had absolutely no support. Elizabeth had been in them for way too long, and her ankle was driving her crazy. "Can we at least hire a carriage?" Ryan waited until she was next to him before he answered her.

"We don't need to. We are almost there."

"Where are we going?" She asked for the final time. He could tell that she was having a hard time walking. So, he wrapped his arm under hers and began to pull her across the street. "I can walk on my own," she informed him.

"But can you walk fast enough not to get hit by a coach?" Keeping his arm around hers, Ryan pulled her towards a dark street.

Elizabeth stepped onto the curb of the walkway and looked down the darkened alley. As Ryan tried to pull her into it, she stood her ground.

"I am not going down there," she told him.

"Just keep walking. My carriage is down here." Ryan left her to stand were she was and continued on without her.

Against her better judgment, Elizabeth followed him into the small street. Thankfully, she only walked a few paces before she saw the two black horses come into view in an alley.

The hop-and-step of her gait began to annoy them both as her heals clicked on the cobblestone. However, neither of them spoke as they reached the carriage at last and Elizabeth climbed up into the seat.

“To Drake’s,” Ryan told the driver as he waited for Elizabeth to adjust her dress on the seat across from his. Once she stopped fidgeting, Ryan climbed up the step and sat down. “We need to get your brother. If they are after you, they are going to go through him first.”

Chapter five

"Here you are, Sir," Mr. Halis carried a tray of glasses into the room and set them on the desk. Without showing any sign of appreciation to the man, Vincent looked over to Elizabeth.

"Andrew Roshire is a businessman. He may be as honest as a thug, but he is not a murderer."

"I saw him." Ryan came to Elizabeth's defense. "And I know him better than you do. Don't underestimate what Andrew is capable of," he added. "Whether he killed your father or not, he wants your sister, and I don't think that he wants to invite her to tea on Sunday." Taking a glass that the butler offered him, he looked over to Elizabeth.

The soft glow of the lamplight made her look innocent as she held her hands in front of her. The white gloves were clasped together next to the pink roses. Her head hung slightly low, allowing a few of the golden curls to fall over her neck and rest against the white satin gown.

Ryan found himself staring at her. She was easy on the eyes, although he had no other thoughts about her. He was a fan of married women. With a married woman, there was almost no complication and he could leave anytime he wanted to. In his mind, women were perfect as long as they were independent, or dependant on someone else. A woman like Elizabeth was a train wreck waiting to happen.

"Hawke," Vincent brought Ryan's attention back.

"You know what I cannot figure out? Why someone that killed your father, and has been asking around about his children, has not come to you yet." Looking at the glass that he held in his hand Ryan continued. "You are a public figure, well known, and live in the same city." He took a drink of the brandy as Elizabeth refused the wine that the butler offered. "Anyone could have put you two together by your name. If I were you, I would really want to see that letter right now." Neither of the men looked toward Elizabeth.

She kept her head low as she looked over toward the door. Elizabeth would have to move behind Ryan's chair to get out of the room. Vincent was leaning on his desk, and there were a few pieces of furniture in between him and the door. If either of them tried to get the

letter from her, she could easily make it out of the room, but with her foot the way it was, Elizabeth would not get much further than that.

"It all comes down to money," Ryan offered. "The only reason men like Andrew Roshire do anything, is because of money. Did your father have a sudden surge of income at all?" When Elizabeth looked confused, he restated the question. "Did he all of a sudden start bringing home anything unusual like more food, of more booze, or new women?"

She was not about to answer the question. Every word was insulting to Elizabeth and her father's memory. Vincent set his glass on the desk and crossed his arms in front of him.

"Beth," Vincent took a more subtle approach. "Did Daniel ever come home from work with any unexplained marks, bruises, or injuries of any kind?"

"No, not that I am aware of." Keeping her mind on the distance between her and the door Elizabeth answered.

"What did he do?" Ryan asked as he sat back in the chair.

"Nothing of interest, odd jobs and maintenance at a glass factory," Vincent said as he thought about the letter that his sister held.

"He was a shareholder that was also in management and distribution!" Elizabeth offered sharply with pride.

Looking at her with curiosity, Vincent wondered when Daniel had decided to take a job seriously. Ryan turned his head quickly toward Vincent, but Vincent anticipated his thoughts.

"Oswald Roshire owns the glass factory in Caterwood. Andrew is controlling most of the family's business right now."

"Maybe your father saw, or knew, something that he wasn't supposed to."

"Like what?" Elizabeth looked down at the flowers on her dress and decided not to crush the beautiful decorations by sitting down, even though her foot was killing her.

"And again, we are back to the letter," Ryan pointed out.

"Did he ever come to Burdery," Vincent looked at his sister as she stood near the bookshelf.

"No," she answered. "Not that I am aware of." After the conversation about the letter had seemed to drop, Elizabeth began to wonder what else might be relevant. "Whenever Jacob or Jarred Sanderson would come to the city, Father would always have them see how you were doing, but he never sent anything or received anything."

“And you are sure, that the man that you saw at your friends house, asked for me.” Vincent kept his eyes on her while he waited for an answer.

“Not by name,” Elizabeth shook her head as she remembered the encounter. “He asked for Daniel’s son.” Ryan turned his head and noticed a flicker of light out on the road.

“I was going to suggest that Roshire did not know that you were related.” Ryan took another large drink of brandy. “But that is not the case.”

“We have different mothers and I was never in Caterwood. It is very possible that he has not put us together.” Vincent rubbed his cleanly shaved chin as he thought further.

“No,” Ryan said as he stood up out of the chair and began to walk to the door. “He knows you are related.”

“Why do you say that?” Elizabeth asked.

“Because if he didn’t know that you were related, then Harland Fening wouldn’t be walking up to your house right now.” Vincent looked out the window towards the street and saw the carriage outside.

“Get her out of here,” he said to Ryan.

“You could always just give her to them,” Ryan suggested as he admired the shocked look on Elizabeth’s face. “Just, go see what he wants. He is not going to start trouble all by himself.” Reassessing the situation, Vincent looked from Elizabeth over to Ryan.

“Keep her in here.” Opening the door to the study, Vincent met Mr. Halis in the hallway and walked across the den to the front door.

Silence surrounded them as Elizabeth strained her ears to hear what was being said. Ryan seemed unconcerned about the situation. He continued drinking his brandy and returned to his chair.

“What is Mr. Roshire going to do to him?” Elizabeth asked.

“Mr. Roshire is not here. It is Harland Fening at the door. Although he can be a drunken bastard at times, he is not dangerous on his own.” The entire time that he spoke, Ryan never even glanced at Elizabeth. “In fact, he is almost comical.”

“How do you know him?” She asked as she watched him stare at the glass. Instead of ignoring her curiosity, Ryan decided to answer her.

“I move in all the wrong circles.” When Elizabeth did not look like she understood, Ryan continued. “We used to work together.” When Elizabeth realized that she would not be able to hear Vincent, she questioned him further.

“At the bank?” She asked. Ryan twirled his brandy once more before he looked at her. Elizabeth had been staring at him, and she diverted her eyes quickly.

“Not exactly,” he answered. It was obvious that she was trying to listen for Vincent. “You won’t be able to hear anything, he is two rooms away.” When Elizabeth did not respond, Ryan came to his feet and walked over to the brandy decanter. “Why don’t you just give your brother the letter? Or do you want him to end up like your father?” Without realizing it, Elizabeth stepped toward him.

“Unlike you Mr. Hawke, I have morals!” She did not intend her outburst to be easy to ignore, but he managed to accomplish the feat. “My Father gave me strict instructions. He did not tell me to give it to my brother, and he did not tell me to give it to the first swindler I met in a flashy suit.” The anger burned in her eyes as she faced him boldly. “You may have intimidated the man at the banquette Mr. Hawke, but I am not afraid of you or my brother.”

As soon as the words escaped her lips, Ryan set his glass down on the table. There were no sudden movements, although she could not seem to back away from him in time. Ryan stepped over to her and held a very stern expression. His eyes seemed to warn her about the danger that was to follow. Without raising a hand, Ryan watched the color of her eyes as they widened with alarm.

“Don’t raise your voice to me.” He spoke in a calm manner. “I can hardly tolerate you to begin with.” His eyes continued to stare into hers, while she tried to correct the dryness that had been bothering her throat. “You need to give the letter to your brother.” Even as he hovered over her, Elizabeth was not going to budge.

“It is not meant for him.”

“Even if it gets you both killed?” Ryan asked as he raised his eyebrows slightly. Swallowing again, Elizabeth did not know how to answer him.

“Please keep at a distance, Sir.” She spoke quietly. The crack in her voice gave away her uncertainty, but Ryan was quick to correct the situation.

“What an excellent idea.” In an instant, he walked back over to his brandy glass on the table.

Almost as quickly as Ryan reached for his glass, Vincent walked back into the study. Elizabeth did not know her brother well enough to understand the look in his eyes, but Ryan leaned back against the table and waited for the information to unfold.

“Beth, we need to get you out of the city,” Vincent stated.

“How about getting her out of the country altogether?” Ryan took a drink before he pulled his lips tight across his teeth as he swallowed the warm liquor. “I hear that Finland is nice this time of year.”

“Not now, Ryan.” Vincent walked over to Elizabeth and took both of her hands in his. “Will you let me see the letter?” He asked. When it looked like she was going to refuse him again, Vincent tried to reason with her. “These men are dangerous, Beth.” He maintained a soft tone. “They know that we are related, but they don’t know that you are my sister. Andrew Roshire is not a man that you want to toy with. If you have something that he wants, he is going to get it.” The concern in his eyes was easy to see as he continued to hold her hands. “He will hurt you.”

The letter that was once concealed so well, that even Elizabeth could hardly feel it, began to cut like a thorn in her side. Her mind traced back to the look on her father’s face the moment before he sent her running out the back door.

“I can’t give it to you,” she whispered. “If we can just get it to Oswald, everything will be better. I know it will!” Although she had convinced herself of her theory, Ryan and Vincent shared a glance that bothered her. “Just help me get it to him,” she pleaded.

“Beth, the man that came here warned me that there was a charge on your head.” Releasing her hands, Vincent stepped back. “They will be watching the bank and the house from now on. You are not safe here.” As the clock on the fireplace sounded the late hour, Elizabeth was not sure that she understood her brother.

“Do they mean to kill me?”

“Whatever you are holding,” Vincent tried to stay calm even though he wanted to yell at her for being naïve. “Whatever is in that letter could save your life.”

“Or in her case it is going to get her killed,” Ryan added with a smug look.

“Damn it, Hawke! Not now!” Vincent knew that he had to keep Elizabeth calm if he was going to get her cooperation.

The tone and the insults that were coming out of his mouth were not helping her consider trusting them. Ryan was driving her further away with every comment that he made.

“I am going back to the Inn. I have to return this dress and pick up my things. Then I will find a way to get to Oswald.” Placing her

weight on her sore foot, Elizabeth looked up at Vincent. “You are a coward,” she whispered. “I have no idea what my father lost his life for, but if this is it?” She placed her hand above the letter concealed in her gown. “Then, I am going to see that it gets to the person that it was intended for.”

Vincent stood in front of her and ran his hand through his hair as he exhaled. For being a man of tall stature, He was not very powerful. His shoulders were round and slanted down off of his neck. Although he did not appear ill or sickly, he was a very thin and wiry man. With an almost pale complexion, Vincent looked very much like a businessman. However, he was still bold, conceited, and self-assured about his abilities.

“I may be a lot of things little sister, but I am no coward.” The tension in the room was becoming too much for her, Elizabeth stepped around her brother and began walking toward the door of the study. When he realized that there would be no stopping her, Vincent looked over to Ryan and lifted his head. “Take her to the Inn. I am going to see what I can find out.”

“No,” Ryan set his glass down on the table. “No one will tell you anything. You play nanny for a while. I have some things to take care of.” Ryan was not in the habit of waiting for permission or being polite. So, there was not even a pause or a glance to either of them before Ryan opened the door and walked out of the room. Elizabeth turned back to her brother after the door closed behind Ryan.

“What are you doing with him?”

There was no answer as Vincent picked up his jacket and walked over to Elizabeth. Placing a hand under her arm, he guided her and her limp out of the study and waited for Mr. Halis to call for his carriage.

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“I tried to stop them from coming in,” Lewis said as he held a cloth to his brow. The small lobby was in shambles. Stains of blood covered the linen and Elizabeth looked around the room franticly.

“Where is Anna?” She asked, hurrying toward the back of the Inn.

“I sent her away when they got here.” Keeping up to her quickened pace, Lewis continued to explain. “They came only a few minutes ago, two men with long dark coats.” Vincent had released

Elizabeth's arm and was walking down the hall in front of her. "When I refused to show them to your room, they threatened to hurt my Anna."

"I am so sorry Lewis. I didn't mean for this to happen." Elizabeth continued down the hall until she came to the room that she had been staying in. All of the furniture had been overturned. Much of it was destroyed. The mattress had been ripped open, along with the upholstery on the chair in the corner. Everything had been torn off of the walls. The green gown and country dress had been shredded.

"Whatever they were looking for was not here. They were even angrier when they left, than they were when they arrived." Lewis stepped into the room and looked around the floor.

It was obvious that something was wrong when they reached the front door of the Inn. The frame of the door was broken and a vase that had sat on the front desk had been thrown on the floor, but when Lewis stepped out of the parlor, Elizabeth was overcome with guilt. The cut on his head was deep. It was bleeding severely, but the fact that he could not stand upright without showing the pain in his abdomen terrified her. It was a senseless act of violence. There was nothing there of hers except for the clothing. Lewis had paid dearly for his kindness to her.

"Is Anna alright?" She asked as she continued to stare at the mess around her.

"Yes," he answered with a short groan of pain. "They allowed her to leave unharmed when they came in." Vincent turned to her with an appearance of shock and disappointment.

"This is only the beginning, Elizabeth." He warned her. Lifting the purse that was at her side, Elizabeth reached into the stack of money that her father had given her.

"Here," she said as she offered Lewis half of what she had. It was more than enough to cover the damages, but she could not cover the injuries that Lewis had suffered or the friendship she had lost. "I never meant for any of this to happen. I couldn't have known that…"

Lewis turned to her as Vincent reached under her arm. "Just go," Lewis said quietly as he turned away from her.

Tears had begun to form in her eyes as she watched the kind man continue to hold his stomach as he walked out of the room. Elizabeth reached behind her neck and unfastened the clasp to the necklace that Anna had lent her, before setting the beautiful item on the only shelf that was left on the wall.

“Where am I going to go?” She turned to Vincent with the tears just beginning to spill over.

He did not want to look angry. Even though he knew she was completely responsible for what had happened to the kind couple. Vincent did not intend to show the fury that he felt. If Elizabeth had simply handed over the letter, he would know what they were dealing with, but her loyalty had placed her life in jeopardy, destroyed two rooms at the Inn, and put him in nearly as much danger.

“Vincent,” she whispered his name as her eyes showed her fear and vulnerability. In the twenty years that she had lived, Elizabeth had never known what it was like to be helpless. Daniel had never left her alone and she had never been placed in danger.

It was either the glow of her eyes, as the tears reflected the dim light, or it was the subtle tilt of her head, but something made Vincent realize how scared Elizabeth really was. Before he could come up with an idea to help her, Vincent pulled her into his embrace.

She did not allow herself to cry. Even though she could hardly hold back the tears, she allowed her brother to hold on to her without fully confiding in him. Vincent had turned his back on her twice in the last week. She would not trust him so easily again.

“Come on,” he whispered as he pulled her to the door. “We have to go.”

“We can’t go back to your house,” she informed him quietly. “If they see you with me, they will do the same thing to you, or even worse.” Pulling away from his assistance, Elizabeth waited for him to understand.

“We need help,” he said as he took her arm once more. Pulling away from his grasp, Elizabeth held up her hand.

“Not Ryan,” she protested. Vincent sighed as he turned back to her.

“Well, we can’t go to the authorities with this. Andrew and Oswald practically own Burdery law enforcement. If we go to them, they will have us both locked away. Your precious letter will never see its way into the right hands.”

“I don’t like that man, Vincent.” She held her voice quiet as she stepped over a piece of broken glass. “That man will turn me over to them the minute you have your back turned.”

There was no point in denying the possibility. Ryan Hawke was not exactly a stand up citizen in the community, but he was good at what he did. He could buy them a little time, while Vincent tried to

figure something out. The only downfall was that, if Andrew made the deal sweet enough for Ryan, Elizabeth could easily be in even more danger.

"We don't have a choice," Vincent admitted. "We just need a day or two."

Taking her hand once more, he led her down the hall and back out to the street. A million thoughts ran through Elizabeth's mind as she looked back at the damage that was done to the Inn. When they reached the carriage that brought them across town, Elizabeth became terrified of seeing Mr. Hawke again.

"You cannot trust him," she tried to warn Vincent. Her thoughts had led her to the benefit that night. "I saw him Vincent. I saw him threaten a man and take his money."

"You don't know what you are talking about." Vincent assisted her into the carriage and crawled up to sit across from her.

"He cannot be exactly honest. He took that man's money in a very unprofessional way." As Elizabeth was trying to warn her brother, Vincent began to chuckle. "There is nothing commendable about him."

Vincent continued to smile as he knocked on the roof of the carriage to signal to the driver. The horses pulled ahead with a slight jerk, and Elizabeth waited for him to respond.

"You won't have to deal with him," he reassured her. "Just stay quiet when he is around. Try not to provoke him."

"Try not to provoke him?" Elizabeth sounded insulted. "That is nearly impossible!" Elizabeth looked out the window as she slid her foot out of the small dress shoe. "The man probably wakes up in the morning provoked about one thing or another." Once the shoe was completely off of her foot, she sighed with relief at the slight feeling of freedom. "Even if I stay absolutely silent, he will still be just as verbally abusive." Shaking his head, Vincent wondered how long Ryan would tolerate her.

"Just don't talk back. No matter what he says to you or to me, just hold your tongue. Ryan has very little patience, but we need him."

"Need him for what?" Elizabeth asked. "What can he possibly help us with?"

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There was a faint light in the window of the small cottage. The house was almost completely enclosed by the trees that surrounded it, but when the carriage pulled up the long drive, the quiet serenity called to Elizabeth.

"Is this where he lives?" She asked curiously as she glanced curiously through the window.

"Stay here," Vincent ordered as the driver opened the carriage door. "I will be right back."

The interest was set aside once Vincent left her view. The idea of having to replace her shoe caused Elizabeth to test her pain. Though she continued to watch out the window, she slowly rotated her ankle. The movement was painful, but she continued it anyway. Each turn of her foot seemed to be easier and more flexible. However, she was not ready to put the shoe back on.

Vincent was gone for quite a few minutes. Although, she did not know where they were, or what he was doing. By the time that he returned to the carriage, the anticipation was nearly unbelievable.

"Where have you been?"

"Alright, we will stay here for the night, but remember what I said. Don't make him mad, and don't respond to any of his comments." Vincent held out his hand to Elizabeth as she stuffed her huge ankle into the tiny shoe. "He hates people that don't have a sense of humor."

"Why can't we just go to a hotel? Surely you can't mean to put Mr. Hawke in the same danger that we are in?" Even as she protested Vincent pulled her out of the carriage. When she placed her feet on the ground, he led her to the door.

"I think he can handle us for one night."

The city was invisible from where she stood. The sounds of the country were around her once more. An owl called in the distance, making Elizabeth want to jump at the sound. There was an almost eerie appearance to the location of the small house. However, despite her concerns, Vincent pulled her up to the door.

Ryan's eyes went directly to Elizabeth's as she entered the small lamp lit entryway. A dark parlor extended off to the left, but she could not see much beyond that.

"There is a room upstairs to the left." He looked toward the hallway behind him. It was more than obvious that Ryan was not happy about their intrusion. "No one has been up there in a while. So, don't expect it to be immaculate." Turning away from them, Ryan

walked toward the hallway. He stopped just short of the stairs and turned to face Elizabeth. “The lamp is on the right of the door. Breakfast is at seven.” Before Elizabeth could begin climbing the stairs, Ryan added quickly to her, “I like my eggs poached.”

Placing her foot on the step, Elizabeth turned to her brother with a confused and insulted glare. Vincent did not say anything. He simply lowered his head a little, and shook it gently to show that Ryan was not serious. When Elizabeth had taken to the stairs, Ryan looked after her.

“She’s a lot of fun, isn’t she?” Ryan asked. Sarcasm was not one of Vincent’s favorite qualities. So, he turned back down the hall and entered the parlor.

“There has to be somewhere that I can hide her, while I find out how to get to Oswald,” Vincent stated.

“I hate to point this out, but the woman is leaving a path of destruction in her wake.” The large caramel colored chair looked inviting. Ryan was not going to resist the urge to relax. “You are not keeping her here.”

“I need a drink,” Vincent said as he looked around the room. “Where is your Brandy?”

“I don’t have any.” Ryan leaned his head against the back of the chair and closed his eyes.

“What do you mean, you don’t have any? You always have something around here.” Vincent checked the shelves on the wall and then looked at the desk in the corner. Ryan opened his eyes and yawned.

“I don’t buy it anymore.”

“But you have no problem drinking mine,” Vincent remarked.

“I have no problem drinking it. I just don’t buy it.” Lifting his head off of the chair, Ryan decided to explain.

“You are getting pretty cheap there, Hawke.”

“How else could you afford me?” Raising his hand to his eyebrow, Ryan ran his finger along the scab that was beginning to annoy him.

“I am going to go and find Lawrence Malone in the morning,” Vincent began.

“Isn’t he on Oswald’s payroll?” Ryan asked.

“He is the accountant.” Vincent leaned his shoulder against the wall. “He has been to the bank a couple of times.”

“I know the man,” Ryan added.

“He does not deal with Andrew that often, from what I know. Maybe I can get into see Oswald through him.” The idea seemed possible, although Vincent knew he was taking a risk by bringing Elizabeth out in the open. “The only other idea I have, is to go back to Caterwood.” Holding his focus on the rug under his feet, Ryan nodded his head again.

“That makes sense. Someone either knows what is going on or Daniel might have left something at the house.”

“Or the office,” Vincent added. “I am pretty sure the house will have been cleaned out by now. Whoever went through the Inn was pretty thorough about tearing it up.”

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The night had been long and cumbersome for Elizabeth. Within the small room, she had tossed and turned endlessly. Although the bed was comfortable and warm, she hardly slept more than a few hours.

She had already replaced the dress shoes that she had worn the night before. After pulling her snarled and straggly hair away from her face, she made a quick braid of her golden blond tresses. When the sun rose high, Elizabeth finally left the room and ventured through the narrow halls, until she returned to the parlor that she had seen the night before.

“Vincent,” she called quietly as she entered the room. When there was no answer, Elizabeth took to investigating the house. “Vincent,” she called again as she found the kitchen and a small den. The lack of response was unnerving to her. “Mr. Hawke,” she finally called as a last resort. There was still no answer as Elizabeth walked through the small cottage.

With light colored paper on the walls, the tranquil dwelling was not what she had expected from a man like Mr. Hawke. He seemed like someone that would live in a pub and have absolutely no fashionable sense at all. The house was not spotless, by any means, but it was well kept with some small nice pieces of furniture and decoration.

As Elizabeth continued through the rooms, her search for her brother came to an end with no success. When the thought of being alone began to make her nervous, she ventured outside. The few clouds covered up most of the sun’s rays, but it could not hide the lush green life that surrounded the cottage.

The land that was hidden from her sight the night before enveloped her senses. An old wooden fence surrounded the front of the property and separated the bright green grass from the gravel that lined the drive. Elizabeth allowed her eyes to follow the fence to the east. In the far corner of the fenced in yard was an old doghouse. The wood was warped on the sides. The condition of the doghouse was not her concern. It was the location of the missing dog that bothered her.

After looking around cautiously, Elizabeth lifted the bottom of her skirt off of the grass, and headed toward the back of the house. Once she had rounded the side of the cottage, she heard a rhythmic sound coming from one of the sheds behind the house. She knew the sound well, and decided to find out who was splitting the wood.

The sound grew louder as she came to the edge of a garden. Whoever cared for the grounds had done an excellent job. A small rabbit fence had been placed around the garden as well, but holes along the outside proved that it had been invaded more than once.

Around the side of the large shed, Elizabeth finally reached the origin of the sound that had taken her attention. As she came to the corner of the building, she could see him wield an axe over his shoulder before slamming it into the end of a block of wood. Shock and embarrassment caused her to look away as Ryan lifted the axe again.

With his shirt hung over a nail on the side of the shed, Ryan continued to drive the axe through the firewood. Elizabeth raised her hand over her eyes as she kept her focus on the grass, but when the sound of the axe continued, her eyes seemed to rise against her better judgment.

Elizabeth found herself entranced. Ryan had his back to her, and was unaware of the attention that he was drawing. Long lean muscles spanned from his shoulders to his waist. Every curve of his body was defined and flawless. Simple brown pants and unlaced boots were all that he wore, and Elizabeth forced herself to look away again. However, when a dog barked behind her, silence and propriety was thrown to the wind.

“Ryan!” It was not until her feet were gliding across the grass that Elizabeth realized her own voice had called out. When she looked over her shoulder, the huge black animal was in a full run at her heels. Without a second thought, she bolted toward the half-naked man.

Ryan did not expect was to see a cloud of material at a full run toward him. Her skirts flew behind her and a look of terror streaked her face.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" He called out as she plowed into him. Elizabeth threw herself into the arms that had opened instinctively, and crashed against his bare chest. Ryan turned her away from the dog. "Runt, back down!" He yelled. The black Labrador began to jump around them. She nipped at the train of Elizabeth's dress, like she had found a bright new toy. "Get down!" Ryan ordered again. Keeping the terrified woman in one arm, he pointed at the dog and repeated the command, "Get down!" His voice had a calm pitch to it as the lab whined at him. "No, you can't have the damn flowers," he added. It was then that he realized the woman was practically clung to his chest. Using the same tone, he looked down at her wide crystalline eyes. "You too," he added. "Get down."

"Why is that thing loose?" Elizabeth asked as she stepped away from him.

"She's not going to hurt you." Ryan looked back at the dog that had lain down on the grass in front of them. The thick black tail was wagging and she was panting from the long run. "She's just a pup."

"A pup," Elizabeth exclaimed. However, Ryan did not seem interested in her fear. "Why don't you have her tied up?"

"Come here, Runt," he called. Elizabeth jumped behind him but was careful not to place her hands on him again. When the dog came near, Ryan bent down and scratched the dog's ears. "She is too lazy to get into trouble. I'm surprised she even barked." Pushing her hair behind her ear, Elizabeth sighed heavily.

"Where is my brother?" She asked as she noticed his undressed state once more.

"He went to take care of some business. He should be back soon." Ryan lifted the axe that had fallen out of his hands, and rested it against the block. "Is there something you need?" Diverting her eyes from his body once more, Elizabeth stared at the dog that appeared more playful than deadly.

"No," she answered. Ryan waited for her to say something, but when Elizabeth began to step away from him, he looked down to Runt.

"Go lay down," he ordered calmly. The dog walked to the side of the shed and curled up on a burlap sack that was on the floor. When Ryan turned his attention back to Elizabeth, she was walking toward the house.

Chapter six

"He won't see me for two weeks," Vincent said as he placed his hat on a table by the door. "Where is Beth?"

"She is around here somewhere." Ryan had spent the morning out in the shed with Runt and had not seen her since the incident with the dog. Moving into the house behind Vincent, he looked toward the parlor. "What did you tell Malone?"

"I said that I had an urgent message for Oswald. That I had to see him as soon as possible." Falling into the chair by the window, Vincent looked around the room. "Did she clean in here?" Ryan looked at the tables and the floor and noticed the improvement.

"It wasn't me."

"She must have been bored. Elizabeth," Vincent called through the house and waited for an answer. When there was no answer, Ryan looked up to Vincent.

"Did he say why you could not get to see him sooner?"

"I guess he is overseeing the blind school himself. He is going to be over in Cameron for the next week or so." Vincent looked to the hallway and called again, "Elizabeth!"

"They're building it in Cameron?" Ryan asked as Vincent stood up and began to look for his sister.

Cameron was the same size as Burdery. However, it had a much larger population. It was home to one of the best colleges in the area. Along with the college, Cameron also had the grandest hotel in that part of the country. It was built only five years before. With three stories and almost a hundred rooms, the Regal Hotel was well renowned.

"Where is she?" Vincent entered the hallway and looked into the small kitchen. "Elizabeth," he called up the stairs.

"Just a minute," she called from the bedroom. "I'll be right there."

"Has she been a problem?" Vincent asked as he looked back to Ryan.

"From the moment she walked into the bank," Ryan offered as if Vincent was an idiot. Ignoring the comment, Vincent turned to watch Elizabeth walk down the stairs in the large gown.

“Well, we need to get you some more clothes before we head back to Caterwood,” he said.

“Back to Caterwood?” Elizabeth asked as she stepped into the parlor.

“We need to go to the glass factory and find out what Daniel had on Andrew Roshire.” Vincent walked over to the sofa and sat down. With a confused look on her face, Elizabeth turned to Ryan and noticed that he had washed up and replaced his shirt.

“What do you mean?” She asked her brother.

“Andrew Roshire runs the glass factory for Oswald. As far as we know, that is the only connection between him and Daniel.” Vincent sat forward and adjusted the back of his jacket. “So, if Andrew was doing something illegal, or if Daniel was trying to hide something, it would probably be in his office.”

“My father had nothing to hide,” she insisted quickly.

“Then what is in the letter?” Ryan spoke up with a hint of annoyance.

“That is none of your business.” Elizabeth answered as she almost lost her patience. Seeing an awkward moment arise Vincent tried to put a stop to the argument.

“Beth,” he called. Once she looked up he held her gaze with warning. “You are a guest. Show some respect.”

“Show some respect?” She repeated. Biting her tongue, Elizabeth switched the position of her feet and refused to look at Mr. Hawke. Unfortunately, her little outburst intrigued Ryan. He wondered how hard he would have to push her to make her do it again.

“When are we leaving for Caterwood?” She asked quietly. The desire to lash out at her brother was stronger than her desire to lash out at Ryan.

“Can you handle things in town for a day or two?” Vincent looked over at Ryan and sighed. “I don’t know what we will find or if we will find anything at all.”

“When do I ever handle anything at the bank?” Lifting his hand slightly and giving Vincent an awkward look, Ryan wondered why he would even ask the question.

“Two days at the most,” Vincent said again.

“You are not thinking,” Ryan began, “You have never missed a day of work.” Keeping his voice in a sharp tone Ryan continued, “If you take off for two days right now, when they have already told you that they will be watching you, they will know you are up to

something." Although Elizabeth disliked him with a passion, Ryan had a point. So, she remained silent and listened. "Caterwood is the first place that they will go to look for you. If Harland and Gatler don't figure it out on their own Andrew will send them there."

"Gatler?" Elizabeth asked.

"You have a problem repeating people. Did you know that?" Ryan asked as he turned to her. If she were not completely concentrating on the name that she heard, Elizabeth would have made a rude comment of her own.

"Father called out that name when he left the house that morning. Gatler was one of the men on horseback!" After Elizabeth finished, Ryan and Vincent looked at each other for a moment.

"I'll see what I can find out," Ryan stated before lifting his head quickly and looking over to Elizabeth. "Is there anything else that you can remember? Or do we need to just beat our heads against a wall until more little details pop-up in your brain?" The cruel tone of his voice invaded her nostalgic moment.

"Let's go," Vincent said. He quickly stood up in front of Elizabeth and stopped her from lashing out. "We need to get you something to wear and we have to stop by the bank." When Ryan looked at him and shook his head Vincent explained, "I cannot hide her for the two weeks that it will take to get to Oswald."

"You won't even get out of the city until after noon. How do you expect to get there and back before they have noticed?" Standing up out of his chair, Ryan walked into a small room off of the side of the parlor and retrieved his knife. Elizabeth was unaware, but Vincent watched him place the knife in his back pocket.

"Are you coming with us?" Elizabeth asked.

"No," Ryan answered. "I have to see an old friend about something."

"We will give you a ride into the city." Taking Elizabeth by the arm Vincent gently led her to the door.

"That's alright," Ryan walked over behind them. "I'll take my horse. We'll meet you at the bank."

Nodding his head in understanding, Vincent led Elizabeth outside. A combination of fear and anticipation began to build in her. She had not considered going back to Caterwood without giving the letter to Mr. Roshire, but she did not seem to have a choice as her brother lead her out the door and toward the carriage. As she stepped

inside the coach, Elizabeth moved the back of the dress aside before she sat down.

The idea of returning to Caterwood began to seem like a good idea. She would be able to talk to Fanny and Jarred about staying with them for a while, until she could get a job and begin to support herself. It would still be a while before she was secure enough to leave her brother's side, but in her mind it was only a matter of days before she could begin to form some kind of normalcy in her life. Vincent sat across from her as Elizabeth watched out the window.

"Why do you let him talk to me like that?" She asked as she watched Ryan head back to the stable.

"It is just his personality. He is an American," Vincent stated the comment as a fact more than a label. "He has always been cheeky, and he always will be."

"So you just ignore him?"

"Actually I think it is funny," he almost smiled. Elizabeth had a hard time believing his words.

"He is rude and inconsiderate. There is nothing funny about it."

"Just don't take him so seriously," Vincent warned as he leaned out the window. "Drive on."

"How can I not take him seriously? He always seems to be serious," she replied.

The coach drove to the end of the lane and then turned around the circle that had been beaten into the drive. Once they past the house a second time, Vincent noticed Elizabeth looking across the lawn for Ryan.

"Don't worry about him, once we get this straightened out you won't have to deal with him that much."

"I'd rather not deal with him at all," she whispered.

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Their first stop was to a ladies shop. Elizabeth was instructed to walk into the shop, pick out two simple dresses, a bonnet, and get back out to the coach within a few minutes. Even though the stop took a lot longer than he had expected, Vincent was still patient when his sister came out of the store with the first smile that he had ever seen on her as an adult.

The idea made him realize how much he had been treating her like a problem instead of family. However, he did not know how to

correct the issue. Elizabeth had always been very sheltered from life, treated like a porcelain doll, and protected. He was thrown out into the mix without as much as a coin to his name.

"Did you get what you needed?" Vincent asked as she stepped back into the carriage. The grand smile faded quickly as saw him. Clutching the two brown packages to her chest, she nodded appreciatively.

"Yes thank you," she said. "I'm sorry that it took so long, but there were a few other ladies in there."

It was actually fun to her to walk into the store and purchase two gowns that had been set out. Though she made sure that both of them were practical, the idea alone was pleasant. The one thing that she was able to purchase was a second-hand pair of boots that had been set on the floor in a corner of the shop. To Elizabeth's surprise they were a perfect fit and held more support and comfort than the little shoes she had been squeezing into. Vincent called up to the driver, and within seconds they were off to make their final stop before leaving the city.

"Have you given any thought to where you will go when this is over?" He asked as he admired her steadfast, yet delicate smile. Unfortunately for Elizabeth, her brother's question brought an end to the joy of the dress shop.

"I am going to ask a friend if I can stay with her and her husband. Then I am going to try and get a job at the glass factory."

"The glass factory?" Vincent asked without hiding his surprise. "Why would you want to work there? Wouldn't you be more comfortable as a governess or a nanny?" When Elizabeth did not answer, Vincent tried to offer help. "I could always see if I could find you a position in the city. There are many opportunities for bright young women around here." There was a soft expression to his face. For the first time, Elizabeth felt like he really wanted to help her.

"Thank you, but no. I would not be comfortable here. I don't feel safe."

"That is because you are not safe. If we can get all of this straightened out, you won't have anything to be afraid of." Although Vincent had always been an unemotional man, he was still caring toward her.

"I am sorry that I have brought all of this on you," Elizabeth whispered to him.

"You did not do this, Daniel did." Vincent reminded her.

She wanted to retaliate. She wanted to defend her father at all cost, but there seemed to be no way. Even though it was unintentional, Daniel had placed her in danger. She had complicated things further by incorporating Vincent into her troubles.

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The building passed in front of her again and some of them had begun to look familiar. Elizabeth saw the bank come into view and looked around for Mr. Hawke, but he was nowhere to be found. Vincent stepped out of the carriage and looked down the street both ways. When he did not see either of Andrew Roshire's henchmen, he turned to his sister.

"It is a long way to Caterwood. Do you want to come in with me and stretch your legs for a minute?"

Elizabeth nodded eagerly as she remembered the long two and-a-half hour ride to the city. Stepping down out of the carriage, she placed the brown packages on her seat before following Vincent up to the door of the bank.

"Come on, we still need to hurry," he said. Taking a set of keys out of his pocket, Vincent turned the lock. Once they crossed the small foyer, he walked to his office and unlocked that door as well. Elizabeth followed silently as he removed a book from a shelf, concealing the loan shark's personal supply of money.

It was the sound of the front door slamming that caused Elizabeth to jump further into the room. Vincent dropped the empty book on the floor but barely made it to her side before he saw the intruders. Quickly, he pulled his sister behind him.

"Well, if it isn't Elizabeth Drake." A man in a long black jacket and a scar just to the side of his right eye walked into the office. Elizabeth inhaled quickly as she looked at one of the men that had arrived at her home the morning her father was killed.

"Gatler," Vincent spoke his name the same way Daniel did on his last day. "What brings you here?" Protectively, he backed up forcing Elizabeth against the wall of his office.

"You have someone I want." The deepness in the scared man's voice was nearly as intimidating as the steel blue of his eyes. Elizabeth was his obvious desire.

The squared shape of his face and the thickness of his jaw would have been handsome to some women. His shoulders were broad

and he appeared very strong. However, his thin lips were drawn up in a menacing smile that was far too threatening to be considered attractive.

"There is someone that wants a word with you Miss Drake. I think he has been kept waiting long enough," Gatler said without easing his smile. Vincent looked back at his sister and saw the fear in her eyes.

"If Andrew wants her, then he is going to have to come and get her," he informed the intruders. Gatler was far larger than Vincent and Elizabeth knew that if her brother tried to protect her he was going to get seriously hurt.

"He sent me, Drake. I think that's good enough." Gatler looked to the man that had walked up behind him. Elizabeth was surprised to see the person that she had refused to dance with at the benefit the night before. "Take her, Harland." Pressed against the bookshelf, Elizabeth watched as both men came toward them in the small room.

Vincent stayed directly in front of her as Gatler approached. He was not afraid of the fight, he was afraid to lose, and his opponent was reputable to give a hard beating. As Gatler threw the first punch to Vincent's jaw, he knew that he was in trouble.

Vincent took the hit well and stood up to retaliate. He was much stronger than either Elizabeth or Gatler first suspected. When the hit forced Gatler's head back, Harland moved in to try and grab Elizabeth.

"No!" She backed away from him as Gatler took another swing at Vincent. This time, Vincent did not take the hit so well and it took a second to shake off the pain.

"Run, Beth!" He yelled as he threw himself into Gatler's stomach, hitting the bruit as hard as he could. It took the large man a moment to gather his bearings, but when he did all patience was lost.

Elizabeth tried to move around Harland and get to the door, but the wiry man wrapped his arms around hers and held her tight. Kicking and screaming, Elizabeth tried to get away but when she looked over to Vincent she almost froze with fear. Gatler knocked Vincent in the stomach hard enough to force all of the air out of his lungs. When Vincent bent over in pain the real beating started. Gatler threw punch after punch, until Vincent could not stand any more.

Blood trickled from his nose and mouth. His arm was fixed against his stomach. However, Elizabeth was not forced to watch him suffer for long. When Gatler turned to face her, a cruel laugh rose from

his chest before he hit Vincent a final time, sending the unconscious man to the floor. Elizabeth cried out, but Harland only held her tighter.

"Don't worry. He's going to be fine. You on the other hand…" His words trailed off into laughter as he pushed her towards the door. When Elizabeth had failed again to kick him in the shin, she looked up to see Ryan standing just outside the office door.

"Where are you going, darling? You can't leave me just because you don't like my dog." Even though Ryan spoke with a calm voice, there was a deep menacing look in his eye. Harland pulled Elizabeth back into the office as Gatler stepped up to Ryan.

"Don't get involved Hawke," he warned. "This has nothing to do with you."

"You know me, Gatler." Ryan said as he stepped into the room. Elizabeth watched as both men backed away from Ryan. "I like to make things my business." He continued to step forward, until Gatler held his ground. Then, Ryan turned to Harland. "Let the lady go."

"I can't do that, Hawke," Gatler said in a stern voice.

"Of course you can't." Ryan returned his attention to the taller and broader man. "You aren't the one holding her." Harland's grip on Elizabeth began to tighten and she winced in pain. When Ryan heard her small cry he turned to her with a very dangerous look. "Come here Beth," Ryan said as he held out his hand.

Harland looked up to Gatler with a curious glance. Before Elizabeth knew what had happened. Gatler tried to push Ryan's hand away. Ryan pulled his hand back, balled his fist, and connected with the side of Gatler's face.

"You shouldn't have done that, Hawke." Gatler raised his hand to his chin. "We go back too far for it to come to this."

As soon as Gatler stood up, he raised his arm to throw his fist toward Ryan. Ryan barely avoided the hit before sending his fist into Gatler's face again.

"Let her go, Harland!" Ryan ordered.

The word's were ignored as Gatler turned back to face him. With a quick move, Gatler threw himself at Ryan. However, Ryan was not about to be caught off guard. His knee drove right into Gatler's midsection before his fist connected with his face. Doubled over with his hand on his stomach, Gatler spit some blood out of his mouth.

"Harland, I am going to tell you one more time to let her go. Then, I am going to lose my patience." Ryan warned as he stared at Gatler.

Elizabeth could not see the look of worry on Harland's face, but she did notice that his grip on her had lessened. Gatler's large form stood up again and Ryan sighed as he shook his head. Then, as soon as Gatler threw another punch, Ryan blocked the hit, throwing his fist into the man's face again. To his surprise, Gatler recovered too quickly and caught Ryan in the chin. Elizabeth turned away as Gatler continued to pound Ryan in the face.

"Let go of me!" Elizabeth screamed as she kicked her foot back toward Harland's leg.

Her gown made it nearly impossible for the kick to land hard, but it hit Harland enough to make him release her. Elizabeth moved aside just fast enough for Ryan to grab the thin man and pull him in front of Gatler's next punch. That one solid hit knocked Harland to the ground, offering a moment of surprise that Ryan took full advantage of.

He began slamming his fists into Gatler's face. One after another, he pummeled the larger man. To Elizabeth's surprise he did not stop, until Gatler bent over with the pain. When Ryan saw that the large man was going down, he threw two more blows to his stomach. Then, he grabbed Elizabeth, pulling her behind him.

"Are you alright?" He asked as he watched Gatler closely. The man had been Ryan's friend for years, and although Ryan did not want to fight him, he was not about to let him take Elizabeth. "Get up!" He yelled to Vincent.

Elizabeth knelt down next to her brother and tried to help him off of the floor. Ryan kept his eye on Gatler. It wasn't easy, but with a little help, Vincent finally came to his feet.

"Come on," Elizabeth called as she pulled her brother toward the door. Gatler still had not moved, but Ryan knew that it was only a matter of time before the large man would be back on his feet. The three of them quickly left the bank and Ryan led Vincent over to his horse.

"You aren't going anywhere," Ryan spoke as he watched how Vincent held on to his ribs. "I will take her back to Caterwood. Get somewhere and sit tight. We will be back by tonight."

"Here," Vincent said as he handed Ryan the money from the book.

"Andrew will be looking for you." Ryan looked at Elizabeth and then back to Vincent. "You need to stay out of sight." Vincent held his breath as he climbed up into the saddle.

“Find out what you can.” Vincent groaned as he took the reins and gritted his teeth against the pain in his side. Every breath of air enflamed his lungs as the cracked ribs made it nearly impossible to move. The horse below him had no sympathy for his pain. However, Vincent looked over at his sister and nodded his head toward her. “I can’t protect you if you stay here. You have to go with Hawke.” Elizabeth looked back at Ryan before she protested.

“Someone needs to stay with you.” The amount of blood that ran out of his mouth made Elizabeth sick to her stomach.

“Beth, you have to go, at least for today.” When Elizabeth nodded her head in agreement, Vincent squeezed his arm against his side and moved the horse forward. Ryan looked back to the bank and took Elizabeth by the hand.

“We need to hurry. Once Gatler gets back to Andrew, they will be on their way to Caterwood.” Pulling her toward the carriage, Ryan practically pushed her inside. “If we can’t find out what we need to, we have to go all the way to Cameron.”

“Cameron?” Elizabeth sat on the seat and watched the bank for any sign of Gatler or Harland. “Why would we go to Cameron?” Getting up into the carriage with her, Ryan closed the door.

“Get moving!” He yelled up to the driver. When he looked back at Elizabeth, he could tell that she was almost in shock. “You have a letter that needs to get to Oswald Roshire before you get us all killed.”

“What about Vincent?” She asked.

“He’ll be fine. If anyone can take a beating, it’s your brother.” Ryan watched out the window as they passed the town square where a waterfall and a statue was the center of attention. “Once we get out of town, we are getting rid of the driver. We don’t need anyone else tagging along.” The cut on his lip had a few drops of blood running down the corner of his mouth.

“You are bleeding,” she whispered.

He could tell that the little bit of blood on his face bothered her. Ryan raised his hand that was gashed open by one of Gatler’s teeth, to feel the small insignificant cut.

“Are you sure?” He asked mockingly as blood nearly poured out of his hand. Once she saw the open wound on his knuckles, Elizabeth reached into her sack for her handkerchief. “Stop,” Ryan yelled up to the driver. Elizabeth looked around for a moment as she tried to figure out why Ryan stopped the carriage. When he looked

down at her small delicate handkerchief, he was annoyed by her feminine behavior. “Put that thing away.”

Ryan stepped out of the carriage and shook his head at the woman inside. Then without a second thought, he handed the driver a coin and told him to take a cab back to Mr. Drake’s house. Then, the carriage pulled forward once more with Ryan in the driver’s seat.

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The journey seemed to take forever. The endless scenery of rolling hills and lush trees began to bore Elizabeth as the carriage moved forward. The fact that she had not eaten for hours began to irritate her stomach.

There was a small insignificant click every time the back wheel turned in a full circle. Elizabeth had counted the clicks over and over until the sound drove her insane. However, she was not about to ask Ryan to stop the carriage. She had no intensions of provoking him. Enduring the journey in silence for what seemed like an eternity, the pain in her stomach and the infuriating click finally drove her to lean out the window.

“Mr. Hawke,” she called quietly. When there was no answer she called again. “Mr. Hawke?”

“What is it?” His voice was not nearly as harsh as she expected it to be. She looked out at the trees that lined the road once more.

“There is a small town up ahead. They have a market and an Inn. Would it be possible to stop for just a moment?”

“We are almost half way to Caterwood. Can it wait?”

The question bothered her a little. If it were not vitally important she would not have asked, but lack of food was making her weak and there were other things that she needed to attend to as well.

“I am afraid it can’t,” she replied.

Even though he was completely out of her view Elizabeth could almost hear the comments that he wanted to say to her. Unfortunately, she did not care. Elizabeth returned to count the click of the wheel, until the carriage ventured off of the main road and headed toward the small town.

Ryan drove the carriage to the front of the Inn before he pushed the brake forward and slowly hopped off of the seat. The cushioned bench was held above four thick springs that reduced the shock from the road, but it was still a bumpy ride. When he came around the side

of the carriage to open the door, Elizabeth was gathering her boots and one of the paper packages in her arms.

"What are you doing?"

"I cannot wear this thing anymore." Elizabeth placed her foot on the step and held on to the side of the carriage as she stepped onto the damp road. Ryan had not noticed that the front of the gown had been stained with blood. It was not a gruesome amount, but it was more than enough to bother a young woman.

"Alright," he nodded his head as he looked toward the market. "But hurry up."

"I will," she reassured him.

The edge in his voice was not as sharp as it had been. The subtle difference made her more much more comfortable. Elizabeth looked down at his hand and saw that most of the blood had dried to a dark brown color around his knuckles, but as Ryan saw the direction of her stare he turned his hand away.

"Go on," he said in the same easy tone.

She didn't mean to stall. Elizabeth looked up at him for a moment. The depth of his dark eyes did not seem as frightening as they had before. Then, the memory of him walking into the bank invaded her mind. Had he not shown up when he did, there was no telling what would have happened. Elizabeth opened her mouth slightly, but somehow the words *'thank-you'* didn't seem to have enough weight.

"Mr. Hawke," she began. It was unintentional, but Elizabeth found herself staring. Ryan's beard was something that she had never noticed before. The sides of his face were shaved clean and the hair was perfectly groomed to surround his lips and his chin. Although she had always found herself attracted to men with fuller sideburns, Ryan's beard was very attractive.

"We need to be on our way," Ryan reminded her. The softness of her eyes held his attention for longer than he would have liked, but he was quick to push it aside. "Go on."

Elizabeth turned toward the Inn and carried her dress and boots with her. Stepping over a large puddle, she hurried into the building. It was easy to ask the clerk for a room to change in. The stains on her dress drew a little attention. However, it was just awkward enough to keep her mind off of Ryan.

After several minutes of waiting, he was becoming less patient. Women's clothing was complicated, but they were still in a hurry. If

she wouldn't have walked out of the door when she had, Ryan was ready to go in after her.

"Did you need anything else?" He asked as he stepped down from his seat and opened the door for her. The white dress looked like a pillow in her arms as she dangled the shoes in her fingers.

"No." Elizabeth lifted the dress into the carriage. "I bought some dried beef." Holding up two of the largest pieces from wrapped paper, she offered them to Ryan. Lifting his head quickly and admiring the simple blue-gray and white dress that she had put on, Ryan accepted the beef.

"Did you buy that this morning?"

"I bought it just now… at the market." Elizabeth looked a little confused.

"I meant the dress," he explained.

"Oh," she whispered as she touched the ribbon of her new bonnet. A slight blush rose in her cheeks as she lowered her eyes. "Yes, Vincent took me to the dress shop before we went to the bank." Taking a bite out of the strip of beef, Ryan chewed silently for a moment as she re-wrapped the rest of the beef.

"It's nice," he added.

He did not make the comment with any sort of humor in his voice, but he had never said anything kind to her before. She was doubtful that he was being sincere. However, when she looked up at him again, there was a subtle expression in his eyes, and Elizabeth wondered if he had meant what he said.

"We will be there in a little over an hour." Ryan reached up to the carriage door and opened it for her. "Is there anyone you need to see while we are there?" He was being too polite, and Elizabeth wondered if he was planning something.

"Are you looking for a place to drop me off?"

"Not yet," he answered. "But it is a good idea, now that you mentioned it." Ryan looked toward the road at a horse and cart that was heading for the market.

"There is someone that I would like to see, and if we get a chance I would like to go to my house." Once she was situated inside, he closed the door.

"Let's get to the factory first," he said returning his voice to steel.

Chapter seven

The small town that she had spent most of her life in seemed about as large as a mouse-hole compared to the city. Black smoke rose out of the factory chimneys, and the familiar smell of burning coal surrounded Caterwood. It must have rained continuously since Elizabeth left the town over a week before. Mud covered everything and the road was a mess of ruts and potholes.

"We have to go to the pub first," Elizabeth called out to Ryan as the carriage moved slowly down through the mess.

"We don't have time for a drink," he called back.

For the first time since she had met him, Elizabeth knew that he was joking. Apparently, she had begun to hear the slight difference in his voice when he was kidding.

"Turn left here. It is right across the street from the factory."

The carriage made the turn and Elizabeth started to feel much more comfortable with the familiar surroundings. The front of the glass factory came into sight bringing more of the familiar setting to her. When they rounded the corner and pulled up to the pub, she was relieved to see Jacob sweeping mud off of the pub steps.

"Elizabeth, I was wondering when you would ever get back here," Jacob said as Ryan helped her out of the carriage. The look in his single gray eye told her that she had been thought of. "There has been a lot of commotion since you left." As soon as her feet hit the ground, Jacob pulled her into a quick embrace.

"Has anyone heard anything about my Father?"

"I have some real bad news for you." Jacob lowered his deep blue eye before he cleared his throat. "You and your friend might want to come in and have a seat," he said as he opened the door.

"What do you mean by real bad news?" She asked as she followed him in.

"You are repeating again," Ryan pointed out quietly as he followed her into the pub. The situation did not need his brief and rude comment. So, Elizabeth ignored him completely and walked to the nearest chair.

"Go ahead and have a seat Beth," Jacob whispered in a very kind voice. "This is not going to be easy for you."

There was no way for her to imagine what was about to be said. Nothing could have been worse than someone murdering her father and trying to kill her and her brother, but as she looked at the single eye that stared back at her with concern, Elizabeth became very afraid.

"What is it?" She asked as soon as she could force the words out. Jacob looked over to Ryan and lowered his head.

"It is the house, Beth. There was a fire just after you and I left." He paused for a moment as Elizabeth reacted to the news. "There is nothing left."

A deep ache in her chest started to form as she tried to comprehend what he had said. The feeling was as physical as it was emotional. It became difficult to breathe, and Elizabeth held her focus on the scratches in the floorboards as she tried to hold back the tears. She could hear Ryan give a deep sigh as Jacob leaned forward, placing his hand over hers.

"I'm sorry," Jacob offered. "I don't know what else to say."

Elizabeth began to find the painful ache too much for her to hide. Her eyebrows drew together as she fought the scream that wanted to get out. She had stopped breathing for a few seconds. However, when she lifted her watery eyes to Jacob, she found strength in his compassion.

"There was no one there. It took several hours to put the fire out." Jacob's hand squeezed her hand tightly. "We were all just glad that you were safe and far away when it happened."

"Was there anyone snooping around here that day?" Ryan hated to interrupt the conversation, but he had to ask the question. "Was there anyone looking for Miss Drake or sneaking around the factory?" Jacob released Elizabeth's hand and sat straight up.

"Mr. Hawke, right?" He asked as he tolerated the banker. When Ryan nodded in agreement Jacob continued. "We haven't seen anyone strange around here at all." Looking away from Elizabeth's anguish, he tried to think of anything important. "The only thing of interest that we've heard was what Beth had said. My son went looking over the hill after her and I had left that day." Jacob motioned toward Elizabeth. "But he did not find anything. There was no sign of Daniel, and no sign of Giles." Being seated in the chair was helping to keep her conscious. As Elizabeth remained silent, Ryan took over the conversation.

“We need to get into Daniel’s office at the factory.” Ryan sat in the chair next to Elizabeth and looked over to her every once in a while to see how she was handling the news. “Is there anyone that could help us get inside?” Nodding his head slowly, Jacob reached over and squeezed Elizabeth’s hand once more.

“I am sure that Robbie could get you in.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lara.” Elizabeth looked over to Ryan. He seemed more than surprised as she stood up from her chair. “Let’s go. I want to get this over with.”

The way that she held herself made Ryan certain that she was not handling the news well. Her stance shifted slightly from one leg to the other, and she seemed to lean forward more than usual.

“Do you want to stay here while I go?” Ryan asked as he came to his feet and placed his hand below her elbow. Elizabeth shook her head gently and continued to stare at the floor.

“No,” she replied in a whisper with her eyes straying over the floorboards. “I have to go with you.”

“Beth,” Jacob called before she turned toward the door. “You let me know if you need anything.”

“I will,” she whispered as she turned away.

Everything that her father had owned and all of her belongings were gone. The paintings that hung on the walls, the quilt that Fanny had made her for Christmas, and all of the little treasures that she had admired through the years had vanished. The pain in her chest began to grow once more as Elizabeth stepped out of the pub.

“Miss Drake,” Ryan called. She ignored him easily and placed her new boots in the mud once more. “Elizabeth, look at me.”

When her eyes met his, all of her strength failed her. The tears that had been hidden began to fall. Ryan stood for only a moment as Elizabeth began to cry in front of him. He was not a compassionate man. However, he pulled her to him almost instantly.

Elizabeth resisted the embrace at first. However when Ryan’s arms slid around her shoulders, she nearly collapsed into him. Her hand covered her eyes as the tears fell. With both arms in front of her, she felt the pain in her chest begin to swell.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered in her ear as she huddled in front of him. “You’re alright.”

Holding close to Ryan for just a few minutes more, Elizabeth became more aware of what she still had to do. Whoever had killed her father had destroyed her house and all of her belongings with it. Not to

mention that she had watched a man beat her brother bloody just a few hours before. Standing on her own, Elizabeth wiped her tears as the anger began to build.

"I want to know why this is happening," she said before she looked up to Ryan. Her sorrow began to turn to anger right in front of him, and Ryan welcomed the change.

"You have the answer in the envelope." The reminder was spoken gently, but Elizabeth refused to give in.

"No. I won't give it to you."

"Then let's go," he suggested as he placed his hands on her shoulders and leaned down to look into her eyes. Straightening her back and taking a deep breath, Elizabeth nodded her head.

"Alright," she said as she looked up at the large brick building. "Robbie will get us into the office, but I have never been there. I am not sure where to look." Ryan almost smiled at his own skills.

"That's alright. I think I know where to start."

The mud on the road made the journey slow, but eventually Elizabeth reached the front door of the factory and pulled on the handle. It was hot, smoky, and dark inside. There were crates piled up in the corner. Large metal hooks and platforms hung from the ceiling. A few rays of light seeped into the room from ash-covered windows, but it was still difficult to see.

The main room smelled like soot, oil, and sweat. About fifty workers stood over hot ovens and shouted orders to each other. Elizabeth was more than surprised at what she saw. Large and odd shaped metal tools hung from the walls and from ropes that dangled from the ceiling. Embers and ash flew out of the ovens as men turned soft glass over metal poles and pushed it into molds.

"You can't be in here," a familiar voice called to them.

"Robbie," Elizabeth looked at the barely familiar man and waited for him to recognize her. "I am Elizabeth Drake."

"Miss Drake," he repeated as he came to stand in front of her. "We were wondering when you would come back." He spoke without a smile. "Have you seen my father yet?" Nodding her head slowly she looked back at Ryan.

"This is Mr. Hawke. He has come to help me find something of my Father's."

"I don't know what you want to find, but you are welcome to look." Leading them away from the front door, Robbie walked to the side of the factory where a small corner office sat unoccupied. "John

McCallister has been handling things around here lately, but he has his own office right next door there," Robbie said as he pointed to a closed door.

"Has anyone been through here?" Ryan asked as he looked at the men that were close enough to hear.

"Not that I know of, and I'm here every day." Robbie opened the door quickly and walked inside with them. "Is there anything that I can help you find?"

"Thank you." Elizabeth shook her head but was still too emotional to offer a smile.

"Well, let me know if you need anything." He smiled politely before he left the room.

There was one window in the small room. However, the light that came through it made the room look dark and gray. Ryan walked over to the small oak desk and began rummaging through the stack of papers that sat on top. There was nothing inside the office except the desk, two small chairs, and a lamp. Elizabeth watched as Ryan read a few lines on every page and continued to flip through them.

"What are you looking for?" She asked. Setting down another piece of paper, Ryan picked up another and skimmed over it.

"Anything," he answered. "Mostly, I am looking for money transactions with Andrew Roshire's name on it." Lifting up a file with more papers in it, he offered them to Elizabeth. "Here," he whispered. "See if you can find anything with Andrew's name on it."

"How can you see anything in here with this light?" Elizabeth asked as she took the folder from him.

"There is plenty of light in here." Ryan looked over his shoulder to the window before continuing to read through the orders. "Light the lamp if you need to."

"I don't know what to look for." Elizabeth looked at the lamp and back to the file.

"Just look for Andrew's name." Ryan continued to skim over each page as he reassured her.

"Don't you feel strange going through someone else's belongings?" Elizabeth lowered the file to her side and waited for him to answer. Holding a piece of paper in each hand, Ryan looked at her like she was a little odd.

"These are not your father's personal belongings. They are the company's records." His eyes looked up to Elizabeth as she continued

to hold the folder by her side. “If you don’t want to look then just give me the folder.” Elizabeth lifted the folder and looked at it.

“I just don’t think it is right.”

He was very confused by her morals. Even after Elizabeth had found out that her house had burned down she was not going to set propriety aside. It was very likely that Andrew Roshire had set the house ablaze. In fact, Ryan had no doubt in his mind that it was Andrew. However, Elizabeth was not lifting a finger to solve the problem.

“Give me that.” He held up his hand and waited until she handed over the file. “Either sit down or go find something else to do.”

The woman was infuriating. She had a letter with her from the moment she arrived in Burdery that she would not reveal, and now she stood in the office and refused to look for information. The more that Ryan questioned her behavior the more his anger grew.

“Do you know what,” Ryan said to her just before she reached for the door. “I think it is a reasonable request that you sit there.” Ryan pointed to the chair in front of the desk. “That way, if I do stumble across any information, you can tell me if you know anything more.” Thinking further on his idea he added, “Unless that goes against your morals or your memory only works in life threatening situations.”

“You don’t have to be rude.” She spat at him. Stunned by her idiotic response Ryan continued searching through the papers as she sat down.

“I am pretty damn sure that this situation calls for it.”

“This should not even be a situation!” Elizabeth removed her bonnet and attempted to defend herself once more. Placing her hatpin into the wicker she looked up at Ryan as he read another paper. “I would like to point out that I did not ask for your help in this, nor did I ask for my brother’s. I simply need to get to Oswald Roshire! I do not need to play detective in a filthy factory!”

“Well, at least you are not an ungrateful spoiled brat! That would have been too much fun for me,” Ryan added without emotion as he picked up a piece of paper. “Who is Duncan Carver?”

“I have no idea.” Elizabeth answered as she quietly fumed over his insult. “Why?” Ryan continued to skim the page before he looked at the one behind it.

“I’m not sure. It looks like he made a rather large order and paid for it, but there is nothing stating what the order was.

“It was probably for glass,” Elizabeth stated under her breath before she realized that she had made the comment much like he would.

“You would think so,” Ryan flipped back to the first page once more before reading the order again, “but all of the other orders have a quantity, description, and an itemized bill.” Taking a moment to look at a couple of other orders that he had seen, he went back to the one that was strange. “This one simply has last month’s date, Mr. Carver’s name, and an amount.” For the first time since they had entered the office, Elizabeth seemed interested.

“Was it a large amount?”

“The largest I have seen here, but I don’t know if it is enough to kill someone,” Ryan added quietly. “Then again, the amount doesn’t matter. We just need to know the reason.” After looking at the papers once more, Ryan looked over to Elizabeth. “Do you know the name?” Shaking her head slowly, Elizabeth tried to remember if she had ever heard it before.

“I don’t think so,” she added slowly.

Ryan made a low huffing sound without looking toward her. It was very possible that Elizabeth would not remember anything until it was too late to use the information.

“I am going to keep this one on hand in case we need it later.”

The sun began to set just outside the filthy window. Elizabeth tried to hide her sadness as she thought about the destruction of her house. Ryan continued to rummage through the desk and the papers. However, nothing seemed to be out of order except the one strange receipt.

“Alright,” he said after several minutes of the search. “I am not seeing anything. Maybe we should just try to make it to Cameron.”

“Mr. Hawke,” Elizabeth looked out the window and noticed a couple of riders coming down the street. Ryan quickly went to the window and looked toward the approaching strangers.

“I don’t know them,” he whispered. “But we had better get out of here if we want to avoid Gatler and Harland.” Taking a small stack of papers and concealing them inside his jacket, Ryan walked around the desk as Elizabeth stood up. “Where did you want to go?”

“Up that hill,” she pointed out the window. “That is where my house is, was.”

“Listen,” Ryan began. “I don’t think it is a good idea.”

“I need to know if there is anything for me to come back to.” Elizabeth held his gaze with certainty. Inhaling deeply Ryan looked out the window and then back to her.

“Alright, but we don’t have long.”

“I need to stop at a friend’s house too, it is on the way.” Without waiting for an answer, Elizabeth turned around and opened the door to leave. Pausing briefly, Ryan followed after her.

“Didn’t you hear me? We don’t have a lot of time,” he reminded her.

“It will only take a few minutes.” Elizabeth fought the urge to raise her hand above her nose to cover the stench and the soot. She nodded to Robbie and walked out the front door of the factory.

“No, we don’t have time now.” Keeping a fast pace, he headed toward the carriage. “You can write to your friend and see her another day.”

“We are stopping,” she nearly demanded.

“I hate to point this out Miss Drake, but I am not your employee.” Before Ryan could walk out the door, Elizabeth turned on him.

“You are not my employee?” She huffed. “I never insinuated that you were. In fact, I am not sure that I would employ someone of your character if I could.”

“Would it be possible for you to stop repeating everything you hear?” Ryan looked down at her with an annoyed glare. “Furthermore, I think my character has been pretty commendable, considering that you are still breathing.” The depth of his eyes returned to the menacing stare that she had seen before.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I am beginning to understand why someone would not want you around.”

“You arrogant…” Elizabeth took a deep breath as Ryan cut in.

“You know Beth, Miss Drake,” he corrected himself. “Your father is dead. Your brother is not looking too good lately, and instead of handing over the letter or helping us figure out what is going on, you want to see your childhood home and go visit a friend!” The tone of his voice and the stern expression on his face infuriated her. “And here is a little something else that you should consider,” Ryan took a step closer to her and lowered his voice. “I am not tangled in this little web of yours. I can walk away at any time I choose.”

There was no way for Elizabeth to know how apparent her fear of him was. The blue of her eyes seemed wide and glossy as she unknowingly took a step away from him.

"Is that a threat?"

"Not at all." Ryan stayed where he was. "I don't give threats. Either things get done my way, or I head back to Burdery. What happens to you is not my problem."

Elizabeth did not question him. His eyes told her that he was serious. The more that she thought about the man before her, the more she realized that he was useless to her.

"Go on then," she said boldly. "I am no better or worse off without you." Her words were spoken with a controlled rage. "You and my brother have done very little to help me." Even though she felt completely responsible for her brother's condition, it was not entirely her fault. "I am standing two miles away from where this all began. In one week I have made little progress in getting to Oswald Roshire." Her anger had built considerably as Ryan stood silent. However, she did not seem close to stopping. "I have suffered the loss of my father and the loss of my home. I have no need of your constant bullying!"

With every word that she said her eyes began to betray her. She hated the obvious sadness in her voice. Elizabeth was simply angrier than she had ever been before. The more she stared at him, the more her tears embarrassed her.

"Go back to Burdery, Mr. Hawke." Turning in the thick mud, Elizabeth held up the white bottom of her new dress and crossed the road to the pub.

Ryan expected her to go inside the pub, but Elizabeth stepped onto the stone path and continued walking toward the corner of the street. He thought about calling to her. It was a dead ringer that Vincent was going to be furious, but once again Ryan was incapable of feeling guilt or empathy. Shaking his head, he started off for the carriage.

He couldn't see her shoulders slump forward, and he was not aware of her crying again. All he could think of was the information gained from the factory. However, Ryan became acutely aware that Elizabeth had called his name. The soul of his boot was just placed on the step of the carriage, and he knew that he shouldn't turn around. Sighing heavily, he set his boot back in the mud.

The grayish blue dress seemed to blend in with the fog that surrounded the small town. Although he could not see the details of

her face perfectly, he knew that she was still crying. Ryan stayed where he was and gave a lot of thought to his actions. If he ignored her and continued on his way he would have been better off. However, before he could reach a decision Elizabeth began to walk slowly toward him.

It was his only opportunity to turn away from her. If Elizabeth were to reach him, he would have no choice but to help her. If he stepped up onto the driver seat, he may be lucky enough to never see her again. Another heavy sigh escaped Ryan's chest as his boots remained in the mud.

"Mr. Hawke," she said as she came close enough to talk softly. Elizabeth had no idea what to say. Up until that moment, her only plan was to get him to stop. "Those men are going to come looking for me, aren't they?" Even though she waited, Ryan was not going to answer the rhetorical question. "If you will take me to my friend's house first, I will give you the letter when we leave."

"I don't want the letter." His voice was harsh even though she had done a rather good job of ending her emotional breakdown. "I just want you to know that this is serious." Ryan watched her continuously as she tried to divert her eyes from his. "I know Gatler very well. If Andrew wants you, Gatler will do what he can to get you, even if that means killing Vincent, me, or anyone else that stands in his way." Elizabeth stared down at the mud. So, Ryan lifted her chin to force her attention. "I can slow him down, but I don't know that I can stop him." Once her stunning blue eyes looked up to him, Ryan wished that he had let her stare at the ground. "If getting that letter to Oswald can save you and your brother, then we need to hurry." Instead of answering him or nodding her head, Elizabeth was stunned by the gentle touch of his hand. "The only thing that waits for you at your home is more pain and suffering. There will be time for that later."

"I just want to…" Elizabeth wanted to argue.

"Later," Ryan released her chin but held her gaze. "I will take you to your friend's house, but we have to hurry." He waited for just a moment until she nodded her head in agreement. "Alright, get in."

She wanted to move, but there was something that kept her still. The moment seemed to last longer than she wanted it too. Elizabeth tried to look at the carriage, but she could not take her eyes off of Ryan.

"Miss Drake," Ryan said as he brought her out of her thoughts. Elizabeth shook her head slightly and looked toward the carriage.

Without a word she hid her moment of embarrassment by turning to the carriage quickly and reaching for the door. “Why don’t you ride up front? That way you can show me where your friend lives.”

The way to Fanny’s house was simple. She didn’t need to ride up front. There was one road to the north of town. Her house was just over a mile down that road. However, Elizabeth took the suggestion with ease.

“Alright,” she whispered as she moved toward the driver’s seat of the carriage.

The firm grip of his arm made her nervous when he helped her up to the seat. The horses pulled the carriage forward through the mud, and they rode in silence to the edge of town. The wound on his hand remained caked with dry blood. She tried to ignore it, but before Elizabeth could remind herself of her manners, she looked over at the man next to her.

“Where did you learn to fight like that?”

“New York.” Ryan glanced at her for a moment before he watched the road ahead.

“Did you fight for money there?” Her question was innocent, but pushy.

“See the thing about New York is, you’re either rich or you’re not.” Adjusting his grip on the reins, Ryan shifted his foot a little before he continued. “I wasn’t rich.” He noticed her looking at his hand again as he spoke. “I fought to survive.”

“But did you get paid for it?” She asked. “My father heard that some folks were so poor there, that men had to fight for money.” A quick smile flashed across Ryan’s face before he turned to her.

“No, I did not fight for money. Well, at least not like what you heard. I was more of a free agent.”

“What is that?” She asked as her interest grew.

“Does it really matter?” Ryan looked away from her as he tried to bring the subject to a close.

“Well, how do you know Gatler then?” Elizabeth did not take his hint. Ryan let his head fall forward a little, before looking back.

“Why am I so interesting to you all of a sudden? I don’t know if you have noticed at all, but I like to keep to myself.”

“Humor me.” Elizabeth ignored his attempt at privacy. She was not at all secure with him. However, she feared him less. The tone of his voice and the blank emotionless stare had become more

comfortable to her. Glancing at her before shaking his head, Ryan wondered if it was too late to put her back inside the carriage.

"You are annoying. Do you know that?"

"And you are rude, thoughtless, and arrogant." Elizabeth tried to brush the mud off of her skirt with little success. "So, how do you know Gatler?" His smile was not pleasant, but she ignored it rather well.

"You are not going to stop are you?" There was no answer for a few seconds, and when she turned to face him, Ryan decided to give up the information. "We came over together from New York. We had never actually met there, but we found out that we had a lot in common one night when he tried to cheat me out of a card game."

"How did he try to cheat you?"

"He pulled out the same Ace that I had slid up my sleeve." Even though Elizabeth did not see the humor right away, Ryan chuckled at the memory. "After a few struggles on the ship, we decided that we had better work together in Burdery." The road curved to the right while it eased up the hill. "Within a month we had made a name for ourselves." One of the horses exhaled loudly, making a huffing sound as it raised its head. "Gatler met Andrew and started to make more money. I met another business opportunity." When Ryan stopped talking, Elizabeth did not know whether she should ask anything more, or if she had pried enough.

"How did you meet my brother?"

"The same way I meet all of Burdery's high society. I collect on their debts." The answer did not bother him as much as it seemed to bother her. Elizabeth gave him her full attention.

"My brother does not have any debts."

Lowering his head Ryan realized his mistake. It would have been easy for him to tell her the simple truth. However, the truth did not matter to her. The woman had been through quite a bit already. There did not seem to be any point in telling her what actually happened. With a heavy sigh he changed his story.

"Fine, we met for tea after church."

"You're a liar."

"Of course I am, and you keep asking me questions!" Every moment that went by made him wish that he had left when the opportunity arose.

Elizabeth was nearly irate. Ryan had insinuated that her brother had a dark history, when she had seen his success at the bank.

“I asked how you knew the man that helped kill my father. Had I known that you were about to affront my brother as well, I would have refrained,” she stated.

“No you wouldn’t,” he pointed out, “You are the one who wanted to ask me everything that popped into that little head of yours.”

“How dare you?”

“See there you go again, asking questions that you don’t want to know the answer too.”

“How on earth my brother tolerates working with such an egotistical man is beyond me!” Raising her hand to motion toward Fanny’s house, Elizabeth avoided looking at him. “There, just drive to the house.” Ryan could not believe the tone of her voice. Before she knew what happened he pulled the horses to a stop.

“Are you ordering me around?”

“What are you doing? We are nearly there?” Her look of shock was more enjoyable to Ryan than he could have ever imagined.

“I am not accustomed to taking orders, little Miss Priss. So, if you want to get to that house in this cart, I suggest you find a nice way of asking.” The blank expression had returned with the darkness in his eyes.

“I’d rather walk,” Elizabeth smiled sweetly.

Ryan let the reins fall to his feet as he looked at her with a devious grin. “Then get down.”

Chapter eight

The small slope of the hill did little to draw the water away from the road. Elizabeth held her skirt tightly to lift the white bottom of her dress, while the mud clung to her boots. The horses seemed to be right at her heals, but Elizabeth held her chin high as she walked to the Sanderson's house.

Ryan followed behind her in silence as she turned off of the road. The farmhouse was well taken care of. However, it was obvious that it had seen better years. Some of the shingles were damaged, and the trim had not been painted in a while. However, for the most part the yard and the fields were well tended.

Fanny Sanderson was not a flower lover. So, there was little decoration to the outside of the home. A few cows and horses roamed in the pasture and there was a small flock of sheep huddled in one of the wooden pens.

"Your friend has a nice place here," Ryan offered as he stepped down from the carriage that pulled in the yard behind her.

Elizabeth visually searched every inch of the farm, until she reached the barn. A scraping sound came from the back of the building, drawing her attention. Elizabeth walked slowly at first, moving faster as she drew nearer. Ryan only followed her to the door, once he saw the man inside.

Jarred Sanderson bent over the wet stone and ran the blade over it repeatedly at the same angle, but when he raised his head and caught a glimpse of Elizabeth, the axe was quickly forgotten.

"Beth," he called as he stood up quickly and placed the axe on the bench next to him. "Thank God you are alright!" Coming to her side, Jarred quickly pulled her into an embrace before looking down into her eyes. "You had me worried sick." Pulling her into another embrace he said again, "You had all of us worried sick." There was no ignoring the ominous man in the doorway. "Where have you been?" Jarred glanced over her mud-covered dress and then to the stranger behind her. "Who is your friend?"

"Jarred," Elizabeth began. "This is Mr. Hawke. He works with my brother in Burdery." As Ryan walked further into the shed he was a little surprised by the age of Mr. Sanderson. He was at least ten years

her senior. The years had been kind to him. However, they were still evident in his light hair and eyes.

"How are you doing?" Jarred asked as he wiped his hands on a rag and offered Ryan his handshake. Ryan accepted the offer, but kept silent. As quickly as Jarred released his hand, he turned to Elizabeth. "I am real sorry about what has happened Beth," he whispered the words as he continued to hold her hand.

Ryan was not expecting Elizabeth's friend to be an older man and he was certainly not expecting him to be an aging farmer. It was not that Jarred was too old for Elizabeth it was simply that she was too young. Ryan stood silent as he watched the two reunite.

"You had best get in the house." Jarred smiled at her and motioned to the front door. "Let me finish up here, and I will be there in a minute."

"Thank you," Elizabeth turned to face Ryan and noticed him still staring at Jarred. "Are you coming?"

Ryan nodded to Jarred before he followed her into the house. He could see Elizabeth fitting in very nicely in the country setting. She was not as refined as the city women. She wasn't concerned about the same things that most other women found important. Then again, he also remembered how stunning she looked and how well she acted at the charity banquette.

Once Elizabeth opened the door to the house Ryan was faced with something he did not expect. A very feminine hand had decorated the inside of the house. Lace and linen's were everywhere and everything was very clean and well organized. Ryan knew at that moment that Mr. Sanderson was not Elizabeth's bow. The smell that came from the kitchen proved his theory.

"Fanny?" Elizabeth called as she removed her bonnet and walked into the den.

"Beth!" A feminine voice called from the kitchen. "Beth, is that you?" Fanny practically ran into the den as she heard the familiar voice. Elizabeth walked straight into her embrace. "Are you alright? We were so worried about you!" The hug was nearly crushing. Taking a step back, Fanny looked Elizabeth in the eye and stroked her cheek before hugging her once more. "I am so sorry," she said as a tear fell from her eye. "I had no idea that those men… I am so sorry."

Taking her hands and looking into her soft hazel eyes, Elizabeth shook her head. "Fanny, has anyone come to see you again?"

“No,” she answered slowly. “What do you mean, again?”

“I saw the man come here a week ago.” She kept her voice calm; making sure Fanny knew there was no blame. “I was hiding just beyond the trees. Has he come back?” Fanny looked at her in disbelief.

“No,” she replied showing a vast amount of guilt. “No one saw him except for me, and no one knows who he was. Oh Beth, I am so sorry.” She pulled her close once more.

“It’s alright,” Elizabeth said again.

“You were here?” Fanny asked as she backed away. “We did not know if you were alive, until Jarred saw Jacob a day later.”

“I am sorry, but I had to get to my brother.” Elizabeth looked back at Ryan and stepped away from Fanny. “This is Mr. Hawke. He and my brother are trying to piece together what happened.” Ryan refrained from smiling.

“And you are?” He asked.

“Fanny Sanderson.” Looking at the furniture in the small room she held out her hand. “Please have a seat.” Fanny motioned toward the sofa, but when Elizabeth sat down on the deep blue cushion, Ryan decided to take the chair in the corner. Returning to the conversation that she was having before, Fanny faced Elizabeth. “Have you gone to the police? The sheriff spent nearly three days combing the top of the hill. Have you talked to him yet?”

“No,” she answered carefully. “I can’t…” Ryan cleared his throat, silencing any further response. Fanny was aware of the heavy tension in the room and quickly changed the subject.

“Why didn’t you come here? We would have kept you safe.”

“I did not want to put you or Jarred in danger,” she answered plainly. “I couldn’t involve anyone.”

“You should have come here,” Fanny continued.

“I know,” Elizabeth said as she tried to move the conversation along. “Fanny, I have little time. There are still a few things that I need to take care of.” Reaching into the pocket of her dress, Elizabeth pulled out her father’s letter. “My father gave this to me the day that he…” Her words faded away as she looked to the rug in the center of the room.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Fanny whispered as she took the letter that Elizabeth easily offered. “Has anyone..?”

Elizabeth looked over at Ryan’s stunned reaction. She knew that he did not understand why Fanny could see the letter when Vincent could not.

"I did not know if my brother would tell me the truth." Turning her eyes away from Ryan, Elizabeth knew that it would only be a few seconds before he understood. "Will you?"

"Of course," Fanny said as she opened the envelope and unfolded the paper. As Ryan looked at Elizabeth in disbelief, Fanny read the letter to the illiterate woman.

"My Dearest Daniel,

I have been told that I am dying. Unfortunately, the doctors do not know what is killing me. It has been nearly five years, since I saw you last, and your memory still holds strong in my heart.

With all of the sadness that I have faced in the last few years, my greatest sorrow is that I will not have a chance to meet my child. So, I am sending you what I have saved for her, in the hopes that she will forgive me one day.

The money is only a small part of her inheritance. My father, without question, will pass the house that you live in to her. The remainder of her inheritance is in the hands of my father. I have left instruction with him and my son that she is to be treated generously with my belongings.

I must warn you Daniel. My son was raised by my husband's beliefs, and he has inherited a cruel nature. His selfish tendencies lead me to suspect that he will not look on my decisions easily. He has been informed of my child. Although, I have protected her name and her gender from him.

Upon my death, Elizabeth Drake should take this letter to my father. It will prove her relationship to me, and secure her inheritance. With this action alone, I hope that she realizes that I have always loved her.

With my love always,

Camille Roshire Hammond"

At the close of the letter, Elizabeth sat still with her eyes on the paper. “She is my mother,” Elizabeth whispered. “That means…”

“Oh Beth,” Fanny reached beside her and placed her hand over Elizabeth’s.

Re-folding the letter, Elizabeth placed it back in her pocket before she looked up at Fanny. The events and the information of the letter swirled around in her mind, until the facts finally took hold. Laying her emotions about her mother aside, Elizabeth concentrated on the living relatives that she had nearly met.

“The son that she was talking about is the man that came here looking for my Father.” Elizabeth stared at the floor in front of her and continued to put all of the pieces together.

“You can’t mean that he..,” placing her hand to her mouth, Fanny hid her shock poorly. “He’s your brother?” Nodding her head, Elizabeth looked up to see the silent and blank expression on Ryan’s face once more. “Oh Beth, I gave him your name,” Fanny added.

“It is alright,” Elizabeth tried to smile. The sunset was nearly passed and night began to fall around the farmhouse. A dull gray hue seemed to hover around them. “I met him on my own, just two days later. An acquaintance introduced me to one of his men. You had nothing to do with it.” Fanny glanced over at Ryan for a moment and noticed his intent stare.

“Do you have time to stay for a quick meal? I have a roast that has been cooking all day.” The fragrant aroma still hung in the air as Elizabeth began to shake her head.

“Thank you, but Mr. Hawke and I must be on our way.” The room fell silent, until Ryan sighed heavily.

“There is no point in refusing hospitality,” he said quietly. Ryan did not even look at Elizabeth as he made the comment. His quiet and cold stare remained on the floor in front of him, while Elizabeth was left to accept the offer.

“In that case we would love to join you,” Elizabeth stated.

“Alright then, why don’t you help me in the kitchen and Mr. Hawke can either sit here and relax or find Jarred out in the barn?” Fanny patted Elizabeth’s hand and stood up from the sofa. Once she left the room, Elizabeth stood up and looked at Ryan.

“I thought we were in a hurry.”

“Dried beef is not enough to live off of. You have not eaten.” Standing up from the chair he stared down at her. “So, that’s why you would not go through your father’s papers at the factory,” Ryan began.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you couldn’t read?” The question was unavoidable, but she did not want to answer it all the same.

“No one asked,” she said simply.

“Do you honestly think that your brother would have kept something this important from you?” His stare was unavoidable.

Elizabeth liked the shape of Ryan’s face when he was not being the arrogant cheeky bruit that she had first met. His eyes could be very intimidating, but there were times when they were calming to look at. His lips were thin. They could easily draw into a rather nice smile. However, she had not seen it happen that often.

“I had no idea what was in the letter, and I had no doubt that my brother would keep the truth from me.” Elizabeth did not smile as she pointed out the past. “He lied about who he was,” she reminded him. “I couldn’t trust him.”

“Well, at least you were right to want to get it to Oswald,” Ryan added. He looked at the traces of mud on her dress and almost felt remorse for the way that he had been treating her. Ryan turned to her with curiosity. “Anything could have been in that letter. Yet, you had blind and complete faith in your father.” Raising her head boldly, Elizabeth looked straight into his deep and dark eyes.

“Without question,” she whispered.

He had not noticed the way that her eyes seemed to keep the same vivid color regardless of the light around her. Lifting his gaze to the yellow gold in her hair and then glancing over her face, he returned to admire her eyes again. Then without a word, he nodded his head and walked out the door. The subtle movement of his gaze made Elizabeth shy and nervous. It was as if he were looking at her differently than he had before.

“Beth, are you alright?” Fanny asked from the door of the kitchen.

“Yes, I am coming.” Abruptly, but not fast enough, Elizabeth left the den to enter the kitchen, leaving Ryan and his dark eyes behind her.

“Who is Mr. Hawke?” Fanny asked in a whisper as she made sure that the den was empty. “Did your brother hire him to protect you?”

“No,” she began. “Well yes, kind of,” her stuttering caused Fanny to put down the small knife in her hand and turn to her friend. She judged the strange look on Elizabeth’s face for a moment.

“He is not the friendliest person.”

“Not at all,” Elizabeth smiled as she walked through the kitchen.

The white and blue-plate wear had been a gift from Fanny’s mother. The silverware was old and tarnished, but Fanny kept it in a hidden drawer in the closet.

“We will use the good forks tonight,” she whispered as she retrieved them from hiding. “Beth?” Fanny asked as she turned to face her friend. “Did Jacob tell you about the house?”

“Yes,” the sadness was apparent in her voice. It was uncontrollable, the moment of emotion that came next. Her breath caught in her throat and Elizabeth fought the tears that came streaming down her face.

“Oh, honey.” Fanny wrapped her arms around the woman.

The loss of control only lasted for a moment. Having spent the last week with her brother, Elizabeth had learned to shed her tears at night. However, seeing Fanny made it nearly impossible not to cry.

After she accepted another large hug from her friend, Elizabeth shook off the emotions and looked at the silver in her hands. Ryan’s words came back to her as soon as the house was mentioned. “There is too much for me to do right now. I have to find Oswald Roshire. After that, there will be time to cry.”

Fanny wanted to hold on to Elizabeth, until the tears that she hid had fallen, but as the water boiled over on the stove, she stepped away from her and went back to work.

“So, tell me about your brother.”

“I can honestly say that I do not know him that well.” Elizabeth walked into the small adjoining room and placed the settings at the large oval table. “He seems to be doing very well with money. Mr. Hawke and he have very nice offices at the bank. His house is spectacular, very big and luxurious. Though Mr. Hawke, he has a nice little cottage at the end of the city.”

Fanny lifted the potatoes out of the pot with a big wooden spoon, but her work seemed to slow down when Elizabeth began to talk about the man that was with her.

“Has he worked for your brother for long?”

“A few years,” she guessed. “I understand that he is pretty well known for his way of handling finances.”

“Is that a good thing?” Fanny asked.

“I am not sure,” Elizabeth walked back into the room to pick up a couple of glasses and take them to the table.

“Is he married?” Taking a short break from the potatoes, Fanny decided to be brave. Once the glasses were set on the table, Elizabeth stood up and thought about the question.

“I don’t think so, but I have never asked.”

“Oh,” Turning her attention back to the boiling pot of water, Fanny smiled. “He is not all that friendly,” she re-stated.

“Not at all,” Elizabeth offered as she picked up a bowl of peas and carried them to the other room. “He’s from America.” The tone of her words made the comment sound like an excuse. Fanny placed the last potato in the bowl as she handed it to Elizabeth.

“I could not really see him from where I sat. The light from the window hid his features.” As Elizabeth began to walk away, Fanny whispered the next question. “Is he handsome?”

“Some women might not mind the ruff beard and he barely has sideburns, but he is not disagreeable to look at.”

Without giving away her complete view on the matter, Elizabeth thought back to the way Ryan looked as he wielded the axe the day the dog took after her. His sheer strength was impressive, but it was his dark eyes that enticed her. In fact, she had never seen anyone quite like Ryan.

“Disagreeable to look at?” Fanny laughed. Elizabeth finally saw where she had learned the ability to repeat people’s words. “You sound like he is an old house or a used carriage.” Elizabeth picked up the freshly baked loaf of bread and turned to Fanny.

“I don’t look at him that much,” her answer was a little shaky. “I have no idea if he is handsome… or if he is a used carriage.” Taking the bread into the other room, Elizabeth returned to Fanny’s annoyed glare. “Alright,” she gave in with a beaming smile. “He is attractive if you can get passed his personality,” she finished. Happy with her success, Fanny picked up the carving knives and set them on the platter with the roast.

“Well, do you want to go and tell them that it is time, or should I?”

“I will,” Elizabeth offered. “Though, I must warn you. He is very likely to eat three bites, and then rip me from the table by my hair, insisting that we have to leave immediately.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Fanny offered. “But I have to admit, I did not expect a bodyguard to be the first man that you brought over for dinner.”

“That is not funny.” Elizabeth sighed as she tilted her head.

“Go and get them.” She spoke in a lighthearted tone. Fanny was trying to ignore the severity of Elizabeth’s situation, even though it seemed impossible. Shaking her head with another short sigh, Elizabeth walked right up to her and pulled her into a hug.

“I have missed you,” she whispered before she released Fanny and walked through the dining room and the den to the door.

The mist was depressing as it continued to hang in the air. The faint glow of lamplight shimmered near the back of a shed. Lifting the muddy white hem of the gown, Elizabeth walked across the drive and into the long and narrow building.

“Mr. Hawke,” she called as she reached the wagon that was being repaired. “Jarred?” Elizabeth called again as she moved closer to the back of the shed. She was beginning to wonder where they were when she heard something move in a dark corner. Elizabeth strained her eyes to see in the dim light, but there was little point to her effort.

“Mr. Hawke,” she called again with a little less volume. Another rustling noise came from the corner. “Ryan?”

Elizabeth waited for a moment longer before she began to back out of the shed. The strange noise was getting louder. To Elizabeth’s ears, it sounded like someone was walking toward her.

“Ryan…” She spoke softly hoping that he was playing a trick on her, but when the noise grew closer Elizabeth turned and ran. She did not listen for the sound anymore. She simply lifted her skirts and made her way through the shed. “Ryan!” Elizabeth shrieked as she made her way passed the wagon and to the door. A scream rose out of her chest as she slammed against the hard frame of a man.

“Whoa!” Ryan pulled the terrified woman off of his chest. “What is it?” With his hands on her shoulders Ryan knew that she was scared, but couldn’t see anything in the shed.

“Beth, it’s alright.” Jarred walked around them and picked up the lamp from the workbench. “It’s just Gabby.” As the light reached the back of the shed, an old goat with a limp walked closer to Jarred. The straw on the ground was the cause of the noise that she heard. Jarred reached down and pet the goat’s head before he checked the rope around her neck. “Something must have gotten a hold of her. She came out of the pasture like this a couple days ago. We wanted to separate her from the flock until she healed.” Ryan looked down to Elizabeth and realized that she was still holding on to his arm.

“You don’t like animals, do you?” He asked waiting for her to remove her arm from his.

“Where were you?” Elizabeth nearly shouted at him.

“Relax.” Ryan stated firmly. “Mr. Sanderson was showing me around.” Elizabeth released his arm finally and placed her hand on her forehead.

“Dinner is ready!” She spat out as she turned to walk toward the house.

“Hold on there a second,” Ryan said as he stepped behind her.

“I will tell Fanny that you will be in soon.” Jarred sensed an awkward moment and decided to go on without them. Elizabeth smiled at Jarred before he walked away, but when she turned to face Ryan there was the familiar blank stare in his eyes.

“I over reacted,” she began, “I am sorry.”

“You didn’t over react,” he said quietly. “You just need to be smarter.” The darkness of his eyes warned her that he was not in a humorous mood. “Why didn’t you take the lamp off of the bench?”

“I don’t know,” she answered with a little more attitude than she had intended.

“Why did you walk all the way to the back of the shed, if you did not know what was back there?” The tone of his voice and the depth of his eyes began to make her defensive.

“I was looking for you!”

“Did you think that I was waiting for you in a dark corner somewhere? I am not your lover.” Raising his eyebrows, Ryan admired the annoyed look on her face.

“You arrogant son of a …” Elizabeth glared at him.

“Beth, you need to think on your feet,” Ryan reminded her. “The next time you want to sneak up on a goat … take the lamp.”

The sway of her skirt as she walked away held his attention for a few moments, but as he walked into the house the smell of the food took over his ideas. Fanny and Jarred were standing behind their chairs when Ryan walked into the room.

“Good, now we can feed you.” Fanny smiled as she sat down.

A quick prayer was said before the food was passed to each person. To Elizabeth’s surprise, Ryan did not take the same large portion of food that Jarred took.

“Are you not hungry?” She asked as he helped himself to a small share of the bread.

“I had a lot of dried beef,” he answered, watching her pile the potatoes in front of her. “Are you looking to eat our host out of house

and home?" Elizabeth looked at the huge amount of food on the table and then over to Fanny.

"She can eat whatever she wants. So, can you." Fanny came to her defense in a pleasant way. "One thing that we have on this farm is plenty of food." Her eyes glanced up to her handsome husband and he smiled. "Jarred has found a great way to irrigate all this rain that continues to fall. We get what we need and the plants don't drown."

"I have to agree. It is impressive." Ryan almost smiled a little as he joined the conversation.

Jarred thought about pointing out that the roast they were eating was a relative of Gabby's, but he was not sure that Elizabeth could handle the truth. Fanny watched Ryan's blank expression as he ate the roast. She was almost waiting for a compliment, but he said nothing.

"This is delicious," Elizabeth whispered as she took another large bite of the succulent meat. Fanny smiled in response.

"Are you returning to the city?" Jarred asked, continuing the meal.

"For the night," Ryan replied. Fanny was waiting for him to continue, but he remained silent.

"It is getting late and the roads are not good. You are welcome to stay here if you would like," she offered.

The idea seemed possible to Elizabeth. The Sanderson's had a lot of room and no children just yet. So, she looked over to Ryan. His eyes finally left his plate long enough to look at her.

"No," he stated flatly. "We had better keep moving."

"Why not?" Elizabeth asked bravely. "If they are offering and the roads are thick with mud…"

"I said no," Ryan glared at her as the room fell silent. Looking over at Fanny, he tried to soften his appearance with a slight smile. "We appreciate the offer." His gaze looked to the window behind Fanny as he saw a horse coming up the drive. "You have company." Jarred looked out the window and saw the single rider. The familiar gray horse gave away the rider.

"That is Robbie Lara. I wonder what he wants at this time of night," Jared stated.

"Hurry up, Miss Drake. We need to be on our way." Ryan set down his fork and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

Elizabeth was becoming annoyed with his constant directions, but she did what he commanded. There was something about his manner that she found concerning.

"What is it?" She asked as she set down her fork.

"Just finish," he ordered.

"I did." She smiled as she looked from Fanny to Ryan. "Is there a problem?"

Jarred and Robbie walked into the dining room. Robbie had received a few blows to the face, and he held his stomach in a hunched over fashion.

"A couple of men came into town looking for you two," Robbie looked at Ryan as he spoke. "I said that I didn't know where you were."

"Did they go to the factory?" Coming to his feet quickly Ryan reached over and grabbed Elizabeth's arm.

"Yes, and they came into the pub and were asking if people had seen you." The swelling on the side of his face gave Elizabeth a retched feeling of guilt. "No one was answering."

"You need to leave," Ryan spoke directly to Jarred. "Take your wife and get out of here."

"What?" Fanny asked. "Why do we have to leave?" Ryan felt like he was surrounded by idiots. Elizabeth saw the annoyed look on his face.

"Fanny," Elizabeth began. "They have been here before. They know that you and I are friends."

"Come on," Ryan took Elizabeth by the hand and started to drag her out of the room. "Dinner was delicious. Now find someplace to go!"

"I am so sorry," Elizabeth called behind her as she was drug through the house. Ryan did not look back. He showed little remorse for Robbie, but he did place his hand on his shoulder as he walked passed.

"Thank you," he nodded his head. Robbie nodded back to him quickly as Ryan continued to the door.

"Go over the hill, there is a road that doubles back to town on the other side. It might give you a chance to pass them unseen if they are headed this way."

"I am sure they will be." Ryan pulled Elizabeth closer. "You had better get out of here," he looked over to Jarred.

“Come on Fanny,” Jarred called to his wife as Ryan and Elizabeth left the house heading toward the carriage.

“I want to ride in front,” she said as she climbed up to the driver’s seat. There was no time to argue.

“Get moving!” Ryan pushed his hand against her hindquarters and practically threw her into the seat.

A slight cry escaped her chest as Elizabeth landed hard and turned to look at him. He sat down quickly, releasing the brake and taking the reins. Calling out with a whistle, the carriage moved forward as he turned the horses back toward the road.

“My bonnet,” Elizabeth called as she reached up to her hair.

“It looked ridiculous anyway,” Ryan answered as he whistled to the horses again and snapped the reins. Within seconds, the carriage was at top speed up the dark hill. Elizabeth could not see anything without the lamps lit and the mist hanging heavily around them. The horses hurried on despite the thick mud that clung to the road.

“How can you see anything?” She asked as the carriage went over a bump. Grabbing on to the side of the seat she waited for an answer. Ryan had really wanted her to ride inside the carriage. At least he could make his way through the dark in silence.

“If we go off of the road, you will know it.”

“Do you think Gatler will go there?” She asked. Looking back, Elizabeth listened for any noise from the farmhouse.

“Without a doubt,” he replied.

“Will he hurt them?”

Ryan knew the truth just as well as Elizabeth did. So, he was not about to answer her. It did not seem to matter though as the horses pulled them around to the top of the hill. The realization of where she was came slowly to Elizabeth. The bare surroundings seemed almost surreal to her as she peered through the darkness.

It was her silence that drew his attention. When Ryan looked at the small plot of land on the hilltop, he realized what had made her quiet. The small shadows that rose out of the ground were the remains of her home. Elizabeth did not make a sound as the horses hurried on. Only a few charred pieces of the walls and the chimney still stood. The darkness hid the rest of the destruction. Her eyes held the sight of the burnt home until they were too far past to see anymore.

Even as Ryan searched the night for some remnants, he could see that it was all gone. The woman beside him lowered her head, but didn't cry. It was almost as if she were running out of tears. For a moment he wasn't sure if she was breathing. As a last resort, he placed his arm around her shoulders.

Elizabeth almost refused the gesture. The hurt was too deep. She was as stiff as stone when Ryan tried to pull her closer. Just as he thought about removing his arm, she gave in and leaned against him. She did not cry, but she held on to him tightly. The horses had slowed their pace considerably, but they had begun the journey down the other side of the hill.

When the faint sound of a gunshot rang through the night air, Ryan let go of Elizabeth to snap the reins once again. They sped on through the night and raced down the other side of the hill. The sound of the gunshot was very far off in the distance. To their best guess, it had to come from the Sanderson's house.

"Dear God," Elizabeth whispered.

"You can pray later. Right now I need you to help me find that damn road!" Ryan searched every gap in the trees.

"I can't see anything!" Elizabeth peered through the darkness and leaned forward in the seat.

"Just keep looking!" Ryan wanted to slow the horses as they reached to bottom of the hill, but he had no idea how far away the road was.

The only way Ryan was going to get Elizabeth to safety was if they got out of Caterwood. At least back in Burdery there were a thousand places for her to hide, but in the small town she was as trapped as a rat.

"There!" Elizabeth yelled as she pointed in front of her.

"Where?" Ryan looked in the direction that she was pointing, but he did not see the road.

“Turn!” Elizabeth yelled as Ryan forced the horses to make a hard right. The two wheels on the side of the carriage lifted off of the ground as the horses sped around the corner. The tilt of the carriage caused Elizabeth to scream as Ryan held on tight.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion as the carriage lifted higher and higher. Ryan pulled hard on the reins as Elizabeth lifted further off of the seat. As he pulled the team to turn to the left, the horses sped on and the carriage slammed back into the mud. Elizabeth crashed back onto the seat as the rig straightened out. Her breath was caught in her chest and her hands were gripped onto the seat.

“Are you alright?” Ryan tried to look at her. Elizabeth made no comment as she held her hand to her chest. “You should try to give me more warning next time,” Ryan whispered.

It took the full length of the road for Elizabeth to get over the experience. When they reached the main road that lead to Caterwood, she was finally able to breathe normally. Ryan looked both ways for any sign of Gatler and Harland before he led the horses onward.

They pushed the team hard as they headed toward Burdery. The darkness surrounded them completely as the horses ran at a good pace. Elizabeth watched over her shoulder for anyone that might come up from behind them, but she could hardly see in the darkness.

“We are fine,” Ryan said. “But we need to slow down. These horses are not used to this kind of exercise.” He tried to look at Elizabeth, but she was concentrating on the road behind them. “We are not going to make it to Burdery tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

“Gatler will be sure that we went straight back. If we stop for the night at that little town where you bought the dried beef, he will pass us by.” Ryan kept the horses at a quick pace, but not a full run. Elizabeth did not like the idea of staying in a strange place with him.

“Aren’t we far enough ahead of them to keep going?”

“Yes, but their horses are not pulling a carriage. They can move faster than we can. They will catch up to us if we keep going.” Even though he was not tired and he wanted to press on, Ryan knew it was a bad idea to keep going. “We have to stop for the night.”

Chapter nine

By the time they reached the small town it was getting late. The Inn seemed quiet and abandoned. Ryan eased the carriage to a stop at the front of the Inn and looked to Elizabeth.

"Go inside and wait for me. I am going to take the carriage in back." Elizabeth came to stand on the solid ground. The rain had fallen in the small town, but there was not nearly as much mud as there was in Caterwood. "Here, you might want this." Ryan tossed her the brown package with the new dress.

With the parcel in hand, Elizabeth turned to the Inn and walked up to the door. An old man stood behind a small front desk, reading the newspaper.

"Good evening, Miss. Are you in need of a room?" He removed his spectacles and set the paper down.

"Two actually," Elizabeth answered as sweetly as she could. "Do you have two to spare?"

She waited in fear as the man opened a drawer that held a box of keys. If he told her that there was only one room available she would not know what to do, but as the thought continued to take over her imagination Elizabeth looked out the window to see if Ryan was anywhere near.

"Yes." The innkeeper smiled as he opened the box. "We have plenty of rooms, don't you worry about that." Elizabeth drew in a deep breath as she looked behind her. Ryan came into the Inn with his normal cheery disposition. "Is this the other guest for the evening?"

"Yes," she answered.

"We are going to let Vincent pay for the night," Ryan said as he took his wallet out of his inside pocket. "Were you able to secure two rooms?" The innkeeper smiled as he looked at Ryan's harsh expression.

"Yes she did." The odd look that he gave, made Elizabeth realize that he thought they were a couple. "Maybe you should say you were sorry," he chuckled as he avoided Elizabeth's annoyed glare.

"I beg your pardon?" She asked rather rudely.

"Show us to the rooms and mind your own damn business." Ryan paid the man and took the keys from him. The little man cleared his throat and replaced his spectacles.

"Up the stairs and down to the left, they are right across the hall from each other."

"Thank you," Elizabeth said rudely as she walked ahead of Ryan.

Lamps that hung from the ceiling lit the hall as they climbed the steps to the second floor. A thick musty smell made Elizabeth wish that they had continued on to Burdery, but Ryan was right. The horses were tired and they would not have been able to travel fast enough.

The creaking stairs sounded like they were going to break under the pressure. Elizabeth held on to the railing as she made her way to the hallway above. Every step seemed to make the floorboards bend under her weight and she looked back at Ryan with concern. The establishment was a little less than repulsive.

"Go on, you are fine," he whispered. When she reached the rooms at the end of the hall she looked at the two doors. Ryan stepped up behind her. "Would you like the parlor room, decorated in fine silk and embroidery?" Turning to wave at the door behind him, Ryan offered another quick description. "There is also the lovely state-room, with periwinkle velvet and a grand view of the gardens below."

"I will take the periwinkle. It is quite a lovely shade at this time of year." She smiled back at him as he held up the keys. Trying the wrong key in the lock he lifted his head.

"Are you sure, I am rather fond of velvet." The second key opened the door and a damp musty smell escaped the room. Elizabeth raised her hand to cover her nose as Ryan looked inside. "Hold on," he said as he turned to the other door and used the key. The second room was much less offensive to the nose.

"You can have the velvet," Elizabeth said as she walked into the cleaner room.

"Thank you." Ryan gave an awkward smirk as he handed her the key.

"Enjoy the view of the gardens," she began to chuckle.

Ryan stepped into her room and walked over to the small table, before lighting the lamp. The blanket on the bed was made of green wool and the shutters on the window had been locked. Walking over to the corner, Ryan checked for anything that might be offensive to her. It

was definitely the type of room that you would find a dead animal lying in.

"You are being a little ridiculous," she whispered.

"Obviously you did not see the vomit stain on the floor in the stateroom." He turned to face her with the same rare smile. "At least I hope it was vomit." Elizabeth felt strange with him inside the room, but at the same time she did not want him to leave.

"Thank you," she spoke in a hushed whisper. "I will be fine." Ryan liked the way that she looked at him. He did not realize it until then, but he was beginning to find her much less annoying.

"I am right across the hall," he reminded her as he backed away.

"I know," she answered, but when Ryan turned around and walked into the hallway Elizabeth felt a moment of dread. "Mr. Hawke," she called quickly.

In that one moment he thought about it. He thought about taking her back into that room and kissing her, until she would call out his name in a less elegant fashion. When he turned to face her, he wondered if the look in her eyes meant that she had thought about it as well. Unfortunately, Elizabeth did not know why she had called for him, but she did not want him to go.

"Goodnight," she whispered after an awkward moment.

"You are going to be fine Beth," Ryan said in a calm tone.

The way that he spoke her name sounded sweeter to her than she had ever heard before. He had called her 'Beth' a few times before, but as he stood there in his white shirt and black jacket with the lamplight showing a different depth to his eyes, Elizabeth found him nearly irresistible. Without another glance, Ryan closed the door behind him.

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Despite the constant tossing and turning, Elizabeth had fallen asleep. Her dreams were filled with thoughts of Ryan, until a strange sound forced her awake. The squeak of the door hinge caused her to sit up straight. Her heart was in her chest as the form of a man walked into her room.

"Ryan?" Elizabeth whispered as the man crossed the room quickly. At about the same time that she realized it wasn't Ryan, he

reached out for her. Elizabeth fought to scream, but a hand quickly covered her mouth as she drew in a deep breath.

"Get in here and shut the door!" The man called over his shoulder. Elizabeth watched in horror as Harland walked into the room with his tall and lengthy form. "Get her clothes," Gatler ordered as he looked at the gray dress on the chair. "I am pretty sure that Mr. Roshire does not want to see her like this." Harland grabbed the dress and the boots as Gatler lifted her off of the bed and placed her bare feet on the floor.

"Your man Hawke is getting a little careless, Miss Drake," he said placing a pistol to her side. "If I were trying to protect you, I would have done it from within the same bed." Elizabeth's eyes were wide with fear as Gatler pressed the pistol hard against her ribs. "Now listen very carefully." He grabbed a fistful of her hair and forced her to look up. All she could see was the large bloody slice above his broken nose. "You are going to remain silent. If you even blink loudly, I will spill your blood all over this floor. Nod if you understand me." The grip of his hand made it difficult to move her head, but Elizabeth withstood the pain as she nodded.

"What about Hawke?" Harland asked. Gatler looked down at Elizabeth and pulled even harder on her hair. She wanted to cry out, but fear kept her silent.

"What do you think," Gatler hissed in her ear. "Should we just kill him now and get it over with?" Elizabeth closed her eyes as he stood behind her and continued to breathe down her neck. "Or should I believe that you will stay quiet long enough to get you back to Burdery?"

She was about to die. Elizabeth had no doubt that it was her last night alive and she was not about to have Ryan killed as well. Through her terror, Elizabeth remained quiet.

"Tell me where the letter is, and I will let him live," Gatler ordered. Even though she was young and naïve, she was not completely stupid. She knew that they would kill Ryan no matter what she said, but the pain in her head was hard to bear.

"Ryan has it," she lied.

"It's here," Harland said as he lifted the letter out of the gray dress. Gatler turned back to Elizabeth and forced her to look up at him.

"You lied to me," he whispered. Then as quickly as he came into her room Gatler released her hair and pulled back his fist, before slamming it into her face. Elizabeth heard Harland chuckle as she fell

against him. “Give me that!” Gatler ordered as Harland handed him the letter. “Take care of Hawke.”

The room swayed around her as Elizabeth reached up to her face, feeling the excruciating pain. Everything seemed to swirl around her, and it was hard to move. However, when she turned to see Harland walk toward Ryan’s room with a gun in his hand she ran after him.

“Where do you think you are going?” Gatler asked as he wrapped his arm around her waist.

Harland kicked open the door with a quick aim and took a single shot at the bed inside. Elizabeth screamed for only a second before Gatler wrapped his hand around her mouth and pulled her close to him.

“It’s alright, Miss Drake. You won’t have to suffer his loss for long.” A thick chuckle escaped Harland as he walked into Ryan’s room and stepped up to the bed.

“I never thought that I would be the one to kill Ryan Hawke,” Harland whispered as he reached for the blanket on the bed. “Damn,” he said loudly.

“What is it,” Gatler looked up from Elizabeth.

“He’s not here!” He yelled. Elizabeth looked over to the room across the hall and felt hope begin to rise.

“What do you mean?” Gatler asked as he pulled Elizabeth into the hall in her underclothes. The room was empty and Harland had shot a whole through the center of the bed. “Damn,” Gatler said as he reached up and grabbed onto Elizabeth’s hair again. “He is setting a trap, let’s go.”

“Maybe we should just kill her now.” Harland followed Gatler down the stairs. Elizabeth held onto the fist that Gatler had imbedded in her hair. The pain was agonizing and she could feel blood dripping from her nose.

“Now what fun would that be?” Gatler asked. “I’ve gone through a lot of effort to get a hold of this little harlot. I am not about to do away with her, until I get paid for my services.” As he reached the halfway point on the stairs Gatler decided that Elizabeth was not walking quite fast enough. “Get moving!” He ordered as he pushed her.

There was no way for her to catch her footing. The force of his arm had sent her tumbling forward without any chance of stopping the fall. Elizabeth cried out again as she reached for the rail. Her

momentum caused her legs to stumble and she fell hitting every step until she landed on the floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Gatler said as he reached down and grabbed a fistful of hair once more. "Did you hurt yourself?"

The room spun around her as her body was wracked with pain. Elizabeth felt the large hand pulling on her hair, and she had no choice but to come to her feet. She cried out as she was forced to stand. However, it wasn't until she opened her eyes that she saw a pool of blood near the front desk.

Tears came quickly as she placed her hands above Gatler's fist again. The old man that had given her the keys laid in a slump on the floor behind the desk. His throat had been sliced open, and his eyes were fixed in a dead stare. Elizabeth turned away and tried to keep her legs under her, but the pain of the fall spread throughout her body.

"I didn't say that you could sit down." Gatler continued to hold her up by her hair. Even as her legs wanted to give way, his fist alone held her upright. "You are in for a hell of a night, Miss Drake. I would hate for you to miss the fun." Looking around the Inn, Gatler called out loudly. "Did you hear that Hawke? I'm going to let Roshire kill her, but she will wish that she were dead long before then." Gatler continued to look up the stairs as he called out.

Tears ran down Elizabeth's face as she tried to find an escape. Blood ran from her nose and her mouth and the only movement that she made was to force her feet to keep up to his pace. Gatler pushed her toward the door and out into the street, keeping the pistol at her ribs the entire time. Then, as if she weighed less than a feather, he lifted her onto his horse and climbed up behind her.

"What do we do about Hawke?" Harland asked.

"Wait for him to find us. Then, he can watch while I play with his little toy." She could not see his face, but Elizabeth closed her eyes as Gatler's breath passed over her shoulder.

With a kick of his boots the horse took off in a run. Every movement caused her body to tense up in pain. The huge man held his arm tightly around her waist, but her only thought was about Ryan.

Elizabeth felt complete agony when Harland had pulled the trigger and shot into the bed. She thought for sure that Ryan was dead. It was hard to believe Ryan was not in the room, but as she saw for herself that the bed was empty, she prayed that he would save her.

Her eyes remained closed as her body absorbed the shock from the horses stride. Gatler pressed against her in a way that made her fear

for more than her life. His hand around her stomach pulled so hard that she tightened her muscles to handle the pain. When she finally opened her eyes she saw where they were going. Gatler did not lead his horse to the main road. Instead, he kept to the field near the forest.

The horses ran at a steady pace for several minutes. Then without warning she heard Harland groan as his horse fell forward. Elizabeth heard a bone snap as the giant stallion rolled forward over its own head. Harland was thrown as it landed on the ground.

"What happened?" Gatler pulled his own horse to a stop as he looked back at Harland.

"I don't know. He just tripped on something." As Harland came to his feet he watched the large try to get up. The first time that it tried to use its front foot, sent him tumbling back to the ground. "I knew that we should have stayed to the road."

"Take care of it," Gatler ordered as the horse lay on its side in pain. It tried to get up several times, but when Harland pulled out his gun and aimed it toward the animal's head, Elizabeth closed her eyes and turned away.

Gatler led his animal toward the woods as the pistol shot echoed through the pitch-black night. Branches and leaves swiped passed her arms and snagged her hair, but Elizabeth made no sound. Once he had rode far enough into the forest that he could not see the field, Gatler waited for Harland to catch up.

"Now what?" Harland asked.

"Take her," he said, pushing Elizabeth off of the horse and into Harland's arms.

"We can't get back to Burdery on one horse." Placing his arms around her waist Harland watched as Gatler dismounted.

"No we can't." Gatler walked over to his horse and took a long piece of rope out of the saddle. "You are going to like this," he sneered at Elizabeth. "This is the same rope that I drug your daddy with."

Elizabeth opened her eyes and looked at the long rope before she understood what he had said. Nausea took over her body as the realization came to her. She closed her eyes and tried to fight the tear that fell down her cheek, but the salty liquid burned the cut that she had received from the fall down the stairs.

"At least he was a man about it," Gatler said. "It didn't matter much. He was practically dead before we strung him up."

Elizabeth struggled against Harland as she tried to break free. Her mind forced her to imagine what her father had to endure, even

though she fought hard to ignore it. The visions that came to her mind ate away at her, until the emotions were too much and the pain made struggling impossible.

"There is a farmhouse, just down the way." Gatler nodded toward the field. A very faint glow of lamplight was visible through the trees. "You have fifteen minutes to get there and come back with a horse. If you don't make it in time, I will take her to Roshire and you will catch up later."

"You aren't taking her without me. There is a lot of money riding on her head." Harland pulled Elizabeth away from Gatler and her nearly limp body did not resist.

"And you will be lucky to see any of it if you do that again," Gatler warned as he reached for Elizabeth a second time. Harland released his hold as Gatler wrapped the rope around her wrists. "Now hurry up, I am leaving here in fifteen minutes. If you want to go with, I suggest that you find yourself a horse."

"You want me to steal a horse from there?" Harland looked through the woods.

"Move!" Gatler leaned over and slapped Harland in the back of the head.

"No… please," Elizabeth begged as Gatler continued to wrap the rope around her hands. "Just let me go." Deep laughter was the answer to her plea.

"Do you even know how much trouble I have gone through to get to you?" He asked as his steel blue eyes peered down at her. "We asked your father for the letter. If he had given it up freely we would have only had to kill you, and that would have been the end of it."

"No!" She cried out as she fought against the rope. There was very little strength left within her, but she was not about to fall to the ground. "Let me go!" Gatler walked over to a thick tree. As he moved his hands, one over the other, he brought her before him again.

"But your daddy had to try and be noble about things. He wanted to give his little girl a life that she never knew." Elizabeth cringed as he wrapped his fist in her hair once more. "A life that meant taking money away from my employer, but that would be taking money away from me." Forcing her head back, Gatler stared down at her. "Now, you don't really want my money, do you?"

"No!" Elizabeth answered quickly as she started to break. There was no one for miles, and she had very little strength left to fight

him. “I don’t want your money,” she swore. Lifting his head and looking around, Gatler leaned closet to her ear.

“Can you hear that?” He did not wait for an answer as he heard her sobs. “I don’t hear anything either…” Lifting his head again, he waited for another moment. “I don’t think anyone is coming to save you.”

Elizabeth tried to fight him as he raised her hands above her head. Looking to the thick branch that came just above her head, Gatler dropped the length of the rope on the other side and began to tie her hands to the branch. She cried out and tried to struggle, but it did nothing more than annoy him. The last cry was loud enough to be heard through the woods, and Gatler was not about to listen any more.

“Shut your mouth!” He struck her hard with the back of his hand. The hit was enough to make her lose the ability to stand. Her weight pulled on her arms as she collapsed against the rope. “Oh, are you alright?” Gatler removed his jacket before he laid his hand against her cheek and turned her face to look up at him. “I didn’t hurt you did I?”

Elizabeth was not a strong woman. She knew that she could not stay conscious much longer. As Gatler leaned closer to her face, she used what she had left in her to stand on her feet once more.

“There you go,” Gatler smiled at her. “That’s a good girl.” His steel blue eyes terrified Elizabeth as he placed his hands on her hips and moved toward her.

Her thin chemise did nothing to protect her from feeling his body against hers. A wicked smile spread across Gatler’s face as he leaned forward and grazed his lips down the line of her jaw. As Elizabeth tried to pull her head away from him, he pulled hard on her hair. Without the ability to move her head, she cringed as he forced his lips against hers. Tears ran down her cheek as Gatler pressed his body against hers. The rope held her arms high above her head and Elizabeth was nearly helpless.

“Stop…” she pleaded. Gatler reached down to her leg and began to pull the fabric of her chemise upward while his mouth continued to assault her neck. The material of the gown continued to rise, until Elizabeth felt Gatler’s hand on the bare flesh of her thigh. She tried to pull her leg away from his hand and that is when she heard the ripping sound of the chemise in his hand.

Elizabeth made one quick movement and screamed out. She lifted her knee and hit Gatler between the legs with all of her strength.

A deep groan came out of his chest as he reached to grab himself, but the next thing that she saw was Gatler's fist as it slammed against her face.

Even though she could not open her eyes, Elizabeth heard more than she expected to. Someone fell against her feet as a groan called out. Then, she heard some kind of a struggle. She was bumped twice by a large form, but had no idea who it was. Elizabeth tried to force her eyes open as she listened to the leaves and branches around her. More clatter could be heard, and a bit of vision finally returned through one of her eyes. Gratefully, the sight was worth it.

Ryan stood above Gatler as the man knelt before him. Fist after fist was thrown into his skull. Ryan showed no mercy to the man that was once his friend. After several strikes, Gatler fell.

"Get up," Ryan said as he circled around the man that he wanted to kill. "Get up!" Gatler shook his head and came to his feet.

"I'm not going to kill you," he said as he struggled to stand. "But I will let you watch me and your little lady."

Ryan attacked quickly, once Gatler stood to his full height. Elizabeth could hardly see what was happening, but she did notice that Gatler hardly touched Ryan. After a few more punches, Gatler fell to the ground again, but this time he reached for his pistol.

"Ryan!" It was barely audible, but he heard her. Gatler came to his feet and lifted his arm with the gun in it.

Pulling his knife out of his back pocket, Ryan turned on him. Within a second, the blade was stabbed deep into Gatler's leg. The wound was vicious, but it wasn't enough for Ryan. Without a second thought he ripped the knife through Gatler's flesh and grabbed the gun beside him.

"You better finish this Hawke, or I swear I'll kill you!" Gatler tried to get up, but as blood spewed from the wound, he fell back to the dirt. "Hawke," he called as he held tight to his leg and looked up to Ryan. It was the last thing Elizabeth saw. As she allowed her eyes to close, she could hear Ryan run to the tree that held her up.

"Come on, Beth." Pocketing the pistol, he cut the rope that held her hands. "I got you." Elizabeth could feel herself being lifted against his body. There was little strength left in her, but she was able to force her legs to hold her up. "We have to get you on that horse. The darkness concealed her wounds from his sight. Ryan placed his hands on the side of her face and gently kissed her forehead. Grabbing the dress from Gatler's horse, Ryan gently eased the material over her

head and covered her torn chemise. “Come on,” he whispered. “We have to go.”

“Get the letter,” she whispered against his chest. Ryan walked back over to Gatler as he lay on the ground and held his leg.

“You won’t live out the week, Hawke!” The pain in his leg was crippling, and Gatler was unable to stop Ryan from taking the letter. “I’ll find you! Andrew will kill that little bitch of yours!”

Gatler yelled after them the entire time that Ryan readied his mount with Elizabeth cradled in front of him. The horse was led out of the woods and slowly made its way to the road. Even if Harland had found them, he was not brave enough to do anything without Gatler. Elizabeth was sore and tired as she leaned against Ryan, but she did not feel safe enough to close her eyes.

“Where were you?” She asked in a whisper.

Ryan could not believe how helpless she looked as she laid in his arms, but he thought about how things played out and he wondered what he could have done differently.

The sound of the struggle with the innkeeper was what woke him up. He could hear Gatler’s voice on the first floor. When Ryan entered the hallway he tried to open Elizabeth’s door, but she had it locked. Ryan knew that he could not call to her without them finding out exactly where their rooms were. Gatler and Harland would want to get rid of him as quickly as they could. So, Ryan did the only thing that he could do.

Forcing the window in his room open, he climbed out to the side of the building. He pulled the window almost perfectly closed and then he waited as he tried to figure out a plan. The small decorative ledge that circled the second story gave him something to press his boots against, but he could not hang for long. When he heard the door to his room open and the shot that was fired, Ryan let go of the window and fell over ten feet to the ground below.

It took him more than a few minutes to stand up. It was beyond luck that kept him from breaking anything more than two of his fingers, but when he made his way to the front of the Inn he saw the gun that was placed to Elizabeth’s side. Once they rode off Ryan took one of Vincent’s horses and headed toward Burdery. It was only when he heard gunfire in the field that he realized how far off he was. At breakneck speed, Ryan headed toward the sound. He eventually came up on Harland’s stallion. At that moment, he heard Elizabeth scream.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a whisper. Ryan looked down at Elizabeth and hated himself for letting them get to her. “I have been following you since they left the Inn, but I just couldn’t get to you in time.”

“I thought you left me,” she whispered closing her eyes and resting against his chest.

“I didn’t leave you.” Ryan pulled her closer and rode on through the night.

She allowed her eyes to stay closed for what seemed like a moment, but when she opened them the night looked much brighter. The horse’s hooves clicked on paved road and she could see the silhouette of tall buildings around her. Elizabeth had slept for the entire journey back to Burdery, and Ryan held her close the entire ride.

“Where are we?” She asked, feeling the stiffness and pain take over her body.

“At your brother’s house,” he answered

“This is not my brother’s house.” Elizabeth sat up as Ryan dismounted. He held out his arms to her, and she was grateful to be in them once more. “I have stayed at his house.”

“This is his house. He doesn’t always live here, but I have a feeling that he is here tonight.”

Elizabeth had no idea what Ryan was talking about and she honestly did not care. Her entire body ached and she wanted nothing more than a place to sleep. So, she allowed Ryan to lead her up the steps and waited as he knocked on the door. A woman in her advanced years wearing a gray robe answered.

“Yes?” She asked in a suspicious voice. “Mr. Hawke, we were expecting you hours ago.”

“I didn’t want to wake you Letti.” Ryan led Elizabeth into the house and closed the door behind him. “Did Vincent tell you that we would be staying here tonight?”

“Yes, of course.” The woman looked at Elizabeth and placed her hand against the side of her face. “Let me have a look at you.” Elizabeth instinctively pulled away from the woman’s hand and leaned closer to Ryan. “It’s alright,” the woman said in a kind tone. “I can look at it later if you would like.”

“I need a place for her to sleep.” Ryan held his arm tighter around Elizabeth as he tried to smile to the maid.

“That is understandable dear. Did you want me to wake Mr. Drake?” Letti turned toward the beautiful stairway that curved up to a second floor.

“Please don’t,” She asked Ryan. “I don’t want him to see me. He has suffered as much as I have.” Vincent had taken a beating that day, but Elizabeth had been through much more in Ryan’s eyes.

“No-thank you Letti, we will talk to him first thing in the morning.”

“Well come on then,” she said as she continued up the stairs. “I will show you to your rooms.”

The entire time that Elizabeth forced her legs to move beneath her, she thought of only one thing. She did not want Ryan to leave her side again. Every step was painful, and the closer they came to the top of the stairs the more intense her fear became.

Even in the dim light from the sconces Elizabeth knew that the house was beautiful, but with everything that had happened, she feared her surroundings. The housekeeper led them down two large halls before they reached the door that she was searching for.

“Mr. Drake ordered this room prepared especially for you, Miss Elizabeth.” Letti smiled as she opened the door. After a silent moment, Elizabeth looked up at Ryan.

“Could you excuse us please?” She asked the woman in a whisper.

“Of course.” The woman nodded and offered a kind smile. “Just ring if you need anything. Mr. Hawke, you know your way around.”

“What is it?” Ryan asked once Letti had left.

“I cannot stay here,” she whispered as a tear rolled down her cheek. “I don’t know where I am.”

“It’s alright. This is your brother’s house. Hardly anyone even knows that he owns it.” Seeing the fear in her eyes, he pulled her against his chest. “You are perfectly safe here.”

“No,” Elizabeth shook her head. “I don’t know where to run. I don’t know where to go…”

“Listen to me.” Ryan stroked the back of her hair as he noticed that long golden strands nearly fell out into his hands. “What did he do to you?” Ryan let the few golden tendrils fall to the floor. Elizabeth shook her head as she held him close.

“I won’t know where to find you.” The words that were stuck inside the back of her throat finally came out.

Ryan sighed heavily as he realized what had happened. In a single day, he had gained all of the responsibility that he had avoided his entire life. “I will be right there,” he whispered, pointing to the chair next to the bed.

Chapter ten

"What happened?" Vincent asked as Letti placed more pastries on the table and quietly left the room.

Ryan shook his head at the idea of food and walked over to the fireplace. The dining room was very large with one table in the center. Deep red carpeting covered the floor, and the chairs were decorated in the same wine color. Silver candelabras hung from the walls above the fireplace, but there was only one window that allowed light into the room.

"There was nothing at the office," Ryan turned away from the fireplace and looked across the long table to where Vincent sat. "We went to the Sanderson house. Apparently they are friends of your sister."

Just mentioning Elizabeth's name made Ryan remember the long night that she had. He had stayed in the chair next to her for an hour before she finally fell asleep. In that time, he watched the marks on her face grow darker.

Originally, he had only intended to stay in the room until Elizabeth fell asleep, but the chair was more comfortable than he had thought, and Ryan ended up sleeping there the whole night.

"Did you know that she can't read?" Ryan asked as he looked back at Vincent. The expression on his face proved that he did not. "She had her friend read the letter in front of me." As he walked closer to the table, Ryan ran his hand across the back of his neck while he waited for the suspense to build.

"And..?" Vincent looked at him with concern and curiosity.

"I still don't know how it is possible, but your sister is not only related to Oswald Roshire, she is his granddaughter." Shaking his head and pulling out the chair next to Vincent, Ryan sat down.

"What," Vincent did not put the piece of pastry in his mouth as he had intended. "What do you mean his granddaughter?" Ryan sat back against the dark wood chair and looked over at Vincent.

"Your sister is the daughter of Camille Roshire Hammond," he said.

"How in the hell did that happen?" Vincent asked before he wiped his mouth and threw the napkin on the table.

“That damn letter is from Camille to Daniel. Within it, she explains Elizabeth’s rights to some of her property. She also gave Elizabeth the house that Daniel lived in.” Rotating his neck from the stiffness he continued. “By the way, that was burned to the ground the same day that Daniel was killed.” Lowering his head and pressing his lips together, Vincent wondered what else Elizabeth would have to face.

“Is she still set on getting to Oswald?”

“As far as I know,” he answered. “But there is more to it than that. I have to tell you the highlight of the evening.” The way that Ryan held his expression made Vincent sit and wait. Ryan was known for saving the worst information for last. “Gatler and Harland followed us to the Sanderson house.” Tilting his head as he thought of the details, Ryan hoped that Vincent would take the news well. “We were able to get out in time, but the horses were run hard. We had to stop for the night.”

“But you came here,” Vincent interrupted.

“I know,” Ryan looked from the table over to Vincent. When there was no further interruption he continued. “We stopped at the Inn halfway between Caterwood and Burdery. We got two rooms.” Placing his elbow on the armrest of the chair, Ryan continued to stare at Vincent. “They came and took her in the middle of the night.”

Adjusting his position, Vincent tried to keep everything in perspective. He knew that Elizabeth was in the house. So, he was only mildly concerned.

“They pretty much beat the hell out of her.” The cold harsh tone of Ryan’s voice had returned as he laid the facts down the way they happened. “Gatler paid quite a bit of attention to her face, but I found her before he strayed any further.” Vincent rubbed his hand across his chin gently as he felt the bruises that he had sustained from Gatler.

“Is Gatler…?”

“No,” Ryan shook his head, “but I slowed him down.” The idea of killing Gatler troubled Ryan. They had been acquaintances for years, but all of that had changed the moment that he put his hands on Elizabeth. Ryan knew without a doubt that one of them would have to kill the other eventually.

“Is Elizabeth alright?”

"No," Ryan replied flatly. "She barely looks better than you. She has had the hell scared out of her, but nothing is broken." Shaking his head Vincent focused on the newspaper that sat next to his plate.

"I have to get her out of here," he stated. Ryan raised his eyebrows at the comment.

"Yes, you do." Ryan watched Letti as she poured him a cup of coffee. When the woman had left the room Ryan went on. "Gatler might be out of the way for a while, but I would not take him out of the equation just yet. Andrew will take this a lot more seriously, when he and Harland get back."

"So, now what do we do?" Vincent stood up from his chair and walked over to the mantle above the fireplace. His former mistress had hated it when Vincent smoked. He hardly ever lit a cigar in the house, but since she was no longer residing there, Vincent removed a cigar from a box on the mantle and lit it.

"Well, we know that you have no part in this. You don't have the rich relative, and no one really cares about you anymore." Ryan turned his attention toward the fireplace. "Gatler will be looking for me, the moment he sews up the hole in his leg. Still, I don't think he will worry about his personal vendetta, until they have taken care of Elizabeth." Ryan paused briefly. "I don't see how in the hell you can get her to Oswald without Andrew finding out about it. The man has always gone to extreme measures to gain control of Roshire's industries, and he does it right under Oswald's nose." Vincent nodded in agreement.

"Everyone knows that Andrew took on Roshire's name as soon as his father died, but less than a handful of people know how well he skims off of the top of his Granddaddy's businesses." Vincent kept his voice low as he puffed on the cigar.

"How in the hell did your Father get a woman like Camille Hammond?" Jumping off of the subject, Ryan looked at Vincent.

"Could you try to concentrate on the situation at hand?" Vincent asked.

"Alright, but for her to have a daughter without anyone knowing is pretty miraculous," Ryan pointed out.

"Where can she go?" Vincent asked as he ignored Ryan's lack of focus. Ryan sighed as he thought of the options.

"She can't go anywhere right now. She's banged up pretty bad, but that is not the problem." Standing up and walking over to the

fireplace Ryan spoke quieter as Letti entered the room. “She’s so scared, she can barely sleep.”

Vincent turned to him on a dime. There was no reason for Ryan to know how Elizabeth was sleeping. It wasn’t likely that his partner would have done anything ridiculous, but the opportunity had still been there.

“He stayed the whole night in her chair up there,” Letti offered as she cleared the table. “Don’t be a dunderhead. He was just looking after her.” With that said, she left the room. Vincent turned back to the fire and held out a cigar.

“Send her on a trip, just until Oswald dies. By then, his Will should be permanent.” Ryan refused the cigar as he considered the options. “Andrew won’t care about what happens to Elizabeth.”

“She will lose the inheritance.” Vincent faced him as he stated the fact.

“Keep her here and they’re going to kill her,” Ryan added.

“I will talk to her tonight,” Vincent replied. “What are you going to do?”

The question was not as easy to answer. As much as he was ready to get back to collecting loan payments Ryan hesitated at the idea of leaving Elizabeth.

“There are at least three payments that have lapsed in the last few days.” Walking over to the closest chair, Ryan leaned on the back of it. “And you know how I hate to lose money.”

“Another day won’t matter.” Vincent puffed on the cigar.

“Don’t go noble on me.” Ryan turned around and faced him. “One week with your sister and you are already thinking about becoming honest? You figure out what to do with your sister. I will handle the collections.”

“Excuse me,” Letti called as she came to the door. “Miss Drake is calling for you.” Vincent threw the cigar in the fireplace and quickly adjusted his coat.

“Tell her I will be right there,” Vincent stated.

“I beg your pardon, Sir. I meant, Mr. Hawke.” Letti bowed her head and looked at Ryan with embarrassment. Ryan did not bolt toward the door, but he didn’t take the time to look at Vincent either. With a heavy sigh, he left the awkward pause and headed up to Elizabeth’s room.

“I want to see her,” Vincent called after him. Ignoring the comment, Ryan climbed the stairs.

The large hallway looked much more vibrant in the morning light. The long golden carpet that spanned the length of the floor drew attention to the golden frames around the portraits that lined the halls. The southwest wall was lined with large paned glass windows that brought light into the hallway. However, it also brought in some of the noise from the city below.

It was a difficult task to drag her body out of the bed and force herself into another borrowed gown, but Elizabeth had done just that. The left side of her face had sustained the most injury. The swollen lip, bruised cheek and small cut above her eye were impossible to look passed. The warm bath had revealed more bruises that covered her legs and arms.

Letti had brought Elizabeth a rather wonderful surprise, a deep green dress with a black collar and black cuffs on the sleeves. The most wonderful accessory to the fine garment was a hat decorated with a very thick dark veil in the front.

"What are you doing?" Ryan asked as he came to the open door of her room. After the severe beating that Elizabeth withstood, Ryan did not expect her to wake up for at least another few hours.

"I have a favor to ask?" Elizabeth asked boldly.

Ryan entered her room without hesitation and quickly walked up to her. The smell of jasmine hung in the air and the long golden braid that extended from the hat to her waist was still damp. Ryan raised his hand to the veil and pushed the material back over the decorative head dress.

"I cannot talk to you if I can't see you." He reached for the veil without realizing how quickly she could move, Elizabeth lowered her face away from his gaze.

"Will you still take me to Cameron?"

"Not now," Ryan answered without a thought. "You cannot possibly make a fifty mile journey, and I am pretty sure that Harland and Gatler have made it back to Andrew by now." Even as she tried to avoid looking at him, Ryan stared at her the entire time he spoke. "There will be a few more obstacles before we even get near Oswald." Elizabeth turned her face away from him as he spoke. "Stop avoiding me."

"I am not comfortable being seen like this," she pointed out in a whisper.

"You looked a hell of a lot worse last night," he added. Elizabeth ignored his comment and lowered her face again.

“I have to see my brother.” She tried to walk by him. “Maybe he knows someone that can take me to Cameron.”

“You can do that,” Ryan said as she walked passed him. “Or you can just wait until Oswald comes back to the city. There are plenty of places to lay low. Your brother can get an appointment with him when he returns.”

“I am not waiting,” Elizabeth turned around to face him.

“Is the money that important to you, because it might be a little hard to spend if you’re dead?” Ryan was facing slightly to the side, and the look in his eyes could have been easily perceived as concern.

“That is not why I am doing this,” she said.

“That’s right,” he nodded in agreement. “Your daddy told you too.” She was silenced instantly by the harsh comment. Ryan did not know when to stop. “It is pretty cruel if you think about it. Your father is going to get you killed by your own brother.”

His comment was not appreciated. Elizabeth turned around slowly and walked down the hall to the stairs. It had been the second time that someone had spoken ill of her father. Considering that she had not even had time to mourn his loss it was beyond rude.

She took the stairs more slowly than she would have liked. Sore muscles and bruises made the journey more tedious than she had thought it would be, but as she reached the bottom of the step she found Letti on her way to the dining room.

“That looks lovely on you.” The slender woman stopped to admire the fit of the gown.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth smiled behind the veil. Lifting out the bustled skirt she asked, “Where did this come from?”

“The lady of the house, Miss.” Letti smiled before she continued on her way. “Mr. Drake is waiting for you in the dining room. You should try to eat a little something.” The silver hair on her head was a nice compliment to her light green eyes. Elizabeth could only hope to age as lovely as Letti had.

Following the housekeeper’s directions, Elizabeth entered the large room and saw the wounds on Vincent. He had returned to his chair and was trying to read the paper, but when he looked up he stared silently.

“What is it?” She asked before she walked any closer.

The veil hid her face and no other wounds were apparent through the dark dress. It had been weeks since his mistress had left

him. Even though he knew that she was not coming back, seeing her clothes on Elizabeth did little to ease his mind.

"You look nice," he said as he shook the memory. "Let me see your face."

"No," she replied. His patients were tested as Elizabeth refused him.

"I want to see your face. Lift the veil." He ordered again.

"I have been bullied enough for one lifetime brother," Elizabeth spoke bravely. Vincent sat at the head of the table and Elizabeth took the seat next to him. "I have a question for you." When she had his complete attention, Elizabeth took one of the pastry cakes and set it on the plate in front of her. "Who is she, the lady that owns this dress?" Swallowing hard, Vincent wondered if he could get away with lying to her.

"She is not here." The veil blocked some of her features, but Vincent could still see dark bruises and a swollen eye.

"I know," Elizabeth replied as she took a few pieces of sausage. "Who is she?"

"It doesn't matter," he answered. Letti walked into the room and brought Elizabeth a fresh pot of tea. "You won't have to meet her." His secrecy sparked her interest.

"Is she your wife?" Although the answer was *'no'*, Vincent did not want to give it. "Does she live here?"

"Find something a little less useless to fill your mind with," Vincent lifted the paper that sat beside his plate. "Hawke told me what happened." Elizabeth thought back to the night before and got a cold chill. "It doesn't matter now," she stated. The food in front of her lost all of its appeal. Resetting the paper next to him, Vincent ran his hand against his forehead.

"It matters a lot, Beth. Gatler will want revenge, along with his cut for delivering you to Andrew." Trying to see passed the veil, Vincent approached the subject carefully. "We should get you someplace safe for a while."

Elizabeth heard the click of heels on the floor of the entryway. She turned just in time to see Ryan walk out of the house. A feeling of panic began to rise in Elizabeth as he walked out the door.

"Where is he going?" She asked, trying to hide her apprehension.

"We have a business to run Beth. It does not involve getting you to Oswald Roshire right now." A faint shimmer of her blue eyes

was visible through the thick veil. “You don’t have to do this,” Vincent reminded her. “I can give you enough money to get away. You can go to the country and wait this out. An inheritance is not worth dying for.”

“But it seems to be enough to kill for,” she added softly. “I don’t want the inheritance.” Holding her gaze on the food that was no longer tempting, she argued. “I want to do what I promised my father. He died for this.” Elizabeth lifted her eyes to his. “Or did you forget that?”

Vincent stood up from the table and walked over to Elizabeth slowly. The events of the previous evening made her draw back in fear as her brother reached for her, but he stopped when he saw Elizabeth recoil. Then, when she was still, Vincent lifted the veil off of her face. The stunning display of swelling and bruised cuts met his gaze for the first time.

“They are going to kill you,” he whispered. Elizabeth raised her hand to replace the veil just as Vincent walked out of the room. Even though she had entered the room hungry, Vincent had found a way to ruin her appetite.

Nearly as fast as Elizabeth had sat at the table, she departed it. There was a small creamy-yellow drawing room in a secluded corner of the house. Elizabeth found it by accident, but it was precisely what she needed. Within the small room she nearly collapsed on a pale vanilla sofa to wipe the tears that had fallen.

She had finally learned who her mother was, but the knowledge had come too late. Camille was no longer living. The knowledge of her new brother was even more disturbing. Since, he was the one trying to kill her.

All of these events still failed in comparison to the loss of Daniel. Over a week had passed, and she had hardly been able to mourn her father. Everything seemed to happen around her. Yet, she had no control of the situation. If she took Vincent’s advice she would never meet Oswald. Even though Daniel had instructed her to find him, learning that he was her grandfather made it much more important.

Elizabeth looked over to a pair of porcelain figurines that stood next to a lamp. Both were painted with extraordinary detail. The man bowed toward the woman as if asking her to dance. The woman held her fan playfully with a smile on her face, but there was a small chip missing on the bottom of her dress.

The figures reminded her of the dance that she shared with Ryan. Even though she did not appreciate his idea of humor and lack of respect, Elizabeth had come to trust him as much as her brother. Ryan held her memory for several moments before she was able to shake the thought.

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"Here," Ryan said as he tossed a folded stack of bills on Vincent's desk. "That is from Mr. Young, and this is the first payment from George Wallace." Throwing a smaller set of bills on the table, Ryan watched the smile grow on Vincent's face. "Apparently he has been warned about me. He had the money in his hand as soon as I walked into the pub." Walking over to the shell of a book, Vincent hid the money inside.

"Perhaps our job is getting easier?" Taking note that the door to the bank was closed, he eased back into his chair.

"Where is the fun in that?" Ryan leaned against the desk.

Closing a ledger and replacing it on the shelf, Vincent looked back at Ryan. He did not have any new noticeable wounds to his hands or his face.

"You have been gone for three days now. I was starting to wonder if you were dead."

"Trust me, if I were dead," he chuckled. "Someone would have bragged." Vincent took his seat back at the desk.

"So, where the hell have you been?"

"It will only be a day or so before Gatler starts looking for me. I would rather not kill him here, but you can pick which office he dies in."

It was amazing to Vincent how quickly Ryan could change his disposition. Just moments before Hawke had entered his office he was holding a conversation with a lawyer from the top law firm in the city. His manner was every bit like a gentleman, and his stance did not show the high self esteem that he obviously suffered.

The lawyer that Ryan was speaking to had made some changes to his Will and investments. Apparently, his eldest son was benefiting from an error that his youngest son had made. Ryan was not at all surprised. In fact, no one in Burdery was surprised at the lawyer's decision. His youngest son had been caught in a scandalous embrace with his Aunt. Needless to say, she was stricken from the Will, as well.

Anyone that knew Ryan would have waited for the sly remarks that the situation would lead him to, but like any other well paid professional, Ryan ignored the opportunity and kept the conversation strictly business.

"How long do you think it will take for Gatler to come to his senses?" Vincent did not slouch in his chair like Ryan did. He held himself straight and stiff at all times.

"We are not like you." Ryan reminded him. "This will only fester like an open wound, and I am pretty sure that one of us will be seriously injured the next time we meet."

"Then you had better make yourself scarce around here" Vincent sighed and agreed. "Don't come in unless you have to." Taking a moment to look out the small window Vincent turned back to him. "You can bring the payments to my house."

Just the mention of his house made Ryan curious. He wanted to know if Elizabeth was still there or if she had run off to find Oswald Roshire alone, but he was not about to ask.

"Right," he said as he stood up from the chair.

"Hawke," Vincent called just before he left the room. "Could you stop by my house and give a message to Elizabeth?"

"You are leaving here in an hour, tell her yourself." Ryan was not about to agree. An annoyed expression passed over Vincent as he looked at the letter on his desk.

"Actually, I might not be home until late. That is what I want you to tell her." The beautiful feminine penmanship still drew his attention. Ryan laughed at the look on Vincent's face as he noticed the letter as well.

"Did your mistress accept the fur coat you sent her yesterday?" The laughter was unmistakable in Ryan's voice.

"How did you know about that?"

"If it's unethical, I'm usually the first one to know." Ryan placed his hand on the knob and opened the door. "A gentleman sending expensive gifts to a married woman is pretty unethical."

"At least give the message to Letti." Straightening his tie, Vincent looked at the clock. He was getting a little anxious to get out of the bank.

His annoyance was visible but Ryan agreed to the request before he left the office. In his mind, Elizabeth should have been gone day after her run in with Gatler, but apparently Vincent did not think that there was anything to worry about.

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There was only the faint glow of lamplight in one window. The house on Pristine St. looked as calm and somber as a cemetery. Ryan wondered if he had waited too long to deliver Vincent's message. However, he had a few other things to attend to and the hour was not too late.

The carriage pulled up to the front of the house and Ryan considered leaving. After all, it was possible that Vincent's lover would send him home early. Considering the wounds to his ribs, he would not be capable of too much anyway.

When the carriage came to a full stop the driver waited to see if he was going to step out. Even though the driver was supposed to open the door, Ryan never waited for him. However, this time appeared to be an exception. Ryan was not making any moves for the door nor was he giving any direction to drive on. Stepping down from his perch the coachman came to the door and held it open.

"I'm going," Ryan snapped. He looked up to the windows of the building, but when Ryan noticed a silhouette behind the curtain he easily assumed that Elizabeth had seen him.

She had no idea what he was doing. The carriage had pulled up several seconds before, but Ryan did not get out. Elizabeth tried to see if there was someone in the carriage with him. It was the only explanation that she could think of. However, after several moments of hesitation Ryan stepped out and began to walk up the steps.

The way that he hung his head bothered her It was as if something was terribly wrong. Adding his hesitation to the way that he held his posture Elizabeth suddenly feared the worst. It had been days since she had last seen Ryan. It did not seem like he would be there for a social call at that hour, especially since Vincent had not come home yet. There was no other explanation for his appearance. Something terrible must have happened to her brother.

Elizabeth grabbed the pale pink fabric of her gown and ran out of her room. The feeling of contentment that had fallen over her in the last few days vanished as she ran through the halls to the stairs.

Painful thoughts began to rise in her mind as she took every step with haste. Vincent had not been recovering from his wounds as well as Elizabeth was. If any of Andrew's men were to have gotten a hold of him it could not have ended well.

Descending to the lower floor of the house Elizabeth saw Letti walk toward the entryway. The glow of the lamp made the moment seem almost eerie. As Letti pulled her shawl around her shoulders, she opened the door.

"Mr. Hawke," the maid greeted him with caution. Elizabeth stood at a distance behind her and she could not see Ryan's face. However, she stood just inside the entryway and waited for him to come in. It was not his intention to stay long. He only needed to recite the message and be on his way. If he was quick about it, he would not need to deal with Elizabeth at all.

"Good evening, Letti." Removing his hat he stepped through the door.

"It is about time that one of you showed up." The little lady held her hands together. "I was beginning to get worried about you boys." Her concern was genuine, and out of all of Vincent's staff Letti was Ryan's favorite.

"You worry too much." Ryan was not in the habit of smiling but he made the effort to smirk at her.

"Then… Vincent is fine," Elizabeth cautiously stepped into the room and around Letti.

Ryan could not respond right away as he looked at her. Yards of pale pink material wrapped around her in a very suggestive manner. Her figure was hidden only by the tuft of decoration that lifted off of her hips and backside. However, Elizabeth's bodice left little to the imagination. Her face had recovered far better than he could have expected. The swelling had nearly subsided and the bruises were barely noticeable against the shape of the dress and the golden curls in her hair.

"Mr. Hawke," she whispered.

Letti noticed the strange look in Ryan's eyes, and although the maid could not decipher the meaning, she left the room without a word. Ryan watched Letti walk away before his attention returned to Elizabeth.

"Yes, he is fine." His words were slow and soft. "He will just be a little late."

"Where is he then?" Without realizing how much her appearance was affecting him Elizabeth stepped even closer.

Ryan decided to wait. If Elizabeth came to stand in front of him he would reach for her, but if she stayed where she was and showed hesitation he would ignore his desire. Until then, he would

remain silent. Without realizing the weight of her actions Elizabeth stepped forward as she tried to make him answer her.

"Are you alright?"

The fact that he remained quiet bothered her to no end. Ryan had made a habit out of being rude and obnoxious. So, for him to stand there without saying a word was strange. The soft expression in his deep brown eyes pulled Elizabeth closer, until finally Ryan held out his hand.

"What is it?" She asked.

His silence drove her to place her hand in his. Elizabeth did not expect what happened next. Ryan pulled her closer, breathing in the scent of her hair and staring into her eyes. Then, without allowing her a second to question him, he reached his hand around her waist bringing her body to his.

Only a few days had passed since she was assaulted by Gatler. Ryan had no intentions of frightening her, but he also had no intentions of changing his mind. The confusion was evident in her crystalline eyes, but she did not pull away.

His lips gently brushed against hers. The moment was quick and brief, but when Elizabeth leaned forward Ryan took her lips again. The desire grew as his hands trailed across the pink satin, making a quiet rustling noise. Innocently and with reserve, Elizabeth lifted her chin excepting every kiss.

Even though it felt like he was crushing her, every move was slow and seductive. The only error Ryan made was when he touched the base of her neck. The thought of his fingers entwined in her hair brought back terrifying memories of Gatler. Reacting on instinct alone, she slowly pulled away. Knowing he had made a mistake, Ryan let her go.

Immediately, she wanted to apologize. She didn't want him to stop, but the blank expression in his dark brown eyes had returned. Even as Elizabeth opened her mouth to speak, she knew it was too late. When she raised her hand to his face, Ryan stepped away. Without a sound, he turned, walked out of the door, and closed it behind him. Elizabeth instantly regretted her actions. Yet, as she stared at the closed door, she knew that Ryan regretted his as well.

Chapter eleven

It was the last thing that Vincent ever expected to happen. His mouth went dry and his palms began to sweat as Mr. Thatcher led the tall broad man toward his office. The sound of his keys was nerve-racking, and Vincent knew that he had to get them away from the young man someday. He had never seen Andrew Roshire in that part of the city, let alone in his bank. After swallowing hard, he glanced at the book on the shelf. Even though he did not know why Andrew was there, it was likely that he would have to pay him to leave.

"That's alright, Drake." Andrew stepped into the office. "Don't bother getting up." Mr. Thatcher closed the door behind him, and Vincent nearly jumped at the sound.

"What do you want?" Vincent tried to keep his fear hidden.

"Come on," he began in a deep, yet soft voice. "Let's find a way around this." Leaning his hands against the back of the wooden chair, Andrew peered down at him as if he were an insolent child. "Maybe we should strike a bargain… before you lose what is left of your little family."

Vincent was not prepared to handle this confrontation directly. He was hardly prepared to handle Gatler, but as Andrew Roshire glared down at him, he had no idea what to do.

"No," Vincent said bravely as he looked into the man's narrow blue eyes.

"You don't even know what I am about to propose." Taking his hands off of the chair, Andrew stood tall, filling the simple office. He was as broad and thick as a bull with narrow eyes and a squared jaw. Gatler had been compared to him in size, but the rumor was a lie.

"It doesn't matter," Vincent replied. "I am not interested."

"It means money for you and your sister stays alive."

Of all of the days that Ryan had not come into the office, Vincent wondered why this had to be one of them. His throat felt thick, and his cracked ribs began to ache. He wasn't healed enough for another fight, but Andrew didn't need to throw punches. As Oswald's heir, he practically held the whole city in his hand.

“You can’t tell me that you are not interested.” Andrew stepped away from the table and walked over to the bookshelf, looking at each binding.

“I might be,” Vincent admitted as he realized how tight his neck felt. Once Vincent loosened his tie, Andrew knew that he had his attention.

“She has something that belongs to me.”

“I am not so sure that it belongs to you,” Vincent cut in. “From what I understand it was given to her.” Andrew laughed quietly as he looked at the ceiling.

“Nothing of mine will ever be given to her. However, somehow Miss Drake has gotten a hold of a piece of correspondence that was…” Andrew paused for a moment before he turned back to Vincent, “…misdirected.”

“That is an interesting choice of description.” Looking out into the main office, Vincent prayed silently that any of his appointments for that day would walk in early. “So, how do you propose to retrieve this piece of correspondence?” Keeping his torso towards the bookshelf, Andrew turned his shoulders and his head back to Vincent.

“You are going to bring it to me,” Andrew stated. As Vincent remained silent, he watched Andrew turn and look at each book on the shelf. “The only reason you and Mr. Hawke have such a prosperous business is because I look the other way.”

The truth was a powerful drug. It could either raise someone higher than they ever thought possible, or drag them lower than the scum of the earth.

“Go on,” Vincent stared at his desk as he waited.

“I like you, Drake. I am not interested in there being a problem between us.” Andrew lifted the book with the money off of the shelf. “You need to let this accumulate just as much dust as the rest of them.” Opening the book, he looked inside before turning back to Vincent. “It has been handled too much.” As Vincent cleared his throat and watched Andrew stare at his money, he waited. Andrew closed the book with the currency inside and turned back around. “You keep your small change loans in this part of the city and I won’t bother you, but if your man Hawke shows up at any other occasions at my home…” He walked back over to the chair and rested his hands against the frame. “I will own him, your house, your butler, the maid on Pristine Street, and even this little office of yours.” Vincent wanted to ask how he

would accomplish such a feat, but Andrew had the money and the resources to do pretty much whatever he wanted.

"Hawke doesn't work for me," Vincent explained.

"Well, he might be working for me if I ever see him again," Andrew warned. "Now, as for your little sister…" Lowering his eyebrows Andrew spoke in a softer and deeper tone. "You have twenty four hours. Bring the letter to me tomorrow, and I will be sure to compensate you for your time and effort."

"And Elizabeth?" Vincent asked.

"You get her out of the city. Keep her at a fifty mile distance from anyone that I know and no harm will come to her." Holding Vincent's gaze without wavering, Andrew waited for a reply.

"And if I don't?"

Andrew nodded his head and took a few steps over to the bookshelf. "Gatler ran into Miss Drake while he was in Caterwood a week ago. Harland say's that he is quite taken with the woman. I'm sure Elizabeth wouldn't mind spending some time with him. He's may be a little hard on his woman, but Gatler is a decent fellow. Wouldn't you agree?"

Vincent stood up from his chair despite the bandages that surrounded his chest. It was obvious that his intention was to come to Elizabeth's defense, but Andrew held up his hand to silence him.

"But… that would be hard to do if she wasn't in the city," he added. "Why don't you bring her with you tomorrow when you bring me the letter?" Andrew looked at the clock on the desk. "About ten o'clock sounds good to me. We could meet at a nice public place like the park near the river." Returning to the shelves, he removed a large set of bills from his pocket and added them to Vincent's book. "We are businessmen, Drake." He replaced the book and walked toward the door. "Family does not usually get in our way." His appearance did not lighten, even as he smiled. "This transaction will go the way I want it to, and we won't ever deal with each other again. Now, are you going to accept my offer?"

A look of disgust fell over Vincent as he stared at Andrew. There was no way for him to disagree. Even though he knew that he was being led into a trap.

"Of course," Vincent added. "We are businessmen."

There was no visible satisfaction in Andrew's eyes, before he opened the door and walked out. It was more like a look of contentment. After all, Vincent did not have a choice in the matter.

Easing himself back into the chair Vincent placed his hand against his forehead and felt the beads of sweat. He had to figure out something to do, but he also took a moment to consider Andrew's offer.

When all was said and done, Andrew had presented him with a way out. Elizabeth would be out of his hair and he could return to his life as it once was. After all, he had gone through a lot of trouble to get away from his family.

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"It's up to you, Beth." Vincent whispered.

Elizabeth stared at the small figurines on the table as he waited for her answer. She had been told all of the information, but it was the threat of Gatler that made her consider the idea.

"How do I know that they won't find me?"

"I don't know." Shaking his head slowly, Vincent tried to answer her.

"What if I write another letter, just like the one that I have, and you give it to them?" Several ideas were coming to her mind. However, none of them were logical. "No," she answered quietly. "It would take me days to recreate it." Vincent wanted to ask her why she hadn't learned to read, but it was not important at the time.

"Well, we have to think of something," he admitted.

"I don't think Father intended for any of this to happen. Maybe I should just let Andrew have it?"

"I think that is a good idea," he admitted.

"Vincent," she began. "How well do you know Mr. Roshire?"

"I know him by reputation." Keeping his back straight in the beige chair, Vincent felt the pressure of his broken ribs.

"He isn't very trustworthy, is he?" Elizabeth surmised as she turned away from the figurines and looked at her brother.

"No, he isn't."

Elizabeth stood up and walked over to the mirror on the wall. The gilded frame reached nearly to the ceiling, and Elizabeth stared at her bruises in the reflection. The golden yellow gown had more lace on it than she would have liked, and the woman that owned it before her had just a little less curve. Reaching up to adjust the ruffle of her sleeve, Elizabeth turned her eyes to see Vincent's reflection.

"How long would it take to get to Cameron?" She asked.

“About four hours.” Vincent was impressed that she had not broken down in tears and hysterics. In fact, for what the woman had been put through, she was handling it very well.

“Does Oswald know what kind of man Andrew is?”

“No. From what I understand, Oswald believes that his grandson is honest and trustworthy.”

“What will happen to you, if I do not comply with his demands?” Elizabeth walked back to the chair.

“Nothing,” he replied too quickly. When he saw that Elizabeth did not believe him, he decided to lie. “There is nothing that he can do to me.”

“What will he do?” She restated the question.

“I don’t know, but I can handle it.” The black suit was a perfect fit. His collar came just below his chin, and the black silk necktie was fixed loosely. A thin blue set of stripes ran down the black material of the jacket. Although Vincent did not look good in blue on its own, the faint stripes were very sharp on him. Elizabeth guessed that it was the suit itself that made him appear regal and unafraid of Andrew Roshire. “You need to make the decision for yourself,” he whispered.

“I think it might be best if I were to follow his advice and yours.” Knowing that Vincent did not understand she continued, “I want to get out of Burdery.” Although the city was beautiful in its own way, she had no intentions of staying there. Elizabeth looked into her brother’s brown eyes and explained her theory. “If it would make you safer I will give you the letter to take to Mr. Roshire, but I will not go with you.” Vincent nodded to her in agreement. “I do not trust him,” she added. “Still, instead of going into hiding, I would like to find Oswald.”

“Without the letter?”

“Without the letter,” she repeated.

“Why?” Vincent stared at her for a few moments after he asked. “What would that accomplish?”

“I don’t know, but I feel like I have to.” Elizabeth sighed heavily as she tried to answer him.

“Well, if you are going to go all the way to Cameron, you had better get there before Andrew shows up at the river tomorrow.” Vincent leaned forward in his chair. “Since you won’t be there, he really doesn’t need it.”

“Then, you will be in danger.” Elizabeth shook her head as Vincent smiled in a careless way.

“It won’t be the first time.” Coming to his feet, Vincent held out his hand to help her up. Even though he never showed a sign of soreness, Elizabeth knew that his ribs were still painful. “We have to leave,” he spoke flatly. “Don’t bring anything that you don’t need.”

“How long do we have?” She turned toward the other drawing rooms as she made her way to the main hallway.

“Ryan will be here in about three minutes.” Vincent held an arm to his chest and cleared his throat. Stopping in her tracks, Elizabeth tried not to look as surprised as she felt.

“Mr. Hawke is coming here?”

“He is taking us to Cameron.” Vincent placed his hand on her elbow as he led her through the rooms. “I know that you don’t like him but we need his help.” Instantly, the memory of Ryan’s kiss caused her chest to flutter inside.

“I don’t think that Ryan would be considered an asset right now,” she whispered.

“Ryan?” He took note of the casual use of his name. “You don’t have a choice, Elizabeth. Hawke knows more people than I do, you left my carriage in Caterwood, and he doesn’t have four cracked ribs.” Reluctantly, Elizabeth nodded her head and accepted the fact that Ryan was taking them to Caterwood. “Go on,” Vincent ordered. “Let’s get to Oswald, before Andrew finds out that we are gone.”

“What if it’s a trap?” Elizabeth asked. Tilting his head to the side, Vincent sighed again.

“It probably is, but what choice do we have?”

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If it had been any darker the black horses would have seemed invisible. They did not have the impressive headdresses that they wore the first time she saw the carriage, but they were still magnificent. Elizabeth stepped out of the house for the first time in seven days, to see the impressive carriage in the gas street lighting. Ryan stood next to the team running his hand across the glossy coat of a horse.

“Do you have it?” He asked. It was not the stupidest question that Elizabeth had ever heard, but it was close.

“Yes, of course,” she answered.

“We are not stopping.” Ryan continued to face the horse. “You better be sure that you don’t need to.” The tone of his voice was more annoying than usual.

"I won't need to stop."

"Then get in." There was no difference in the way Ryan had said his words. However, Elizabeth instantly regretted the idea of traveling with him.

"Vincent," she said quietly, turning away from Ryan. "Maybe we should go alone. I am sure that Mr. Hawke has better things to do."

"Actually, I do. So, can we hurry it up a little?" Ryan glanced up to the driver then walked back to the coach. The sharp persona returned as Ryan waited for Elizabeth to climb into the carriage.

"Why is it that every time you open your mouth, you have to be rude?" She asked.

"Not every time." His eyes moved quickly to her lips, purposely focusing on them.

He did not actually imply anything about the kiss, but at the same time he could not have meant anything else. Elizabeth could not think of a comment fast enough. Avoiding the embarrassing stare, she reached up to the silver bar on the door and climbed into the rig. Vincent and Ryan followed behind.

Vincent was noticeably uncomfortable with the movement of the carriage. At times, he would press his arm against his side and hold his breath. The four hour ride was going to be agony for him, but even Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief when he pulled out a small silver flask and took a drink of the hard liquor.

"Do you know where Oswald is?" Elizabeth asked Vincent.

"No, but he won't be too hard to find. The blind school should be almost finished by now." Vincent was not bothered by the small detail of locating Oswald. Money and persistence would get him where he wanted to go.

They rode in silence for quite some time. Elizabeth was not about to attempt a conversation with Ryan. Vincent was taking a drink from the flask nearly every three minutes, and Ryan had turned sideways in his seat, lounging as inappropriately as he could.

It wasn't long before the silence drove Elizabeth to close her eyes. The gentle rocking of the carriage and the soft red interior was almost too much to resist. Trying to hold as upright as she could, her shoulders began to slump forward and Elizabeth soon drifted off.

It was a small bump that caused her to jerk her head back up and open her eyes. However, Vincent was fast asleep and it was too dark to see Ryan's eyes. The farther they drove the more heavy the fog became. It was almost an eerie night. There was very little sound

outside the carriage at all. Without the groaning from Vincent every time they went over a bump, hardly anything would have been heard.

Passing the time was not easy for Elizabeth. All of her thoughts strayed to Ryan as she continued to stare at his eyes and wonder if they were open or if her mind was playing tricks on her. He leaned against the side of the carriage and had his face turned away from her, but Elizabeth glanced his way often, in case he moved.

"You should get some sleep," Ryan whispered as he noticed her glance at him for the hundredth time.

"I can't," she answered simply as she diverted her eyes.

"You are not doing yourself any good by thinking about it. You will see Oswald tomorrow." Ryan turned toward her with a small amount of moonlight reflecting in his eyes.

Elizabeth had hardly given any thought to seeing Oswald. Even though she tried to imagine what it would be like to meet her grandfather, she was more interested in Ryan.

She wondered if she should apologize for pulling away from him the night before. Even though Vincent remained silent, he still breathed rather shallow from the pain in his ribs. There was no way for Elizabeth to be certain that he was asleep. So, instead of attempting the conversation she remained silent.

Ryan crossed his arms over his chest as the carriage rocked back and forth. Even as Elizabeth tried to close her eyes, his nearness was too apparent. Uncontrollably, her mind recalled the look in his eye as he reached for her.

It was nearly three in the morning when the carriage pulled up to an Inn in Cameron. The building was just as rickety as the first one that Elizabeth had stayed in, and she wished that they could have roomed at the well-known Regal Hotel.

Ryan opened to door to the carriage and offered his assistance, but when Elizabeth stepped down to the road, she quickly let go of his hand. His help was appreciated, but it was also torture for her. A second later, Vincent crawled out of the carriage, clamping his arms to his chest.

"We will stay here until morning." He looked over to Elizabeth as she scanned the exterior of the building. "When the sun comes up, Hawke will find Oswald. Hopefully, that will be the end of it."

"Alright," Elizabeth whispered as her mind concentrated on one detail. She did not want to take a room by herself. Even though

Gatler, Harland, and Andrew were back in Burdery she did not feel safe by herself.

Ryan walked behind Elizabeth and Vincent as they entered the Inn. A very young man at the counter snapped his head up as the door was closed behind Ryan.

"Can I help you?" He asked in a groggy state.

"My name is Jackson, I need two rooms for the night." Vincent stood in front of the man and blocked Elizabeth from his view. The hours of drinking seemed to have impaired Vincent enough to slur his words. Elizabeth watched him closely as he swayed gently at the desk.

Unaware of the reason, Ryan placed his hand on Elizabeth's elbow and led her away from the desk and down a narrow hall. The pace was extremely slow, and Elizabeth could hear Vincent and the young man speaking as she was led out of the room.

"Have you been here before?" She asked Ryan once he released her elbow.

"No." He decided to keep his response short. Elizabeth wanted to ask how he knew where he was going, but he stopped walking and turned to wait for Vincent. "You will not be getting your own room," Ryan whispered. It seemed like he had taken her away from the desk to avoid her making a scene. For a moment, she thought about telling him how thankful she was, but that would have seemed improper. Nodding her head in understanding, Elizabeth watched Vincent hand Ryan a key.

"It's down here," Vincent said as he led them down the passage. His balance was affected by his attempt at pain relief, and his stride was nearly comical. "You're not getting the room with the fireplace."

The inside of the establishment was far better than the one that Elizabeth expected. The walls seemed thick and everything was very clean and comfortable. As she followed her brother down the hall Elizabeth finally realized how tired she was. Yet, the fact that she would soon be able to rest did not make her feel at ease. Ryan took one of the keys from Vincent and looked at the door in front of him.

"The other one is down the hall." Vincent motioned down the hallway and started to walk away. Elizabeth followed him without question until Ryan grabbed her arm.

"This is your room," he whispered.

"Then, shouldn't you go with my brother?" Her surprise was well hidden. Shaking his head gently, Ryan placed the key in the lock.

“Are you saying that I can’t come in? I thought that you would have expected this.” Stepping inside, he lit the lamp on the table.

“What do you think you are doing?” Elizabeth asked as she looked down the hall. Vincent entered his room and closed the door without even looking her way. She wanted to tell Ryan that he was not staying in her room, but she didn’t have time.

“Think about it,” Ryan began. “Vincent can hardly move, and a four hour ride on rough road did not seem to help him much. If he is going to be any use in a few hours, he needs to sleep off the brandy.” Once Elizabeth walked into the room, Ryan reached behind her and closed the door, turning the lock. “And if you recall your last stay in one of these fine establishments, maybe you can realize why Vincent does not want you to be left alone.” Elizabeth did not seem to be taking the news any easier as he spoke, so Ryan tried a kinder approach. “You are only going to be here for a few hours. You don’t need to change your clothes, and I will keep my distance in the chair.”

“I can sleep in my brother’s chair!” Elizabeth quickly retaliated.

“Go on then.” Ryan nodded once and walked over to the bed. “He is drunk and incapable of protecting you if you need it.” Easing himself to the bed, Ryan lifted his feet off of the floor as he lay back on the pillow. “If you need anything, be sure to yell as loud as you can. The walls are pretty thick.”

The small room with one table and a slightly padded chair seemed too confined. Ryan’s attitude was always difficult for her to tolerate, but as she stood by the door watching him recline on the blankets she was even more irritated. The one thing that drove her insane was the fact that Ryan was right, and he had left her very little room to change her mind. Elizabeth looked back at the door and wondered if she should simply walk down to Vincent’s room and stay awake for the next few hours.

“Face it, Beth.” Ryan leaned up and set his feet back on the floor. “You would be safer in here with me.” He stood up slowly and walked over to the uncomfortable looking chair. “You know that I am not going to hurt you.”

Ryan had the same look in his eyes that he had the night before. His face was expressionless, and neither his height nor his build was intimidating to her anymore. The way that he held himself was not submissive, it was just not threatening. His broad shoulders

were relaxed instead of squared, and his head hung slightly forward as he waited for her to respond. Elizabeth had to admit that he was right.

"I know," she whispered as she stayed where she was and watched him.

Ryan waited as she made her decision. The ceiling lamp had begun to flutter, and he wanted to adjust the regulator before the flame died. Seeing that Elizabeth was unaware of the flickering light, he walked toward the switch beside the door. The second time the flame dimmed Elizabeth was well aware.

"I've got it," Ryan whispered walking closer to the switch.

Keeping her eyes on him, Elizabeth found herself wanting just one more moment. She wanted one more chance to prove that she trusted him. The dim light flickered reflecting in Ryan's dark eyes, but that was the last thing that Elizabeth saw. Before he reached the switch, the light went out.

Silence surrounded them and Elizabeth held her breath as she waited for a sound. Anything would have helped, the shuffle of his shoes, or the sound of footsteps on the floor, but there was nothing. Without any light at all, Elizabeth was left to realize that he was still standing in front of her. Finally, she heard the switch next to her as it was clicked, but he had turned it off.

Just before she was about to move, Ryan slid his hand along her arm. The soft brush of his lips against hers made her inhale quickly. Ryan had calculated exactly how far away she was, and with only one silent step he was able to find her lips with merely the touch of his hand for a warning.

Ryan's hand slid along her waist and around her back. Gently, he pulled Elizabeth closer as he deepened his kiss. The sensation was more than she could have imagined. Elizabeth raised her hand to Ryan's neck and gave in completely.

It was not long until Ryan pulled her even closer. The muscles in her shoulders flexed and her back became stiff. For a split second, the memory of Gatler came back, and Elizabeth almost pulled away.

Ryan stopped as soon as he felt her shudder. He could have let her go but, he was far too interested by then. Tracing the line of her jaw, he pulled away only for a second before he kissed her again.

The moment of hesitation had passed and Ryan was too skilled for her to resist. Elizabeth let her hands run across his shoulders. The feel of his body became addicting and she shamelessly wanted more.

It was supposed to be a trial. Ryan wanted to see if Elizabeth would allow him to touch her neck and the back of her hair. He wasn't sure why, but he wanted Elizabeth to give herself to him completely without fear. However, the fact that every muscle in her back was slowly relaxing, made Ryan want her submission even more.

After several moments and a few tempting kisses, Ryan let her go and stood to his full height. Things were getting too tempting for him, and he wanted to stay in control. Turning away from Elizabeth, he clicked lit the gas light once more. Her eyes were larger than he could have ever imagined. It could have been the darkness, but regardless, it made her even more stunning.

"You need to get some rest," he whispered. Elizabeth did not understand. She had not pulled away from him, and yet he was still being cold toward her.

"Did I do something wrong?" She asked in a whisper.

Exhaling slowly, Ryan avoided the question. Of course she had not done anything wrong, but he was about to do more than just kiss her. The chair looked as comfortable as a bed of nails, but he walked toward it silently.

"Ryan," Elizabeth called to him. When he turned to face her, Elizabeth had no idea what to say. She wanted to ask why he had left her or if there was something she could have done better.

The gown revealed her figure well and her golden tendrils shimmer slightly. Even though she was far too innocent and naïve, he wanted to have her.

"Beth, this is your last opportunity to lie in that bed alone, and get some rest." The thickness of his voice was harsh.

Elizabeth looked over to the bed and sifted through the thoughts that invaded her mind. There was more to Ryan than just his kiss and Elizabeth had to decide how far she was willing to go. If he had not lit the lamp, she would never have thought about it. Elizabeth would have simply given herself to him without question, but the light brought more clarity to the moment.

It was as if she were weighing the consequences. Ryan saw her concentrate on the covers of the small bed, and he almost wanted to help her make the decision, but instead of walking over to her and stripping her clothes off one-by-one, Ryan sat down in the chair.

Elizabeth almost panicked. She wanted his arms around her and his lips on hers, but she was losing the chance. Ryan was insisting

that the moment was over, but her blood still boiled with desire. She was being forced to accept a situation that she did not want.

"Lay down," he whispered.

"I can't," she answered honestly. With every breath Elizabeth wanted him to come to her. The day would break soon, and everything would change. They would find Oswald, and she would deliver the letter. After that, no one knew what would happen, but Elizabeth was pretty sure that she would not see Ryan much after the day was over.

She was not about to walk over to him and Ryan knew it, but she did not look like she was about to lie down either. Unaware that he was doing exactly what she was praying for, Ryan stood up from his chair and went to her side.

Elizabeth stepped closer to him. Holding her breath, she looked up into his dark eyes and Ryan threw aside all of his honorable intentions. From that moment on, he wanted to own her. Ryan placed his hand on her neck and gently trailed his fingers down to her collar bone. The touch forced Elizabeth to close her eyes.

"You missed your chance," he whispered in a husky voice. Ryan let his fingers run over the portion of her chest that was not covered by her bodice. Without opening her eyes Elizabeth raised her chin, subtly inviting him.

He took the invitation with ease and leaned down to taste the skin of her neck. There was nothing threatening about him. Ryan gently drew his lips over her neck before he kissed her.

A deep desire awakened inside and Elizabeth immediately wanted more. Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, Elizabeth pulled him closer. His hand slid over her breast as his other arm entwined around her back. With one quick pull, Ryan held her waist against him while savoring the taste of her.

Elizabeth gasped in surprise of his strength. However, before she knew what had happened Ryan kissed her lips once more. A surge of energy raced through her blood. Her skin felt more sensitive and the scent of leather hung heavily around him. Somehow, Ryan unhooked the buttons of her bodice. Before she realized what he had done, Elizabeth felt his hand on her chemise just above her breast.

She was far more delightful than Ryan had ever imagined. All of her reserve had faded and Elizabeth allowed him to explore her body without any resistance. The feel of her breast in his palm was as addicting to him as the taught nipple that waited for his kiss. Unlacing the top of her chemise, Ryan reached inside.

Elizabeth wanted to pull the bodice off by herself to give him more access. If it did not mean letting go of him, she would have. Ryan's hand held her breast gently while his tongue flicked across her nipple. Instinctively, she wrapped her hands around his neck and inhaled quickly, reveling in the sensation. Despite the fact that he held a susceptible part of Elizabeth in his mouth, Ryan smiled at her response.

Ryan stepped away from her and slid the bodice off of her arms, before he removed his dark jacket. The break of his kiss gave Elizabeth a moment to question her actions. However, as she looked at the top button of his white shirt she could only think of how stunning he looked the day she saw him splitting wood.

Reaching up to unfasten the button, Elizabeth was overcome with the desire to see him again. With just a light touch, Elizabeth allowed her fingers to brush against his chest. The strength of his shoulders and the firmness of his stomach controlled her mind as she slowly opened his shirt. However, when their eyes met he was smiling at her.

"What?" She asked with interest. She had never really seen him smile before.

"Here," he said as he stepped back and lifted the shirt over his head. "Is that better?" Ryan did not want to say anything about her enthusiasm. He was expecting Elizabeth to change her mind at any moment and send him back to the chair. Seeing his body at last, Elizabeth was more interested in the rare smile.

"Why are you laughing at me?"

"I'm not," he shook his head gently and forced the smile away.

His smile faded and the desire returned as Ryan reached to the side of her dress and began to unfasten the set of skirts. The overskirt slid off rather quickly, but it took him a moment to unfasten the second. However, when Elizabeth placed her lips against his neck and let them trail towards his shoulder, he nearly ripped the buttons off of the material.

Elizabeth felt him tense up, and in a quick moment he crushed her against him and claimed her lips once more. She stood in her chemise and her petticoats, her dress piled up around her ankles. When Ryan reached to explore her waist he found the pouch that held the letter.

There was no decision to be made. Elizabeth wanted him far too much to be concerned with the letter. Without a thought, she

removed the satchel from her waist and allowed Ryan to continue removing her underclothes.

By the time he had her breathing heavily Elizabeth was down to a single article of clothing. The chemise became all that he thought of as Elizabeth brought her lips to his neck. Reaching down to take the silk in his hands, Ryan began to pull the fabric over her. The cool night air felt good on her legs, and Elizabeth closed her eyes as the material was lifted over her body.

To see her in the faint light was powerful for Ryan. The curves of her body were more exquisite than anything he had ever seen before. Ryan reached for her, devoting all of his attention to her breasts. Her nipples were erect with pleasure, and Ryan saw it as his duty to enjoy them.

Elizabeth moaned softly as his hands ran along her bare flesh. Before she realized what was happening, Ryan eased her back onto the bed covers. His hands trailed along her body hungrily as Elizabeth arched her back against him. The pressure of his body against hers was nearly unbearable. His hands searched her waist and thighs as his mouth dined on her breast.

Ryan looked down at Elizabeth as his hand reached toward her inner thigh. The thick curls of hair enticed him as he watched her eyes for any sign of fear. She was unsure and worried, but Ryan knew he could make her forget everything. When he continued to explore her, Elizabeth hesitated for a moment and reached up to hold onto the pillow that was behind her head.

Knowing that his skill would decide for her, Ryan did not move his hand. He leaned down to kiss her as passionately as he could, and when she moved her body against his, he let his fingers explore.

Elizabeth closed her eyes. She knew what was about to happen, and she wanted it to. So, when Ryan felt the softest part of her body she remained calm and concentrated on his kiss.

It did not take long for her to drive him over the edge. With all of his patience expended, Ryan unfastened his pants and slid them off. He kissed every inch of her as he settled himself between her thighs. Elizabeth had no fear and no concern. She opened up to him completely.

Ryan entered her slowly. There was no pain, only a little discomfort that caused her to suck in her breath and wait for him to move again. Holding onto her hips, Ryan pressed within her. The

feeling drove him insane and he knew he had to stop. If she was going to enjoy this as much as he was, he would have to hold off.

Confusion whirled around her as Elizabeth felt him withdraw. She wanted to ask why, but she did not have time. A strange fear began to rise in her as Ryan trailed his mouth down her stomach. She expected him to stop, but he continued lower. Instinct caused Elizabeth to reach down to his arms, but Ryan ignored her plea.

The next thing Elizabeth knew, Ryan was pleasuring her in a way that she had never imagined. He fascinated her. A feeling that started out as a dull ache grew into a need that her body welcomed and her mind tried to refuse.

Elizabeth knew that there was more. She found her body reaching for something that she could not quite grab on to. Ryan placed his hands against her waist and held her firmly to the bed. Lost in rapture, she entwined her fingers in the blankets as she surged toward the feeling that controlled her. Elizabeth cried out as Ryan drove her wild. With the release that she had been waiting for, her body pulsed madly against his touch.

Knowing that she had reached her climax did not help Ryan. He had never wanted any woman as much, and his desire was about to outweigh his endurance.

He didn't care if he was being selfish. Ryan held his hands around Elizabeth's waist and pulled her down to the center of the bed. Elizabeth wrapped her arms around him as he entered her again. She learned his movements, and soon became comfortable with his rhythm.

His control impressed him more than he thought it would, but eventually her exquisite body forced him to admit defeat. Ryan moved hard and fast within her, and Elizabeth welcomed every thrust. Her nearly silent moans threw him to the edge of sanity as Ryan pushed himself into his own climax. Every muscle in his body was tense and he drove himself deeper with every movement. A sound rose deep from his chest as Ryan thrust forward one final time. His breathing was rapid and his heart pounded in his chest.

Exhausted and spent, he pulled her into his embrace. Elizabeth rested her head against his shoulder as his fingers wrapped around hers. Ryan took her hand and held it firmly against his chest. She knew that the hours would pass soon enough. However, as Ryan's breathing became easier, and his arms enfolded her completely, she couldn't have cared less.

Chapter twelve

It took several moments for Elizabeth to comprehend what had happened. She awoke in the bed just before dawn and Ryan was gone. A mixture of confusion and concern hung around her, making it impossible to sleep. Hurrying to get dressed, Elizabeth began putting on all of her undergarments. A faint ray of sunlight began to sneak in through the window as she noticed the satchel that lay on the floor. When she went to place it above her petticoat, Elizabeth noticed that the money was there, but the letter was gone.

For nearly fifteen minutes, Elizabeth frantically searched the room. She looked in the blankets and under the bed. It did not seem possible that Ryan would have taken the letter, but the more she searched for it, the more she was certain that he had used her.

The hurt came first and Elizabeth could not help the tears that followed, but as she concentrated on every moment of the night before, the hurt change to anger. Ryan had to have felt something. He couldn't be so cruel as to use her that way.

The tears flowed freely as Elizabeth tried to convince herself of Ryan's innocence. Even though she knew he could be cruel and insensitive, Ryan couldn't be that heartless. Letting her face fall into her hands, Elizabeth sat in a slump on the floor. He had lied to her and used her in the worst possible way.

Daniel had given her few instructions before he died. Elizabeth was supposed to keep the letter hidden, get to her brother, find Oswald Roshire, and trust no one. She had failed him in all but one of his demands. Forcing herself to get to her feet, Elizabeth put the rest of her garments on and let her hair fall over her shoulders. She did not have the strength to tie it up.

As she pulled the blankets on the bed together, Elizabeth felt the warm tears run down her cheek. Ryan had held her for hours in the bed, and all of it was simply to get his hands on her letter. She did not know what he wanted it for, but she was sure that he was going to give it to Andrew.

Once Elizabeth began thinking about his use of the letter, she wondered about Vincent. Either he did not know what Ryan was up to, or Vincent was in on Ryan's plan. Walking to the window, Elizabeth

looked to the street below. The town had not awakened yet, but there were some people taking goods to the market. Elizabeth had to find out if Vincent was behind the scheme. He had worked with Ryan for years, and the two of them had tricked her before.

Turning back to the room, Elizabeth became even madder as she thought about the possibility. Her anger mounted into a silent rage, until she threw open the door of her room and walked down the hall to Vincent's room.

"Vincent!" Elizabeth pounded on the hard wood and yelled out.

She expected him to be sleeping off the effects of his booze, but when the door flew open in front of her Elizabeth nearly jumped.

"What?" Vincent asked. He stood completely dressed with an air about him that proved he had been up for a while. However, the sway to his stance proved that he was still drinking.

"Where is Ryan?" She asked as the rage shined in her eyes.

"I sent him out. He should be back in about an hour. Why?" Vincent pulled the raving woman into his room and closed the door behind him. "And could you lower your voice please? No one here needs to know our business."

"When?" She asked as she tried to control her emotions. "When did he leave?"

"About thirty minutes ago. Why? What are you raving about?" He asked as he walked over to open the window. Vincent pulled a cigar out of his vest pocket and bit off the end. He was used to the ease of his cigar cutter, but he did not mind. "What is this about?" Vincent asked as he leaned closer to the window and lit the cigar with a long thin stick from the fire place. Elizabeth was going to tell Vincent about Ryan taking the letter, but as she opened her mouth to speak Vincent put his brandy flask to his lips.

"Aren't you still in pain?" She asked. The way Vincent moved and twisted his torso made her wonder how he could have miraculously healed in one night. "Are you still drinking?"

"Yes, but it is nothing that I can't handle." He puffed on the cigar once more.

"Why are you smoking? Is there something to celebrate?" Elizabeth became more concerned about his behavior.

"I am trying to calm my nerves, Beth." Vincent explained. "I don't know if Roshire will be glad to see you, or if he will look at you like Andrew does."

“Father said he is a good man.” Elizabeth walked closer to Vincent and noticed the paleness of his face. “Besides, obviously my mother wanted me to go to him as well.”

“Your mother…” Vincent began with a quiet chuckle. “You never even knew her! What if this is all some big collaboration to eliminate you from the family tree?”

“I won’t listen to that,” Elizabeth warned him. “You’ve had too much brandy.”

“Think about it!” Vincent took another drink from the flask. “Daniel raised you in the middle of nowhere. You’ve never stepped foot outside of Caterwood.” He puffed on the cigar once more as Elizabeth began to slowly back away from him. “You have never gone to school, you can’t read, and you were never told about your family until the day your father died.” Holding his hands out to the side, his voice quieted, and he spoke with a cruel tone. “Daniel took care of his horse better than he cared for you.”

“My father loved me.”

“Did he, Beth?” Vincent took another quick drink. “I know very few people that Daniel cared about. I am beginning to wonder if you even knew what kind of man he was.”

“Why do you hate him so much?” She asked instead of screaming at him like she wanted to.

“You know why,” Vincent began. “Or did you forget that he let my mother die?” Keeping his voice quiet, Vincent tried not to scare Elizabeth any further. “She needed a roof over her head and food to eat. Daniel took me from her when she couldn’t afford me, and when I received the letter saying that she was dying, he offered nothing to save her. He even tried to stop me from helping her. ” Knowing that he was about to put the words in a harsh manner, he spoke quieter. “Daniel could stand her well enough to fill her belly with a boy, but he was not about to lift a finger to keep her alive!” Elizabeth swallowed hard and looked away. His hatred for Daniel ran too deep, and there was nothing she could do to change it.

If there was one thing that Elizabeth knew, it was that her father was a great man. Daniel tried to spare Vincent. He didn’t want his son to rush fifty miles away to a woman with a highly contagious disease. However, she did not try to defend her father at that moment. She was far too concerned with her own situation.

“What about me?” She asked. “Are you still going to try and help me?”

“You are not going to die, Beth,” Vincent reassured her as gently as he could despite his anger. “Ryan went to find out where Oswald was. When he gets back, we will take you to him.” Elizabeth had not calmed down from their last discussion. Even as Vincent continued to trust Ryan, she did not. “Wait…” Vincent held out the flask and made a curious expression. “That’s not right…” There was nearly a slur in his voice. “I have to tell you something.”

The sound of footsteps came through the hallway. Elizabeth grew impatient, wanting an answer before Ryan returned. Unsure of her own bravery, she walked directly up to Vincent, grabbed the flask out of his hand, and slammed it on the table.

“I know he took the letter!” She held her breath and waited for him to say something. “Did you tell him to take it?”

“That is probably him right now.” Vincent walked over to the door and turned the knob.

“Wait!” Elizabeth called out as she was overwhelmed with a sense of dread. Vincent opened the door just as Gatler and Harland shoved it in.

“Well, what do we have here?” Gatler asked, pushing Vincent aside and walking up to Elizabeth. Shock came over her as Elizabeth looked at her brother. Gatler paid him absolutely no attention and Vincent did nothing to protect her. He didn’t even call for help. Gatler backed Elizabeth up to the wall behind her, and Vincent didn’t even try to intervene.

“I don’t understand,” she called quietly as she looked for an escape.

“Sorry,” Vincent had a dead stare in his eye as Gatler reached for her. “If you go with them, they won’t hurt you.”

Gatler came at her with his tall and overpowering form. There was no way that Elizabeth believed she would not get hurt. In fact, she saw the hatred in Gatler’s eyes and wondered how long it would take for him to kill her.

“No!” Elizabeth cried out as she tried to run.

“I have been waiting to get my hands on you,” he sneered as his thick hand wrapped around Elizabeth’s slender neck. She instinctively grabbed on to Gatler’s hand. Harland was in the room, but Elizabeth hardly noticed as she gasped for air.

“Let her go, Gatler!” Vincent warned. “If you harm one hair on her head, there is no way the deal goes through.”

“Oh, I’m not going to hurt her.” His grip eased around her neck. “I just wanted her to know how much I have missed her.” Once her let go of her completely, Elizabeth breathed deeply. In the same instant, Gatler reached up to her head and grabbed a fistful of hair.

Vincent cringed when he saw the amount of force that Gatler held her with. Elizabeth’s neck had blotches on it, from where he had choked her. The marks were reddening and easy to see.

Gatler yanked her hair so hard, that Elizabeth stared up at the ceiling and cried out from the pain. Franticly trying to escape his grasp, she held tight to the enormous fist.

“I’m not kidding Gatler!” Vincent warned as he reached into his pocket and took out an envelope. Holding it just above the fireplace, he made his threat clear. “Let her go!” Elizabeth looked at her mother’s letter in Vincent’s hand.

“You rotten son-of-a-bitch,” Elizabeth whispered. She would have said more, but Gatler jerked her head hard as he faced Vincent.

“Hawke said it himself, Beth. The only reason men like Andrew Roshire do anything, is because of money.” Vincent glanced at his sister while he watched Gatler. “I’m no different.”

“You tricked me…” Elizabeth’s voice trailed off. “I trusted you!”

“Now would be the time to give me the money.” Vincent pulled a pistol out of his jacket. Dangling the envelope above the flames, he aimed the small gun at the enormous henchman.

“And that little thing will keep me from killing you?” Gatler asked nodding at the pistol. Pulling a fully stuffed envelope out of his pocket, he eyed the weapon that was pointing at him. “This is not exactly good public relations,” he warned. “Do you think I am going to just walk out of here now?”

“Not really,” Vincent answered as he released the envelope. In an instant, Elizabeth’s breath was stolen from her lungs. From across the room, she watched her mother’s letter drop down into the fireplace. A collective gasp filled the room as the envelope floated down to the flames.

Elizabeth was thrown to the ground before the fire caught hold. For his size, Gatler was extremely fast. Throwing the pack of money at Vincent’s face, he pushed the gun aside and attacked him.

“Get the girl!” He yelled to Harland.

Elizabeth screamed as she ran past towards the door. With incredible force, Harland threw out his arm and caught her. Continuing

to struggle, Elizabeth watched Gatler as he plowed his fists into Vincent.

The emotion that she felt the first time she watched Vincent get pulverized was not there. Elizabeth was in just as much danger from her brother as she was from anyone else. Struggling to free herself Elizabeth kicked, bit, and scratched at Harland.

"Who the hell do you think you are, Drake?" Gatler asked as he pushed Vincent to the wall across from the window. The gun had been kicked across the floor and had come to a stop at the opposite end of the room. The letter had also fallen to the floor. Doubled over, Vincent held his ribs and gasped for air. Blood trickled from his nose and his eye was already swelling. "Did you really think Andrew was going to pay you money for a piece of paper? She is the payday!" Gatler pointed his finger towards Elizabeth as she struggled with Harland. "Without her, there is no deal!"

"Then there is no deal!" Vincent stood up. With a loud groan, he lifted his fist with all of his strength and connected with Gatler's face. When Gatler recoiled, Vincent swung again. The large man backed up across the room and Vincent continued to strike. Elizabeth stopped struggling long enough to see her brother clobber the much larger man.

He almost fought like Ryan. If Elizabeth had not been terrified, she would have been proud. Vincent threw fist after fist into his face and stomach, until Gatler fell to his knee in front of the fireplace.

"Get up!" He beckoned Gatler as the blood continued to drain from his face.

Gatler leaned on his knee and the palm of his hand as he shook his head once. Then, as he came to his feet, Vincent saw the burning log that he had grabbed from the fire. As a reflex, Vincent raised his arm. From across the room, Elizabeth heard his bone snap. Vincent groaned in pain as he and the log both fell to the floor.

Elizabeth's eyes widened when Gatler bent down to pick up the discolored paper. Looking down at the writing, Gatler tossed the paper carelessly into the fire.

"We don't really need that, do we?" He asked Elizabeth. "Andrew has seen your face. I am just destroying it for him." Her eyes widened at the vision of the burning letter. All that remained of her mother went up in flames before her eyes. "Give her to me." Gatler commanded as he reached for Elizabeth's neck, but before he could take another step toward her the door to the room flew open. "You're

always the last one to arrive!" He yelled as Ryan ran in. Harland was ready for the attack. Throwing Elizabeth onto the bed, he faced the intruder.

"I thought you were going to miss the party, Hawke." Harland chuckled as he threw the first punch.

Ryan dodged his fist and quickly returned two solid hits to Harland's face. Without missing a beat, Harland fell to the floor and held his chin.

"I wasn't invited," Ryan added as he walked over to Gatler. He was very aware of where everyone stood in the room. Elizabeth was cowering on the bed and Harland was next to the door. As he began to dodge Gatler's fist and throw his own, Ryan made sure that they stayed away from the others.

The men grappled with each other for several seconds before Elizabeth realized that she could finally escape. Scrambling to her feet, she tried to run toward the door. Harland barely caught her foot and caused her to stumble.

"Get off of me!" Elizabeth yelled as she kicked at Harland. She could hear the rustling sound of Ryan and Gatler as they fought against each other, but she did not look at them. Her eyes glanced at the fireplace as the remains of her letter vanished before her.

"Get back here." Harland pulled on Elizabeth's ankle and caused her to slide back.

"No!" she yelled with more anger than fear. Elizabeth kicked her legs with all of her strength. The heel of her shoes became weapons as she struggled with Harland, and she refused to stop.

Ryan had not wasted any time with Gatler. He threw all of his force into the man's body and felt him weakening. When Ryan had nearly beaten him to the floor, a deep voice called out over all of the commotion.

"That is enough!" Vincent yelled out. Both Ryan and Elizabeth looked upward. However, Harland crouched on the floor, holding the wounds that Elizabeth had inflicted on his arms. Vincent stood in the center of the room with the pistol in his hand. "Get her out of here," he ordered to Ryan. Elizabeth felt the contents of her stomach rise in her throat as she looked at the crooked position of Vincent's arm. "Now, Hawke!" He said in a voice that none of them had heard before.

Ryan looked over to Elizabeth and started to walk over to her. Without knowing exactly what was going on, she tried to slide away from him.

"Get up," Ryan said as he walked over to her.

It was the first time that she had faced Ryan since the night in bed. Elizabeth was too confused and terrified to be emotional, but as she looked at the man that had used her in a way that she never thought possible, she wanted to get away. Her feet finally felt free and Elizabeth scurried to stand up. Then without a second thought, she jumped away from Ryan's hand and tried to get to the door.

"Whoa, whoa," Ryan said as he grabbed on to her arm and pulled her hard against him. The struggle that she gave him was fairly impressive for her size, but Elizabeth was unable to get free. "Stop!" Ryan ordered as she pulled on his arms and leaned toward the door.

"Get them out of here." Vincent repeated. Ryan held on to Elizabeth by her wrist as he grabbed Harland by the back of the shirt.

"Let's go for a ride," Ryan said as he pulled both of them out of the door. "We have a delivery appointment with Andrew Roshire."

Elizabeth pulled against him every step, but Harland simply accepted his fate. Looking back, Ryan tried to imagine if Vincent could handle the job at hand. Bloody, battered, and with a shattered arm, Vincent nodded to Ryan as he held the pistol.

"Only one of us could kill you. So, we flipped a coin." Vincent sneered to Gatler as Ryan walked down the hall.

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"Let go of me," Elizabeth called as she continued to struggle. The man that was so gentle the night before turned into a monster. Ryan drug Elizabeth down the hall behind him. Pushing Harland forward, he made his way to the carriage. Elizabeth looked into the rooms they past and toward the front desk, but it appeared as if the entire building was empty.

To her surprise, the young clerk that she had met at the bank was hooking up one of the black horses to the front of the carriage. Mr. Thatcher glanced over to Ryan and nodded his head as he walked to a carriage that was a good distance behind Ryan's.

"What is he doing here?" Elizabeth asked as she looked at the curly haired man.

"No questions," Ryan said as he pulled her along.

When he reached the carriage, Elizabeth jumped as the sound of a pistol shot rang out behind them. Even though Vincent held the gun in his hand when they left the room, she did not know if he pulled the trigger or if Gatler had taken the gun away from him.

"Vincent," she whispered as she thought of the possibilities.

"Get in!" Ryan spoke in a stern tone. Harland fell to the floor of the carriage as Ryan tried to push Elizabeth in behind him. Her first instinct was to try and slide beneath his arm. However, the expression on Ryan's face was as hard as stone. "Don't make me move you, Beth."

His eyes held the blank stare that she had seen several times before, but Elizabeth hated Ryan more than she had ever hated Gatler or Andrew. Without considering her actions, she leaned forward and spit in Ryan's face.

Ryan closed his eyes as he reached up to wipe his cheek with the cuff of his jacket. He had been punched, kicked, stabbed, and slapped, but Elizabeth was the first person that ever spit in his face. When he opened his eyes, her fierce anger shined through. However, before she could assault him again, she crawled back into the carriage.

"Move!" Ryan yelled up to the driver.

Jerking in her seat with the motion of the carriage, Elizabeth stared across to Ryan. She wanted to ask if he was going to just leave Vincent, but they had played her for a fool and she had nothing to say. Even if Vincent had been shot, it was no more than what she wanted to do to him.

Little details came to her mind as she watched Harland curl his legs up under him. The man was not about to move unless Ryan gave his permission. Elizabeth remembered how Vincent had seemed more aggressive when he returned from the office the day before. He and Ryan had already planned to take Elizabeth to Andrew. The rest of the night must have been created for her compliance.

Elizabeth was thrown into a room with Ryan, and it was he that had seduced her and stolen the letter. Then, when he could not have sunk any lower, he handed it off to Vincent. It all came together as she recalled the events of the last few minutes.

"How much money am I worth?" She asked as she looked out the window. Not realizing that her emotions were capable of switching from anger to hurt so quickly, Elizabeth felt the tears begin to form. Ryan looked down at Harland before he answered.

"What do you think? You are still in for your cut. What was Gatler figuring you would make in this deal?" His voice was raspy and quick as he nudged the man on the floor with his foot.

"I am not asking him," Elizabeth turned to face Ryan with her glossy blue eyes. "I am asking you."

Ryan stared back at her, but his expression was not as blank as he would have liked. The tiny muscles above his eyes rose for just a moment. His lips pressed together and he cleared his throat with a quick low cough.

The subtle differences made him appear emotional for a moment, as if he felt remorse, but as Elizabeth continued to stare into the deep brown eyes that she loved the night before, Ryan returned to stone.

"I said no questions," he reminded her with a thick voice.

Elizabeth slowly led her attention to the window. In the distance, she could see a large structure that she guessed to be the college. The young men that were walking in and out of the establishment held books and papers while they talked to each other. They had no idea what was happening in her insignificant life.

"What room?" Ryan asked as he kicked Harland again.

"I am not saying anything." The thin and bony man shook his head. Ryan reached down and grabbed him by the back of the neck and began to squeeze.

"You're a smart man, Harland. That's why you are still alive. Now tell me what room he is in, or I swear I will…" The pressure on the base of Harland's neck was nearly intolerable. He could hardly breathe and he reached up to swat at Ryan's hand.

"Alright… alright," he forced out as Ryan let go of him.

"Don't be so concerned. You'll still get your cut," Ryan added as he looked down at him. "Get up there and I'll tell you how this is going to work." Motioning to the seat next to Elizabeth, Ryan waited for him to move. "Get up there." Harland looked at both passengers and slowly raised himself off of the floor. Elizabeth tried her best to ignore his close proximity.

"What do you want?" Harland asked.

"It's not what I want," Ryan replied. "This is how it is going to be." Harland glared at him as Ryan continued. "You are going to take me to Andrew. Gatler is unavoidably out of the deal, and Drake and I want on the payroll." Shaking his head, Harland almost laughed.

"Roshire is not going to hire you after this."

“Are you sure?” Ryan asked without a trace of humor. “Because I am positive that he is short his best man.” Pausing to let the information sink in to Harland, Ryan looked over to Elizabeth. “You and I are going to walk her up to Andrew. You follow my lead, and I’ll make you look good.” Taking his eyes off of Elizabeth, Ryan looked back at Harland. “He can have the sniveling little rat, and you can take your cut. Next week, Drake and I start working for Andrew.” Elizabeth held her breath as the tears started to fall. Every word that came out of his mouth ripped a hole through her heart. “We’re sick of the small change and we can’t get anywhere with Roshire controlling half of the city.”

“You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t kill you.” Harland chuckled.

“I think he’ll be very interested in what I have to say.” He wanted to turn his attention to Elizabeth and include her in the discussion with some sharp comments, but the woman was barely able to hold her composure. Elizabeth stared out the window with tears streaming down her pale face.

“Now let me ask you again, what room is Andrew in?” Turning his attention back to Harland, Ryan sighed heavily. The amount of concentration that Harland was attempting showed on his face. He looked to the floor and then back to Ryan.

“Roshire always said that you wouldn’t work with him as long as he had Gatler.”

“Well, that isn’t a problem anymore,” Ryan added quietly. The quiet sound of weeping began to annoy him to no end. “Could you stop that?”

There was nothing that she could say. Elizabeth was not afraid of seeing Andrew. She was barely afraid of dying at that moment. What Ryan and Vincent had done to her felt worse than anything she could imagine. However, as the red brick walls of the Regal Hotel came into view the inevitable fear set in.

“What do you say, Harland?” Ryan asked as he looked out the window. “Are we going to be partners?”

Looking over to Elizabeth, Harland carefully considered the offer on the table. He knew that Andrew had wanted Ryan to work for him. He had made a name for himself in all of the wrong places. However, he still floated through society as an upstanding citizen. Ryan was as much of a business man as he was a thug, and that meant more profit for Andrew.

“You know me, Hawke. I don’t bite the hand that feeds.” Harland looked over Elizabeth’s dress while she continued to stare out the window. “If Roshire cuts you in, I’ll be glad to work with you.”

“Good, now either you tell me what room he is in, or you take me to him.”

“I have an idea,” Harland offered. “Why don’t you let me take the little lady here to him, and I will talk to Andrew about your plan?”

Lifting his hand, before Harland had a chance to look away, Ryan cuffed him in the back of the head. Recoiling from the quick slap, Harland gave him a dirty look.

“Do I look that stupid?” Ryan asked.

“Alright, I’ll take you to him.”

“You aren’t worried are you?” He asked in his deepest voice as he ignored her tears. Ryan leaned forward towards Elizabeth with a smile. “You know, I really did have a nice night.”

There was no way that she could make him shut his mouth. Elizabeth closed her eyes as he leaned closer to her. She heard a deep chuckle come from Harland’s throat as he assumed Ryan’s meaning. While Ryan added humiliation to the pain, Elizabeth tried to handle the lump that had risen in her chest.

The carriage pulled up to a stop just in front of the Regal Hotel. Finally facing Ryan for the first time, she looked for anything human in his eyes. All that remained was his cold heartless gaze.

“Stay by my side at all times,” he said to Harland. “We will follow you up to the room.” Turning to look at Elizabeth, Ryan reached for her hand. Without a thought, she jerked away from him, but he was beginning to lose his patience. “Miss Drake, I didn’t expect you to be so shy this morning.” His sense of humor made her feel sick to her stomach. “You can either walk with me, or I can carry you.” Raising his voice to a kinder tone Ryan added,” which would you prefer?”

Opening the door to the carriage, Ryan stepped out and offered Elizabeth his hand. When she refused, he reached in to grab her arm. Elizabeth was pulled out into the street as they waited for Harland.

Tears fell down her cheek. Harland stepped out of the carriage and adjusted his coat as he looked up at the three story tall brick building. The magnificent architecture was lost on Harland but the finery caught his eye.

“Now there is a sign of the times,” he said as he looked over at the elevator. The comment annoyed Ryan. He didn’t care about the hotel and was not about to act like he did.

“This will go better if you don’t say anything.” Ryan nodded as he spoke in a quiet voice. Harland took the advice and walked through the large double oak doors.

Elizabeth did not realize that her mouth had fallen open. The tall goldenrod walls extended several feet above her head and the chandeliers were so tall that she could hardly see the gilded décor. Fabulous paintings, larger than life, covered the walls around her. The floor was carpeted in a deep wine color with small black designs. Turning her head to admire the beauty, Elizabeth saw the grand fireplace. If she placed her hand at one end and reached for the other, she would not even touch the center. Without knowing that she had stopped in her tracks, Ryan pulled on her arm.

“Let’s go,” he ordered.

There were people everywhere. The gigantic room was filled with visitors and paying guests. Small tables were huddled with women having morning tea and men reading the newspaper, but Elizabeth did not call to any of them for help.

She could not explain it really. Her life was in jeopardy, but she could not find a way to save herself. The thick carpeted stairs seemed to go on forever, but Elizabeth did not try to get away.

When they reached the top of the stairs, she held her eyes on the never ending carpet, while Ryan waited for Harland to lead the way. As they rounded a hallway, Elizabeth saw a man sitting in a chair outside a large open door. He looked familiar to her. After a few seconds, she remembered seeing him with Andrew at the charity benefit.

“No,” Elizabeth blurted out without thinking. “You can’t do this!” Pulling hard against Ryan’s hand, he turned to face her. “Please Ryan, let me go.” Her feet dug into the carpet and she held her wrist with her opposite hand.

“Don’t make a scene.” Ryan warned her as he pulled her hard against him. She started to cry again and continued pulling on her arm.

“Please,” she pleaded with him, “For goodness sake, don’t do this!” Ryan placed his hand behind her neck and pulled her ear close to his mouth.

“I need you to keep going,” he whispered in a cold and calloused voice. The man at the door noticed Ryan for the first time.

“What are you doing here?” He asked as he stood up.

“It’s alright, Logan.” Harland raised his hand. Even though Logan did not understand what was going on, he was not about to stop them. They had the girl, so he let them through the door.

“Where is Gatler?” Andrew asked.

“He’s been fired,” Ryan said as he cleared his throat.

The beauty of the upstairs parlor was lost on Elizabeth. The light grayish blue walls did not impress her, and she was hardly aware of the tapestries and paintings. All Elizabeth could see was the man sitting in the large cushioned chair holding the paper.

“Well, isn’t this a surprise?” Andrew folded the edge of the paper over and looked at Elizabeth. “Good morning, Mr. Hawke. I see you have taken matters into your own hands.” Ryan walked into the center of the room and held onto Elizabeth tighter than before.

“You’re short a man,” he said with ease.

“I see Harland has made it here without a problem.” Andrew looked at the tall skinny man and lowered his eyes. “Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

Looking behind her, Elizabeth noticed two men at the back of the room. Her attention on Andrew had kept her from seeing them before. There was nowhere for her to go. Elizabeth looked around her quickly and wished that she had screamed and fought against Ryan down in the lobby.

“Well, look at you.” Andrew finally addressed Elizabeth for the first time. “My little sister is all grown up and looking for Mommy’s money.” Andrew placed his fingers under her chin and raised her eyes to his. As soon as their eyes met, Andrew pulled back his hand and slapped her across the face. “No little bastard bitch is going to take anything from me!” His voice seemed to hiss as he leaned closer to her face.

Immediately, her face turned crimson. It was a solid slap, but not nearly the pain that Gatler had inflicted. Still, as Elizabeth faced Andrew with glossy eyes, she felt Ryan squeeze her arm.

“Now,” Andrew turned his attention back to Ryan. “What do you want?”

Ryan watched Andrew’s every move. He almost expected to be slapped as well. It would have been a bad idea though. Ryan would not have turned his cheek as sweetly as Elizabeth had.

“Gatler is not working for you anymore,” he spoke clearly and without hesitation. Reaching up to scratch the side of his nose, Ryan sniffed before he continued. “I want the job.”

“So, that is why you turned on, Drake?” With a smile Andrew nodded his head.

“Actually,” Ryan watched as Andrew walked around him and Elizabeth. “Drake wants in, too.”

His eyebrows raised for a second as Elizabeth finally turned to face her brother. The hatred in her eyes was easily visible and it replaced the pain. Andrew almost seemed to know the look as she glared at him, but it did not matter.

“I don’t need Drake.” Andrew placed his attention back on Ryan. “You don’t either.”

“I think you do,” Ryan added to Andrew’s surprise. Tilting his head to the side, Andrew considered Ryan’s audacity.

“You know, Hawke.” He paused as he crossed his arms over his chest. “This won’t work if you question me.” Watching the dead stare in Ryan’s dark eyes, Andrew stepped closer. “I make all the calls, all the decisions, and all of the rules.”

“Drake has all of the clientele that are afraid to do business with you, and some of them have made us miserably wealthy.” Taking a step back, Ryan looked around the room. “Furthermore, not a man in here could stop me from walking out.” Ryan took a step forward as well. The tension was thick as Ryan released Elizabeth’s arm for the first time. The corner of his mouth turned upward slightly and Andrew smiled.

“Now, I will disagree with that.” Taking a moment to imagine how tempting the idea was, Andrew forced himself to focus on the more important details. “Where is the letter?” He asked as he looked down at Elizabeth.

“Careful,” Ryan warned. “She spits.”

“Well, isn’t that charming?” Andrew asked as he stepped closer. “I’ll ask you one more time. Where is the letter?” Elizabeth was too terrified to speak let alone rebel.

“It was burned.” Moving forward, Harland offered the information.

“I didn’t ask you,” Andrew warned him. “I asked her.” His attention turned back to Elizabeth.

No sound came out of her throat as she opened her mouth. Elizabeth moved her lips, but remained silent. Ryan turned to face her

for the first time, since he entered the room, and saw the huge red handprint across her face. Swallowing hard, he stood his ground.

"Can you talk?" Andrew asked as he lifted her chin with his fingers. "Can she talk?" He asked Ryan.

"Yeah, she can talk just fine!" Again, Harland offered the answer. A threatening glare from Andrew was all that Harland needed to be quiet.

"Where is the letter?" Andrew wrapped his hand under Elizabeth's chin and looked down at her as he applied pressure.

"It was burned," she whispered. Letting go of her face, Andrew stepped away.

"Did you see it?" He asked Harland.

"Yes, Sir."

"Did you see the writing?" He asked. Harland did not understand where the questions were leading, but he was sure that he had done something wrong.

"I saw the envelope."

"But no writing," Andrew added. Harland did not need to answer. He could see it in his face. "Who burned it?" He moved on to the next question.

"Gatler," Harland answered.

"And I suppose he did not see the writing either," Andrew assumed the rest. "So, you mean to tell me…" Running his hand through his hair, Andrew looked directly at Harland and smiled. "Drake, who has been hiding her for over a week, has suddenly turned on her. The letter that connects her to my family is not in my hand, and my best man has been prematurely terminated."

Ryan adjusted his stance as he saw the logic forming in Andrew's eyes. Harland was not as quick to figure out what was going on.

"Yes," Harland answered. Looking over to one of the men at the back of the room, Andrew motioned for him to step forward.

"Get rid of him. He is wasting my air."

"Wait," Harland said as the man grabbed him by the back of the neck and led him out of the room. "Wait!" Elizabeth did not turn around to see Harland pushed out the door. In all honesty, she could not care less.

"Well then," Andrew turned to Ryan as he thought of the best way to solve his curiosity. "Let's see if Mr. Hawke is really as unattached as he claims to be." Andrew unhooked his cufflink and

began to roll up the white sleeve. “I would hate to get your blood on my new shirt,” Andrew whispered as he smiled at Elizabeth.

The thickness of the air made it difficult to breath. She had been hit too many times to count within the last week, but as Andrew prepared to strike her with full warning, Elizabeth looked over to Ryan. Her nerves were raw, making it impossible to hear the jingling sound that came from the hallway. Without wasting a moment on the suspense, Andrew drew back his massive arm and raised his shoulder slightly before he drove his fist forward. There was not enough time to blink. Ryan stepped forward in an instant and grabbed the hand that was aimed for Elizabeth.

“Is that any way to treat your sister?” The sound of the jingling keys was loud and clear as Ryan looked up at Andrew.

“What is going on here?” Oswald Roshire asked as Mr. Thatcher continued to nervously shake the keys in his pocket.

The two men had entered the room just as Ryan held Andrew’s fist away from Elizabeth. Cringing in fear, Elizabeth raised her eyes to see that Ryan had indeed stepped in front of her. Andrew was about to turn on Ryan when Oswald called out again.

“Andrew!” The old man walked into the room followed by a small group of men. Among them was Mr. Thatcher, two men from Oswald’s staff, and two men in police uniform.

“This is the woman I spoke to you about, Mr. Roshire.” Ryan released Andrew’s hand and reached into his jacket. Holding her breath, Elizabeth watched him pull a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. “She has been trying to get this to you.”

“My letter,” she whispered. Seeing the warm and inviting look in his eyes left her even more unsettled.

“Here,” Ryan handed her back the paper.

Elizabeth looked at the writing, recognizing it immediately. It seemed cleaner than the envelope that had carried so far, but it was definitely hers. However, the writing was familiar to Oswald as well, and when he eagerly noticed the words in his daughter’s penmanship, Elizabeth handed him the letter at last.

“I don’t understand,” she whispered, looking back to Ryan.

“And neither do I,” Oswald agreed.

“I’m afraid we had to deceive Miss Drake.” Ryan explained as Oswald read the letter. “In order to get past… certain barriers, it had to look like we were bringing her to your grandson.” He took a long daring look at Andrew. “Vincent Drake was supposed to explain the

details. However, things didn't go as planned." Ryan gently brushed his thumb over the back of her hand. "Up until you walked in the door, she believed that she was being betrayed."

Oswald finished the short letter before looking back at the young woman. "Lord Almighty," he said as he looked beneath the bruises and the cuts that she had acquired. "You are your mother's daughter."

Underneath the cruelty that she had been shown, Elizabeth was an exact replica of Camille Roshire Hammond. Without looking up at Andrew, Oswald took Elizabeth's hand and kissed her wrist. Then, without reserve, he gently clasped her face in with hands and kissed her forehead.

"Grandfather," Andrew argued. Raising his piercing blue eyes to his grandson, Oswald wondered if his heart would continue to hold up from the shock.

"And to think, I didn't believe him." The old man looked over to Ryan. "Mr. Hawke said that you were keeping her from me, but I didn't believe that my own flesh and blood was capable of something like this." His eyes stared back at Andrew.

"I swear." Andrew looked as convincing as he could. "This is the first time I have ever seen her." A disgusted expression came over the old man's face.

"Then, why was your hand raised toward a woman you had just met?" When Andrew opened his mouth to answer, Oswald stepped closer to his grandson. "If I were you, I would not say another word."

Oswald was not as tall or as broad as Andrew, but he held much more power than Elizabeth could ever imagine. Even though there was pure hatred and anger in Andrew's eyes, his grandfather's warning kept him silent.

"Constable," Oswald called to one of the men behind him. Would you please see that my grandson is brought up on charges?" Moving his gaze on Elizabeth, Oswald took her hand gently. "Daniel Drake from Caterwood is missing, and I understand that Andrew may have some information about that." Elizabeth finally found her voice at the mention of her father.

"Mr. Roshire," she began to talk, but she had no idea what to say. After a few moments of Elizabeth looking from him to Ryan, Oswald realized that she was still in shock.

“It is alright now,” Oswald spoke quietly. “This will all be straightened out.” His large blue eyes were very similar to Elizabeth’s. His hair was dark, but speckled with silver threads. He wore glasses with round gold frames that made his face seem very narrow. If she had seen him on the street, Elizabeth would not have figured him for one of the wealthiest men in the country.

Again, Elizabeth wanted to say something. She wanted to ask him a thousand questions and tell him a hundred things. Unfortunately, she didn’t know where to start. When her voice failed again, he smiled gently.

“I cannot imagine what you have been through.” Pushing her hair behind her ear, Oswald savored the sight of her. Elizabeth breathed easily for the first time since she had left her house in Caterwood.

“Where is Vincent?” She asked as she looked up at Ryan.

“He is fine,” Oswald looked over at Ryan and stepped away from the young lady. His smile was still apparent as Ryan stepped closer to Elizabeth. “Your brother arrived when I did. He is waiting for you downstairs, but he needs to see a doctor.”

Both Elizabeth and Oswald turned as the Constable and the other officer led Andrew out of the room. He went without a word, but Elizabeth had the distinct feeling that it would not be the last time that she saw him. Oswald turned her face back to him and gently lifted her chin. The bruises and cuts were very apparent on her face.

“Its fine,” Elizabeth reassured him. “I am alright.”

“Then humor an old man,” he smiled. “There is a lot for us to do, now that you are here, but I would feel better if you let a doctor look at you.” Nodding her head, Elizabeth silently agreed to his request. “Mr. Lower,” Oswald turned to the tall and young man behind him. “See that my appointments are canceled for the day and find my lawyer. There are some changes that he and I have to discuss.”

“Right away, Sir.” Mr. Lower nodded before he nodded toward Elizabeth and walked out of the room. It was his departure that led Oswald to notice Ryan.

“Mr. Hawke.” The elderly man was used to delegating his needs. “Would you please see to my granddaughter? I have a few pressing matters to take care of.” Stopping in his tracks, Ryan cleared his throat as Elizabeth noticed he was headed for the door.

“Of course,” he replied.

"Mr. Roshire..," Elizabeth could not seem to take her eyes off Oswald as he spoke.

"Oswald….. For now," he instructed with a smile.

"Oswald," she corrected herself. "Has Camille…?" Looking down at her hands Oswald nodded his head with a visible amount of sadness.

"Almost two months ago."

"How did…" It was something that she had to ask, but she didn't know how. Raising his head, Oswald looked over to Ryan before he returned his eyes to her.

"There will be plenty of time," he whispered. "Right now, I need you to see a doctor, and I have someone downstairs that I have to deal with." Elizabeth looked over at Ryan as Oswald released her hand and stepped back. "Mr. Hawke, I certainly hope that you and Mr. Drake will be able to join me for dinner here this evening." Rolling his shoulders back, he stood to his full height and raised his chin slightly. "And if you are not further engaged, I would appreciate it if you could persuade my granddaughter to stay for the evening. I will be sure that you all have the best accommodations."

"Thank you," Elizabeth accepted his kindness as Oswald kissed her hand once again. Then, after smiling at her for several seconds, he left the room followed by Mr. Thatcher.

Before Ryan had a chance to open his mouth the quiet sound of the keys in Thatcher's pocket was heard once again. Elizabeth did not seem to notice as she looked up to Ryan. Her eyes were full of questions, but he did not want to answer all of them.

"You never planned on trading me?" She asked.

"No." Ryan the same blank stare. "You weren't really worth all that much." There was no change in his voice, but she knew he was joking.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"There wasn't time," he spoke quietly as she stepped closer to him. "Vincent was supposed to tell you before Gatler got there, but the second flask of brandy..." Elizabeth thought of everything that had happened in the short period of time.

"He was very angry with me, but he never said a word about any of this."

"I don't know what happened. I have not had a chance to talk to him yet." Her fabulous blue eyes held his attention more than he wanted them to. The red mark on her cheek nearly drove him insane. It

took everything that he had to remain in control and not attack Andrew, before Oswald walked in the room. “He was pretty hung-over this morning,” Ryan continued. “It took quite a bit of coffee to get him to stand upright.” The closer she came to him the more she found herself thinking about the night before.

“And last night?” She asked before the desire to hold him took over.

“What about it?” Ryan shook his head with very little movement and looked down at her. She was not expecting to ask more.

“Were you just trying to get the letter?” The question was hard for her to ask. Placing his hands in the pockets of his jacket, Ryan sighed as he thought of the truth. His refusal to respond led her to her own conclusion. “You were, weren’t you?” Letting the anger and hurt show again, she backed away from him. “I would have given it to you,” Elizabeth whispered as the hurt grew. “I would have handed it to you myself, had you asked.”

“I know,” Ryan held her stare as her eyes became glossy again. “You did.”

“Excuse me?” She reached up to catch a tear. Ryan reached for her arm and pulled her close to him.

“I asked you.” Placing his hand behind her neck, Ryan gently touched the hair that fell around her shoulders. “You were half asleep.” With a gentle smile, he trailed his fingers around to her chin. “But you said that I could have it.” Elizabeth had no idea what to say. So, she kept her thoughts to herself and accepted the gentle touch of Ryan’s lips. Again she was lost in the luxury of his touch. Ryan had an uncanny ability to make the world around her disappear, and she welcomed it. However, the sensation was broken long before she was ready.

“We had better get you to see your brother,” he whispered. Elizabeth placed her hand over her lips, wondering if they had reddened from his kiss. “You will have to talk to the Constable as a witness. He will be charged with Gatler’s murder.”

“It was not his fault,” Elizabeth stated quickly.

“I am sure that between you and Oswald, we can clear him of it,” Ryan added. “However, he is pretty bruised up. It is going to be at least a week before you two get back to Burdery.” Ryan ran his hand over her arm gently.

“You are not staying?” Her eyes seemed to soften as she waited for his answer.

“I can’t,” he answered honestly. “Someone needs to handle things back at the bank.”

“Can’t Mr. Thatcher speak to someone?” The thought of him leaving her was becoming uncomfortable.

“No,” Ryan dropped his head a little. “I can’t do anything for your brother besides keep business on track. You are going to have to take care of him for a while.” Aware of the men walking in and out of the room behind him, Ryan drew his hand over her arm. “Besides, you have a lot of catching up to do with your Grandfather.” The thought of being safe and not having to hide made her contemplate going back to Caterwood.

“Oh no,” Elizabeth lifted her eyes to the ceiling. “Fanny,” she whispered. “Oh lord.” Her hands covered her mouth.

“She’s fine, Beth. Mr. Thatcher sent a telegraph Mr. Lara at the pub in Caterwood. It turns out that the gunfire was from Jarred’s gun.” He could see relief washing over her immediately. “Gatler and Harland never stepped foot on their property.”

“I will write to them today.”

“I don’t think you have to worry about them,” He offered. “They think of you as family.” Elizabeth nodded her head and glanced around the room.

“It’s mutual,” she agreed. “Fanny and I have been very close over the years. I have no doubt that they will let me stay with them, now that this is all over.”

“Is that what you want to do?” Ryan kept his voice low. “Don’t you think you should stay with your brother for a while? He is going to need some help after all of this.”

“I’m not sure.” Her gaze lifted to his once more. “I think I have imposed on his hospitality just a little.”

“Then helping him out would be the least you could do.”

She wasn’t sure if he was smiling, but she knew that he wasn’t being as cold as usual. Elizabeth stepped closer to him and ran her fingers along the small buttons on his shirt. Inhaling deeply, his chest rose against her hand.

“Would I be able to at least see you?” She asked bravely. “I don’t know that many people in Burdery.

“You’re going to have to.” He stood very still, watching her hand graze across his chest. “Someone has to keep an eye on you and your brother. Trouble follows you two wherever you go.”

“I’m not sure that I should be socializing with a businessman like you.”

“It’s a little late for that,” he chuckled. “But I have to warn you, I’m not getting rid of my dog.” Elizabeth smiled at the response. Her amusement led Ryan to continue. “And I am not going legitimate.”

“Then, I am not going with you.” She moved away quickly, but he caught her arm.

“Oh, yes you are.” With a slow and deliberate step, Ryan turned Elizabeth around and fervently brought his lips to hers.

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