

## CHAPTER 1



The man in the dapper suit stared at me for a long time. I caught men absently taking me in all the time, and I knew I had a striking face; I knew that my big green eyes and silky chestnut hair were a jarring contrast to my scrawny form and ratty dress. After a whole day of floor scrubbing, I didn't exactly look appealing.

But this gentleman stared just a little bit too long. He was very handsome—golden hair and vivid hazel eyes. And he gave me the creeps.

I exchanged my few coins for the cheapest loaf of bread I could find and ducked quickly away from the bakery stall.

I relaxed a little to be back in the slick, cobbled streets, still glistening with early-summer rain. I hoped Molly had put the chicken soup on and immediately felt bad for hoping that. Molly was only a little girl, after all. And all I wanted, all I'd ever wanted, was for my sister to have a childhood. I hoped she was out playing and not thinking of chicken soup at all.

Things weren't so bad anymore, I reminded myself, shuffling the bread under my arm. Now that I was working in better houses, we were able to afford a flat that wasn't exactly warm, but it was

dry. Molly didn't have to work as a companion to the elderly for half as many hours a day just to help keep a roof over our heads.

Rain began to drizzle again, and I walked a litter faster. If the rain seeped through the bread's thin packaging and made it soggy, I'd have wasted a whole scrubbed floor's worth of money.

I'd tried for another job first thing that morning.

They knew my mother, so I'd been declined.

The fine house hadn't needed a girl whose only experience was floor scrubbing, anyway. It had been a waste of time to apply.

I could hear mother's voice in my head, one of her many worn-out sayings, 'Time is money. Every coin you spend, think of the time you took to earn it. Every hour you waste, think of the coin you could have made.' I could have scrubbed a whole floor with the time I'd spent daring to think I could do better for myself.

I think Mother told me that sort of thing, hoping it would get me ahead in life, but all it really ever did was make me an anxious wreck, prone to bottling up my feelings until I had spontaneous, spectacular outbursts.

As I clattered over the wet cobblestones, I felt an eerie feeling. The feeling of being followed.

I'd felt the feeling before, working late nights, when men mistook me for somebody else. I shuffled around in my unraveling pocket for the one pretty thing I owned. It had been the one pretty thing Mother had ever owned, a gift from father before he left, a pocket mirror.

I clicked it open to see the reflection of a carriage rumbling slowly after me.

I snapped it shut and walked faster.

My body began to reveal just how stiff it was as I hurried along. Today, had been particularly stiffening, trying not to scream whenever a roach scuttled by in the filthy servant's quarters I was scrubbing. I just set my teeth and scrubbed harder. I'd scrubbed all manner of gross things, but bugs were always a breaking point for me. To make it through, I chanted to myself that maybe, someday,

someone would see me as something other than the daughter of a woman who had seduced a man above her station. *He'd seduced her*, but of course, people got it the other way around.

I reached into my pocket to stop the jingle of the few coins there with a silencing grip.

But the man could still pick me out in the dreary grey.

"Excuse me!" The carriage had come close enough for its passenger to call after me. "Miss?"

I didn't look back. I broke into a run.

Mother would be astonished at me. Even as a young girl, she'd snapped, "Olivia, if a gentleman finds it in his heart to admire you, the least you could do is smile prettily back at him." I tried to live by my mother's wisdom as far as possible. She'd done well for herself, before father left and before she got sick, and she'd assured me it was because she lived by a few simple street smarts. And maybe poor girls shouldn't be so pretentious as to think they had the right to reject or decline people's notice, but I couldn't abide by being mistaken for a prostitute tonight. It was raining, and my knuckles were cracked and bleeding, and all I wanted was to be home.

Damn it, I made a wrong turn.

The alley came to an abrupt end, capped with a towering brick wall. I was cornered.

I spun around to face my follower.

It was the man from the market, the dapper-suited one from before.

"I'm not one of Madam Delaine's girls!" I called out.

The young man leaned out of the carriage and looked momentarily astonished and then almost annoyed that I'd said that. "Well, of course not. I wouldn't be caught dead talking to you if you were. *I am a gentleman.*"

"Gentlemen do like to remind us of what they are," I murmured, tugging my bread defensively closer to my chest. Gentlemen who

came to the city were certainly full of trite little protestations of moral superiority, almost as much as Madam Delaine's bank account was full of their money.

The carriage rumbled a little closer, and the man got out. "I'm Nicholas Hawthorne."

He extended a hand for my ragged one.

After a moment's hesitation, I gave it to him, and he visibly stiffened to feel my calloused, split grip in his uncommonly smooth one.

"Pleasure," I said, trying not to betray with my voice that it wasn't.

I had precious few moments to spend enjoying my evening with Molly before bed and before rising at an ungodly hour the next morning to start this all over again.

"Do you have a name?" he asked, his tone strained like he wasn't used to being so amiable.

"Olivia."

"A last name?"

"March. I'm Olivia March."

Then the golden-haired young man looked fidgety for a moment, as if unsure what to say next or how to say it.

Finally, he settled on, "This might all seem very strange and untoward, but I wonder if I could take you somewhere to talk?"

"I told you—"

"No, not about anything like that. We'll even have a chaperone." He called back over his shoulder. "Jasper?"

A head poked from the carriage, a dark-haired man who looked slightly older than the gentleman, not quite so fine-looking but also handsome.

"Assure the poor girl we aren't going to beat her over the head with a shovel and ruthlessly kidnap her?"

The man shrugged and withdrew back into the carriage.

Nicholas Hawthorne laughed nervously, looking back at me. "Jasper's a jokester like that. That's Jasper Roy. He's very good at

making sure nothing untoward happens." He said it like Jasper Roy was a name one just knew, one that should instill instant comfort. "I just want to talk." He held his hand up like he was calming a frightened filly. "We'll stash that loaf of bread safely in the carriage."

I wondered if I had a choice in the matter. What if I was about to be abducted?

But neither of the men, nor their ancient carriage driver, looked more charlatan than the normal sort.

"Fine," I said.

The young Mr. Hawthorne's look was one of triumph as he led me to the carriage.

I climbed into the seat, where the other man nodded his wordless greeting to me, and Nicholas Hawthorne give the driver instructions to take us to a hotel restaurant.

Once arrived and seated in the sort of fine dining room I'd only ever been in to scrub, Nicholas ordered the dinner special for us while the dark-haired one sat silently by.

The dishes came in no time at all. I had never seen so much food piled high on a plate. An overwhelmingly-colorful salad with crab cakes, brown bread, *and* clam-chowder. They put extra brown bread on the table too.

I stared suspiciously and hungrily.

"So what are we here for?" I asked, but the man either didn't hear me or chose to ignore me, cutting a slice of brown bread.

"Oh, I miss city portions," Nicholas muttered, while his friend went straight for the crab cakes.

Suspense aside, I was hungry. So I put the napkin on my lap and started eating, trying very hard to eat daintily and slowly. I wondered if I could smuggle any extras home to Molly.

After a few bites, Nicholas sat back and got down to business. "I'll be forthright, Miss March. I need a consort."

I lifted my head in astonishment. "I thought I just made it very clear—"

"No. Not quite like you're thinking. I mean a consort like..." He

stared at the rain-wet window, trying to come up with words. He looked back at his companion. "Jasper. How would you explain it?"

"You need a fake sweetheart to get your parents to notice you."

Nicholas sniffed dryly. "Yes. Thank you, Jasper." He turned back to me. "See, there is a living. And because my dear brother," the way he said *dear brother* left little doubt that he was nothing of the sort, "is in peril of marriage, and he might very well be getting it all. And then, when I get married, or when my father dies, I will get the leftovers of his livelihood. But, if I *too* appeared to be in peril of marriage..." He trailed off as if hoping that would be sufficient for me to get it.

I didn't get it. "I'm sorry, but I feel like there are easier ways to convince your father to give you half a living."

Jasper Roy raised his head in agreement. "Like maybe just asking."

"Don't be ridiculous, Jasper," Nick snapped, then he turned his attention back to me. "You don't understand. In my world, you just matter more if you're about to marry or have a baby."

"Honestly?" I said. I slathered my warm bread with butter. "That's kind of how the whole world works."

"And there's more, Nick," Jasper prompted.

"Yesss." Nicholas moved around his salad leaves. "I need an attendant to attend the Summer's Eve ball. Nobody goes without a partner. It's tradition. To go alone, would be in morbidly poor taste."

I knew nothing about such codified things but nodded like I did.

"There's a business connection I hope to make. He'll be in attendance. You're my ticket in."

I didn't like being talked about like a ticket, nor the way he was looking at me like an object he desperately wanted to own.

I shoveled another bite of clam chowder and noticed my hands. The blood between my knuckles had dried, only serving to make them look dirty and worse.

Mother had told me 'when life throws you a pearl, you take it,

and I don't care if you've got to muddle around in the mud! Mother honestly might not have been too torn up if I became one of Madam Delaine's girls.

Attend a fancy party and pretend to be some dapper gentleman's girlfriend. I could think of worse things. But all this couldn't come without a hefty price tag attached.

My education had been lacking, but one thing I always remembered was the method for asking good questions—who, what, where, when, why. A silly thing, but it gave me small power. If I didn't have much choice in my destiny, at least I knew it from all sides.

"Who are you, really? Nicholas Hawthorne, I know, but who is that?" He looked a little annoyed that I would ask that. I got a little more specific. "What do you *do*?"

"Do?"

Jasper looked amused.

"I am the son of a very wealthy gentleman." And he left it at that. Well, okay then.

"What are the," I wasn't sure how to ask my next question, "what are the—"

"The benefits?" Nicholas said, at the same instant I asked, "The rules?"

He looked a little surprised.

I fumbled, a bit anxiously. "I guess what exactly would I be expected to do?"

He seemed, for the first time, delighted. "I'm glad you asked! We'll start with the benefits first. I will pay you. A small stipend. I'll purchase all your dresses and girl things."

I didn't ask him to specify *girl things*. But my mind was spinning.

"You'll have a room of your own and plenty of time off to come and go as you please. I certainly won't have use for you all day, every day. You'll have meals. Use of a carriage." He rattled them off like such things were a trifling nothing.

I nibbled at a crab cake in an attempt to hide how affected I was.

"Now I'm glad you bring up rules, because I was afraid that might be a sticking point." He wiped his mouth and cast the cloth napkin aside. "Jasper, here, is my valet, and he will act, in a way, as your valet also."

"So like a lady's maid," said Jasper dryly.

"He'll make sure you are well-dressed and prepared for everything you'll encounter. You'll rely on his advice and, if necessary, submit to his discipline."

I looked again at Jasper Roy, this time a little more closely.

He had a vaguely intimidating air about him, perhaps only due to his quiet. He didn't look threatening, though. Mostly, he looked like he vaguely felt sorry for me.

"And I do have expectations, which I will draw up for you in our employment contract. And consequences, should you fail to meet them."

My stomach churned a little warily at words like *discipline* and *consequences*. I couldn't help the burning question, "You won't expect me to...go to bed with you?"

He looked miffed. "Of course not; that goes without saying."

No, it didn't really. But I shoveled my mouth full of salad and didn't say so.

"You'll go to social events and parties with me and let me hold your hand and make tasteful overtures in public."

I got back on track with my questions. We'd covered the who and the what.

"Where would I be staying?"

"You'll have a room in my parents' vacation home, over on the island."

*The island* could only mean St. Myrtle. My mother had told me it was named after the matron saint of turtles, initially named after the native word for *turtle*, and I'd never been quite sure whether to believe her. It was a ferry ride away from the northern coast. Snotty, wealthy people came from all over the world to take their summers there.



My heart began pounding a little fast. I'd only ever dimly dreamed of setting foot on the island, even if it was a stone's throw away. On clear days, I could easily see it from here.

My hand clenched tight around my spoon, and I'd stopped eating. I'd never in my wildest dreams imagined that kind of compensation. Not just payment, but a tiny ounce of freedom. A small taste of autonomy.

I'd once worked in a house up north and took my brief lunch on the pier, watching the ferries of beautifully-clothed people sail out. I'd shut my eyes and, for the tiniest moment, allowed myself the audacity of imagining I was one of them, in a flowing white dress and a scintillating hat, about to board.

"When would I join you?"

"This upcoming weekend. Saturday."

"But why are you doing this? I think your valet is right. There are easier ways than a whole—"

"Ruse?" Jasper proffered.

Nicholas ignored him. "If I make my intended business connection at the Summer's Eve ball, then my first project would be expanding my father's vineyards to include a bed and breakfast and other touristy things. Howard Abbott's specialty is hospitality, and everything he touches turns to gold. Father hasn't been able to secure a partnership with him. I'm the youngest, so if *I* was able to, you see what that could mean for me."

I didn't see at all what it could mean.

He elaborated a little, patiently, like talking to an aggravating child, "If we're successful by the end of the summer, I'll have my living. I'll have a lucrative partnership with Howard Abbott and my father, and I'll be financially independent. And I'll be very grateful to be free."

"I see." Although it was hard for me to see how a man, with a carriage, servants, a vacation home on St. Myrtle, and such fine clothes, felt deprived of independence.

"Trust me." He swigged a drink. "For once in my life, I know what I want, and I know how to accomplish it."

I had one final question, "But why me?"

"You have a very pretty face and a refined carriage about you, even in *that* dress."

I felt my cheeks heat a little. It wasn't as if I didn't know my dress was ancient and dirty.

"So?" His tone was light again, and he gazed at me eagerly. "What do you think? I'm sure we could make you decently pretty in a heartbeat. Not gorgeous enough to arouse suspicion, but that's exactly what we're looking for."

I was already tired of these thoughtless barbs. I could have a bold temper sometimes, and I was tempted, for a tiny white-hot prick of a split second, to refuse simply on that basis.

Mother's words filled my head. 'Some of us are born with options. Some are not. Beggars can't be choosers, Olive.'

But something about the gentleman riled something in me, spurring me to test that beggar's boundary, just a little.

I sat up a little straighter. "If I'm going to do this for you, I think I have some stipulations of my own."