

# Chosen One

*The Enlightened Hand Book One*

By

Sadie Dane

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# Chapter One

Olivia lay back, nestled in a thick layer of hay. She lifted her hand and examined how the sun shone between her fingers. Bits of dust swirled in the golden air as Olivia noticed how the sun changed the edges of her fingers, making them brighter. Lawrence would certainly get scolded again for not fixing the hole in the barn's roof, but his laziness was Olivia's gain.

With her gigantic hound, Bart, snoring at her side and the sun shining on the both of them, she was utterly content, warm and happy.

"Olivia?" Her mother called for her from just outside the barn's entrance.

As long as Olivia stayed put and kept Bart from snoring too loudly she would remain undetected. There was no way her always proper mother would step a dainty foot into a place as unseemly and filthy as this barn.

"Olivia Fosterson, I know you are in there, come out right this moment and begin drawing water from the river for your bath. I want you scrubbed pink for dinner."

There could not be a worse idea. She slunk down even lower and stuck out her tongue, even though her mother couldn't see.

"You are not a child, Olivia, stop acting like one. You are a grown woman who will not spend her days smelling like dog and dirt."

"I do not smell like dog!" Olivia hollered and then clamped a hand over her mouth. Curse her horrid mother, she definitely knew how to get a rise out of her.

She could not mistake the smug undertone in her mother's next words. "We are having important guests for dinner and you will look your best. Do not make me find you again, or you will feel your father's belt!"

Pah! If she ever felt her father's belt it would be because she'd borrowed it to hold up the pants she'd stolen from Lawrence. Her mother, however, seemed to feel like the threat was sufficient and soon Olivia heard her soft footsteps fading away.

Bart whined in his sleep and then yipped like an overexcited puppy, startling himself awake. He blinked at her with big, brown, soulful eyes. "She gives me nightmares too," Olivia said. Bart yawned.

Someone chuckled, a low and familiar sound. Lawrence crept out of the shadows. How long had he been there against the back wall? Had he been watching her nap? Her breath caught in her throat, imagining his eyes on her without her knowledge. It wasn't the worst thought in the world.

He was classically handsome. His clothes were well worn from hours of hard labor. He'd rolled his sleeves up over his muscular forearms that were crossed over his chest. He smiled, as he usually did when looking her way.

A few years or so ago her stomach began to flip over whenever she saw his smiles. Lawrence had been hired as her father's apprentice when he was a teenager and had become a staple in Olivia's life. When he wasn't avoiding fixing roofs or learning the trade with her father, Lawrence was near her. Sometimes he helped her with her own chores or simply lingered in the same space she was. Olivia loved every moment they had spent together.

"Nothing gives Ollie nightmares," Lawrence said to Bart.

Olivia smiled sweetly. "Except your ruddy face," she said. She may have feelings for the handsome man but she had always teased him. That couldn't change just because of a few butterflies in her stomach.

His brown eyes remained gentle, unaffected by her teasing. He reached down and with a soft grip, he helped Olivia to her feet. Close up she could see the golden flecks of color that surrounded the blacks of his eyes, like tiny sunbursts.

"Are you sure it is only in your nightmares that you see my face?"

She trembled in response to his soft, yet persistent tone, to the way his touch lingered on her skin.

"Cold, Ollie?" He asked with a knowing twinkle.

Olivia stretched forward, needing to destroy the small space that remained between them. Would he finally let her?

"Don't you have water to fetch?" he asked, leaning back.

Frustrated, Olivia sighed. If Lawrence waited any longer to make his move, he may well find she'd given up waiting for him. She spun away from him, and was at the barn's entrance when he grabbed her wrist and swung her back around. Olivia had never been a great dancer and ended up landing roughly against his body. He held her firm though, cloaking them in the shadow of the wall.

"What—" she tried to sound angry, but suddenly found she didn't have the breath to finish her sentence, much less finish it with aggression.

His face was close to hers now and in the flash of a star's burst her world changed because he was kissing her. From the moment she felt his warm, full lips, it was exactly as Olivia had fantasized it would be. He didn't paw at her, like she'd seen in the dark streets outside of the tavern whenever she accompanied her father and Lawrence into town. He fit perfectly against her. Like two parts of one whole.

Her hands wandered over his body, up and down his strong arms and up his neck where they played through his dark blond hair. She let her fingertips slide slowly over his skin, committing each bit to memory. He explored her mouth, gently at first, as if testing the levels of her desire. She responded with a low moan, nearly overcome by her body's reaction. She'd touched herself before, even brought herself to completion with the image of Lawrence in her head, but even that feeling had not compared to the arrows of pleasure between her legs or to how lightheaded she felt as if she'd had too many glasses of mead.

He let go of where he'd held her arms and touched the back of her neck, her shoulders and finally, he slid the back of his hand over a breast. Even through her dress she felt her nipple contract, instantly scratching against the fabric causing more pleasure arrows.

She wanted to touch more of him, had to touch all of him. She reached for his pants and he pushed back, gently, but the result was the same.

"Ollie, I—" he gasped.

"Don't you dare apologize to me, Lawrence Richard Collins," she said, breathlessly.

His mouth opened and then closed. Then he smiled. He kissed her again, ever so gently and Olivia could feel his smile against her lips. She giggled.

Her hound, Bart, had drifted back to sleep almost immediately after Olivia's mother had left. He got to his feet, hair raised, and howled right as a herd of horses could be heard clip-clopping towards them. Lawrence frowned as he motioned for Olivia to stand back behind him. He poked his head out of the double door barn entrance. Olivia nervously tiptoed to the space beside him—despite his grunt of disapproval—and tried to see around him to where the horses were coming to a stop in front of her home.

There were four riders. All were riding the prettiest dappled gray horses Olivia had ever seen. The horses' coats gleamed like a reflection off a lake. Their bodies were the color of storm

clouds and river stones while their mane and tails were a bright, nearly iridescent white. The four of them had matching dark leather saddles and bridles adorned with gleaming silver. Each rider wore a matching tunic, white with the same insignia on their fronts, two hands circled around a golden sun.

"Who are they?" Olivia whispered from Lawrence's armpit. It was the only place she had been able to squeeze her head through to see.

"Stay back, Ollie. Please." Olivia was surprised to hear the obvious fear in his voice, the way he'd stiffened at first sight of them. Lawrence pushed her back against the wall and then strode forward out of the barn. The men immediately dismounted and eyed him with distrust.

"Mason Fosterson? Are you Mason Fosterson?" one of them called out loudly. Olivia didn't like his tone which was sharp and unfriendly.

Lawrence shook his head in answer to the man's question. Olivia couldn't hear what he said next. At that moment, Olivia's mother bustled out of their small home. She had her hand around her father's arm, but it looked more like she was dragging Olivia's father than being escorted by him. His lips were pressed tightly together and his eyebrows were drawn down in a dark glower. Olivia could tell from where she was, all the way across the path, that he wasn't happy about meeting these strangers.

Sensing her eyes on him, Olivia's father spotted her crouching down in the barn's entrance. He hurried forward, abandoning his wife and whispered something into Lawrence's ear and handed him his sword. Lawrence turned like a soldier who had just been given urgent orders. He held none of his casual, lazy grace as he ran back to her.

"We need to go," he said the moment he'd gotten close enough.

"Who are they?" Olivia stretched to the tips of her toes to see them. "Why are they here?" She wasn't frightened of them, not yet anyway. But she could tell something was definitely off. Her mother looked too happy while her father and most of all, Lawrence, were too worried.

Lawrence's answer was to wordlessly hoist Olivia up onto the bare back of her mare. He was about to jump up behind her when Bart snarled ferociously, the noise hardly recognizable coming from her normally sweet tempered hound.

"Going somewhere?" asked an arrogant, male voice.

Bart growled and Olivia immediately distrusted the speaker. Her hound was an amazing judge of character. Lawrence cursed softly.

With dark hair and bright green eyes, the young man looked a little older than Lawrence, but where Lawrence had kindness, this man looked serious, cruel even. Where Lawrence had happiness, this man had arrogance. He was handsome, Olivia supposed, but in the same peculiar way a wild animal was beautiful.

"Just going for a ride," Lawrence replied.

"So late?" the intruder asked lazily.

"We have a late errand."

At the same moment Olivia asked, "Who are you?"

The man smiled, but she didn't trust it. "I'm the man who's going to save you from all this."

Olivia scowled. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"They told me you were curious," he said.

Lawrence tried to shift in front of her, probably attempting to give her a silent signal that she should stop talking to the new stranger. She *was* curious though, and tried to push him aside. He was like a rock. "Who told you?" she asked over Lawrence's head. "Why have you been talking about me?"

"Which should I answer first? To be honest, many people have told me about your tenacity. The townspeople for one, though they spoke of your inquisitive nature as if it were a bad thing. More important than that, I wager, is who told me first. That honor would belong to your mother."

"My moth..."

"She knew the choosing was upon us and wrote to tell me about the prettiest, most capable girl in all the land."

Olivia thought the stranger meant to compliment her, but she felt a chill and the hair on the back of her neck rose.

"What is the choosing? What is going on here? Who are you?" She asked her questions over the now livid Lawrence.

The man sighed, he sounded almost bored. "My name is Grant Thatcher, fourth candidate of The Enlightened Hand."

Olivia burst out laughing. Lawrence hissed and crouched in a protective stance in front of her.



"What?" she asked between fits of laughter. "Everyone knows The Enlightened Hand isn't a real thing. Bogeymen with their eyes on the lords? They are bedtime stories to tell to nasty little boy lords and headstrong girls who run too fast."

"Be quiet, Olivia," Lawrence whispered furiously.

She laughed again, though this time there was some doubt in it. "Why? You were the one who taught me the rhyme," she continued in a sing-song tone, "Don't run too fast or sing too loud, The Enlightened Hand will make your town proud, don't answer too quick or be too pretty, The Enlightened Hand will show you no pity." She slid from her mare's back, colliding with Lawrence. "It's rubbish, Lawrence. This man is not well in his head."

"In here," the arrogant stranger barked angrily.

Instantly, the four men ran in. Lawrence pulled his sword, brandishing it at the four men who approached slowly, unsheathing swords of their own.

If Olivia had been waiting for a sign to panic, the sight of so much sharpened steel was that sign. "Wait, wait, wait, what are you doing?" She wasn't sure if she was asking Lawrence, the arrogant—perhaps insane—stranger, or the men.

The situation had changed so drastically in the span of two seconds that Olivia had the distinct feeling that she was missing out on something. The men surged forward as a group, bringing their sharp swords ever closer.

"Stop," she ordered the lot of them. "Father! We're in here! Help!" Olivia attempted to shield Lawrence but he held her back with a strong arm.

"Oh Lord," Grant Thatcher, the arrogant man, sighed. "I see this all the time. If you wanted her this badly. You should have married her."

It took Olivia a moment to realize who he was talking to. She blushed.

"We can do this the easy way or..."

Whatever else he was going to say he never did, instead he lunged as if he was going to snatch Olivia from his side. In the same instant the four other men moved forward in a well-rehearsed attack. Grant Thatcher's distraction had worked and before he knew it Lawrence was both disarmed and restrained, though it took the four men together to keep him under control.

Olivia caught his wild-eyed gaze for one a moment as the arrogant man grabbed her arm. The moment she realized he meant to take her away from Lawrence, she jerked her arm out of his grasp. From the look he gave her, Grant Thatcher clearly wasn't used to being denied. Olivia

dumbly noticed that his eyes were a startling shade of green just before he grabbed her around the middle and lifted her up over one shoulder.

"I'll take my leave, men. Don't release him until the stone mason and his wife have had a chance to calm him down."

"Leave where?" Olivia began fighting, pounding the man's back with her fists as she kicked wildly at him, at the air, at anything she could come in contact with.

He carried her out of the barn. Lawrence's shouts began then, echoing in her ears. "Don't worry, Ollie! I'll find you, Ollie!" She searched for her parents, but they were nowhere in sight. She kicked and punched harder, her breath growing ragged from the effort. For a moment, his hold loosened. Seconds after, she felt a sharp sting against her bottom and she froze, fists clenched in the air. Had he just spanked her?

"Is that what you need?" he murmured while readjusting her on his shoulder.

She spotted an elegant carriage. Her heart pounded. Was she being kidnapped? Is that what this was? Where were her parents?

"Mason Fosterson, please do not be angry with your wife," Grant said. Olivia saw her parents then on the other side of the carriage. "Miss Olivia here has an amazing opportunity. The only reason she has this opportunity is because of how special of a woman she has become. You fostered that and should be proud. And, if she makes it back to you, you should remember this feeling instead of focusing on your present loss."

Olivia grasped at what he said, there was much hidden in his words. She didn't understand much of it. Her head was swimming. His tone had changed, became less arrogant, actually respectful while he addressed her parents. As respectful as a man could be as he was hauling their daughter out of her childhood home like a sack of potatoes. The respect in his tone made her hate him just a little less.

She searched her father for some comfort, but he wouldn't look at her. Her mother, however, beamed. The man placed her in the carriage. He was in the act of climbing in behind her when there was a great booming sound from the barn.

Bart sprinted towards them on a mission. "That is a great ugly beast," Grant said.

Any respect she had felt for him vanished.

"Bart!" Olivia cried out for her friend.

"No pets at the manor," Grant said, without a hint of kindness, before climbing the rest of the way in and slamming the carriage door shut on the frantic animal.

\*

Three days later and Olivia had yet to eat or speak. She feared that if she allowed herself to do anything more than sit and think she would begin to cry and would have no way of stopping it. On an average day, back before in her normal life, Olivia hated to cry. There hadn't been much point to it. In her present company though, she especially loathed it.

Grant—she refused to address him as Master Thatcher as he had instructed—had remedied the silence by speaking nearly non-stop. He'd told her all about where they were going and why. She couldn't, didn't want to believe most of it.

They'd spent the majority of the three days inside the carriage. Olivia had even slept inside of it. Grant had slept outside with the other men. The sun was beginning to set on day four and Olivia's bum was sore from the constant bumping of the carriage wheels over rocky terrain. In her head was an endless beat, a click clack rhythm that sounded even when the carriage had been called to a stop.

Above all the aches and pains though, Olivia was devastated from everything she had lost is the space of an inhale. She mourned for those things endlessly.

And, she was starving. Her hunger was only exacerbated by the smells that wafted in through the carriage door, from the campfire spit.

"Miss Fosterson, the deer is almost ready. And, can I say, the seasoned rub that Mr. Daniels here concocted elevates the meat to an upper echelon of flavor."

Olivia rolled her eyes. He was taunting her. Joking with her as if he had already forgiven his leading role in ripping her from everything she'd known: her parents, Bart, Lawrence...

Tears threatened to gather as she had feared and Olivia swallowed them down, concentrating on the burning contractions of pain radiating from her empty stomach.

"Please," he called loudly into the carriage, "Stay where you are. I really would hate for you to enjoy this lovely weather."

Her legs were stiff.

And, maybe if she went for a walk she could secretly eat some berries.

Olivia scooted towards the carriage exit. She took one step out and her leg refused to hold her weight. She hadn't noticed just how weak she'd become over the three days. The extent of her fatigue became clear quickly enough as she fell out of the carriage.

Grant cursed and caught her. He set her down roughly on a log. "Jesus, Olivia, don't make me regret my choice," he spat.

This was too much, the final insult. That he could take everything from her, and then regret it, broke down the last dam she'd constructed inside of herself. Her tears began to fall, as fast and as uncontrollably as she had feared they would.

She sobbed so loudly the birds erupted into the sky, frightened from their branches. The other men were kind and suddenly found other things to do as she wept, in the ugliest way imaginable with much snorting and not a small amount of slobber. Grant was not kind.

"Ugh, finally," he muttered loudly. "Cry it out, Olivia. Please, cry it out. But eat. You are no good to The Enlightened Hand if you are frail or dead. We want you for your spirit, I told you."

He had explained the trials. When it was time for a new Praetor to be chosen to govern The Enlightened Hand, the candidates were tasked with scouting the nations for the best females. Only the brightest, strongest and handsomest women were chosen. Those women were trained and put through a series of trials until finally a Praetora was chosen. It was then up to her to choose the next Praetor of The Enlightened Hand. That man would also end up being the Praetora's husband and they would lead together. It had all sounded very confusing and backwards to Olivia. Why should the woman choose?

She was hardly aware that Grant had moved closer to her and was now holding her chin as he gently fed her. Her sobs had run out of steam, quieting down to timid cries. She chewed through her remaining tears, not knowing what else to do. Grant had not been lying, the meat was delicious.

Once he had fed her what felt like her weight in food, he left her alone to weep and joined the other men who circled around a second fire. By the time they were all done eating, the sun had set and the only light came from the fires.

Olivia hated to admit how grateful she was to Grant for feeding her. Her own stubborn pride had refused to allow her body sustenance. But now, she felt better, stronger—strong enough to take a stand.

"You told me two days ago that no one is forced to take part in the trials," Olivia said with a voice that sounded like a frog's croak.

If Grant was surprised by her speaking, he didn't let it show. He merely turned from the men and walked towards her. "That is correct."

"Then, I want to..."

"You forget though, that first you must go through training, and training is not voluntary."

The wind in her sails dissipated, so much so that when she spoke again, it sounded very nearly like a child's whine. "I want to go, I don't want to train or take part in the trials, let me go home to my parents!"

"If only I could believe you, Olivia. You say you want to return home to your parents. But then, why did you show almost no emotion towards them when you left? The only time you let any feelings show was when that beast of an animal came loping towards us and when you had to leave your young lover in the barn.

"You say you want to return to your parents, and if that were the God's honest truth I might be tempted, but it isn't the complete truth. You want to return to that boy, that man-child who didn't have the guts to wed you already. You aren't too young. Plenty of women your age are already married and bearing children." He paused, but Olivia felt like it was mostly for dramatic effect. "You were chosen because of how special you are—how special you could potentially become. If I'm being all the way honest, at this moment, with your face gaunt and splotchy and your dress all wet from your blubbery tears, I can't picture a lot of that potential, but I would have to be a blind man to not have noticed already how comely and intelligent you could be."

He leaned closer so that his words were like pebbles thrown at her face. "If your little stable fling didn't have the balls to tie you down already then I will go as far as to say he doesn't deserve you. So, please, mourn him if you must, but never, ever ask to return back to his mediocrity, because I will not allow it. Trial or no trial."

Olivia had no control over the vicious words that flew from her mouth. They certainly weren't ladylike, nor were they smart or kind.

There was a moment before Grant stood over her, his bright green eyes mesmerizing, that she witnessed the other men literally cringing back and turning away into the forest.

Grant's tone was low and dangerous. "Not only is language like that unbecoming of a lady of The Enlightened Hand, it is unacceptable to use while addressing me or anyone else in this forest. You will apologize to me and you will apologize to yourself for bringing yourself low enough to let such a phrase pass through your pretty lips."

Olivia seethed. He had no right to tell her what she could and could not say. In all her years she had never struck a single thing in anger, living or not. But that didn't stop her hand from sailing through the air and slapping against Grant's cheek with a sound that resonated around them. He caught her slapping hand and held it in place against his face. Someone viewing them from the outside could've mistaken the moment for a tender embrace between two lovers.

In one, swift motion Grant sat down on the log. As he did, he held onto Olivia's elbow, guiding her body down so that she was laid across his lap with her bottom up in the air. He held her legs down with one of his own and pressed one of his hands in between her shoulder blades. The pressure was just enough to keep her still.

Despite the position she found herself in, Olivia felt as if there was nothing in the world that could force her to feel remorseful, nothing would make her feel contrite. She was not surprised when he landed the first spank against her upturned bottom. In the back of her mind she had kind of expected it. She remembered the moment over his shoulder, three days earlier, so when his solid hand had crashed against her butt cheeks she wasn't shocked, only angry.

His onslaught continued, spank after spank. She was fully dressed so the first few spanks had hurt, but in the same way accidentally falling in the snow hurt. Grant was relentless though, and as each blow landed, her cheeks started to burn until she hollered out loud. At first, her cries simply wanted to rebel and did so by spewing every bad word she could think of. It was good that her earlier cries had frightened the birds away, for now, each nasty syllable she uttered bounced off of the trees and brush and bounced back into her ears. Grant seemed unaffected by her rebellion, his hand did not quicken in its spanks, nor did it slow, it did not fall softer or harder, he simply continued, a firm, determined, steady rhythm.

If he had chosen any other type of punishment, any other test of her willpower, Olivia was certain she would've come out the victor. By now her bottom felt as if it was on fire, but that was nothing compared to the mortification she felt at her position. Her angry words transformed into cries for him to stop. After she promised everything she could think to promise and his hand still did not pause, she had little air left with which to scream, so she lay silently, frustrated tears streaming down her dusty face.

Once she'd grown silent, Grant stopped.

"You are a stubborn one," he murmured, lifting his hand from between her shoulders and releasing her leg. As she scrambled off of him, he assisted, settling her on her feet. "Your life with me does not need to be difficult, Olivia," he murmured.

In a different circumstance, she would've believed him.

The other men had vanished in all the commotion and she was very much alone in a dark forest with Grant. Illuminated by the campfire's light, Grant looked predatory. His startling green eyes shone and for a moment Olivia imagined him as something otherworldly, something from a story book. A cautionary tale.

Olivia was too tired to glare at him for long and on top of that, her bottom stung. She meant to turn away from him, to go where she had no idea, but she swayed, unsteady once again on her feet. As before, he was there to catch her, but this time he drew her uncomfortably close to his body. At least she wanted to claim it was uncomfortably close. In truth, his hard lines pressing against her soft curves was disconcerting and guilt inducing.

As was the way she fixated on his lips. His green eyes flashed with awareness and he brought his face closer. The desire on his face was clear, he was going to kiss her, so why wasn't she pushing him away?

A bellowing bark shattered the spell that had been cast on her by his lips. Olivia jerked back, the sound instantly familiar. It was also coming closer.

"Bart!" Her great hound came loping out of the trees looking a little worse for wear but absolutely ecstatic at the sight of her. "How are you here?" She fell to her knees as Bart leapt to her. With one massive paw on each of her shoulders, he licked her face.

Grant made a disgusted noise.

Olivia was too busy noticing Bart's bloody paws though. He must have tracked her nearly nonstop the entire way. Her own exhaustion vanished in the face of her injured friend. She pushed the dog down into a sitting position and grabbed a branch that was large enough to act as a torch.

"What are you doing?" To his credit, he sounded more curious than anything else.

"I need water and garlic," she responded, already on her way through the thick, dark trees.

"For a soup?"

Olivia paused long enough to look back at Grant with an expression that clearly said what she thought of his question. She thought he might not be able to see her face through the night, but his warning glare was proof that he had.

"No," she said crisply. "For his paws, they are wounded and I don't want him getting an infection. I can't trust that there will be any medicinal herbs at the manor, who knows what you do to your injured."

"Olivia." He caught up with her, reached as if to grab her elbow and then thought better of it. "He can't come. I'm damned impressed that the mutt tracked you down all this way, but you can't keep a pet at the manor. And this isn't negotiable."

She didn't stop scanning the brush for little white flowers. "He can come."

"Please tell me why you sound so sure of yourself."

*Because I need him to. Because he was my first, and now my only, friend.*

"Because while you were speaking, I was listening. You were tasked with bringing back all the outstanding and admirable young women that you could. Yet, you haven't told me about any of the other girls and there are no others here with us."

His face was unreadable.

"So, what I am guessing is that you pulled a risky move and put all your eggs in one basket, so to speak. My basket."

He glowered.

"Furthermore, judging from the amount of supplies we have left, we are either very nearly there, or you intend for us to starve. Simply put, I don't think you have the time to locate a second amazingly capable young woman such as myself and you will have to, if you don't let me bring Bart with us now, in the carriage."

She wasn't sure what to expect from him. He had his face turned away from the flames so that she could only see half of him, but the half she did see appraised her.

"Fine, he can come with us the rest of the way, but you will get no help from me once we get there in trying to persuade the Praetor to let him stay."

"I never expected any," she said, returning to her search, but not before she saw a flash of something that looked like sadness darken his features.

\*

Their carriage arrived at the manor the following afternoon. Olivia tried not to look too smug, she had been right though, they had been very nearly there.

The carriage rolled down a cobbled lane, manicured lawns on either side. Despite the fact that he was nearly twice the size of her lap, Bart was curled on her legs, refusing to move. Olivia



would've been frozen in her seat anyway. Her home at the outskirts of her small village was modest. Her father had built it for her mother. It was dark and at times a little drafty, but it had been home.

Her small home could not have been more different than the sprawling country mansion that they now approached. Hundreds of windows reflected the afternoon sun, making the mansion look like it was glowing, or on fire. There was what looked like a garden maze on the left of the mansion that met the forest and a veranda on the right that sat upon a hill that sloped gently downward. It was picturesque and beautiful, but mostly intimidating.

"Welcome, to the manor," Grant said. He eyed her from the other side of the carriage. He looked tired and his dark hair was ruffled, his eyes were wary, worried.

The carriage had stopped directly in front of a set of very tall wooden doors that were painted solid red. They were ornately carved with flowers and vines in the center and at the top of each was the carving of a sun, its rays curling out. The beautiful doors opened and everything seemed to happen very quickly. Servants poured out, silently whisking away the men's luggage.

Grant walked away, leaving her without a backwards glance. She started towards him, but stopped. If he was so eager to go, he could go. She was anxious at seeing her only familiar face disappear through the doors. Without him by her side, she felt entirely alone.

The servants approached her; their eyebrows rose for the shortest of moments as they caught sight of Bart. Their faces returned to their more passive expressions as they led her out of the carriage. No one introduced themselves so Olivia stayed silent, keeping her hand on Bart at all times, lest they tried to take him from her, rendering her truly alone.

Directly through the double doors was a very large foyer. Ahead, was another set of carved doors, these glittered with bits of precious metal that had been woven into the carvings. The servants took her to the right, up a wide staircase. On the next floor they led her down a quiet corridor with doors on either side. Nearly at the end of the hallway they took her inside a bedroom that she assumed was to be her room. They left her, shutting the door behind them.

It was a modest room in comparison to the rest of the house, but huge compared to her home. There was a stone fireplace directly across from a four-poster, canopy bed. A fire had been lit inside and kept most of the chill out. Directly ahead was a window that looked out onto the veranda she'd seen on their approach. Now, she could see that the hill led down to a wide, rushing river.

Olivia remained frozen, clutching Bart, in the middle of the room for a long time. Eventually, her hand tired and she sat down on the floor. It was hard stone but there was a large tapestry that offered her some comfort. Bart sat splayed across her lap.

This was how she remained until her door finally did open an hour later. A stern looking man strode in, without knocking, and stopped a few feet from her. He had a scholar's build and very perfect posture. His salt and pepper hair was thick and matched his goatee. What struck Olivia was just how familiar he looked. Like it was a face she'd seen before. She scrambled to her feet and Bart cowered behind her letting out a pitiful whimper. That did not bode well.

He had the most peculiar expression. He spent longer than was polite simply staring at her. Then he cleared his throat. "I was ready to believe that Master Thatcher was embellishing the story, but no. It really is a great, hulking, ugly beast." He had a voice like distant thunder.

"As if he is so amazing," she mumbled.

The man's eyes flashed first with amusement and then disapproval.

"He wasn't lying about you either. Beautiful and unpolished."

He'd called her unpolished!

"Uh, er, thank you."

"You realize that wasn't all complimentary."

Olivia felt almost as if he was teasing her. She didn't respond.

"My name is Praetor Kingsley leader of The Enlightened Hand. You may address me as Praetor Kingsley until such a time when I no longer hold that title, which is why you are here. Did Master Thatcher do an adequate job explaining to you the nature of what we are? I understand there are many rumors out there in the world about us."

"The Enlightened Hand—apparently not just a cautionary tale." She'd meant to say that to herself, but the words had slipped out.

"Not the slogan we use, but apt."

"You are a type of watchdog society that claims to keep an ear to the ground. Whenever a lord or lady grows too big for their britches, The Enlightened Hand steps in and cuts them down, so to speak."

Praetor Kingsley looked almost like he was about to laugh. "So to speak."

Olivia continued, she felt like if she impressed this man, it may help her chances of keeping Bart. "Whenever the time comes for the current Praetor to step down, a pool of potential candidates

is sent out into the world to secure a flock of female tributes to take part in the training and trials. Whoever comes from those trials the victor is made Praetora and given the monumental task of choosing a husband and new Praetor of The Enlightened Hand from the available candidates."

"You certainly do sound knowledgeable."

"I am unclear on one aspect though. Why the long process of choosing? Why not simply vote the next leader or pass it down by birth?"

"Do you believe blood is a reliable indicator of a man's ability to govern? Of a woman's ability to thrive?" He didn't ask the question like she was a child being reprimanded, but like she was a student.

"No, I don't believe that. But it does seem rash to leave such an important decision up to a woman's fancy."

Praetor Kingsley laughed. Olivia liked the sound, booming but comfortable.

"The Enlightened Hand relies heavily on this ancient process. If a Praetora were unable to be chosen in this matter it could mean doom for The Enlightened Hand. And, if we were speaking about the average young woman, perhaps you would be right. But you are a chosen one, Miss Olivia, as are the other tributes who have already arrived and occupy all those rooms you walked by to get here. You were all chosen because you are undoubtedly the cream that has risen to the top. Over the next five years, you will become even more so, learning everything from the arts to bow hunting. Many of the tributes will not pass training and will be sent home. In five years' time those of you that remain will force us to make a very hard choice."

The wild river outside her window rushed through her head. "Five years?" She almost couldn't form the words. Grant had never said five years. She'd assumed she would arrive, fail the trials and then get to go home, maybe a year would've passed.

What would become of her parents in five years' time? How could she expect Lawrence to wait for her?

"I see Master Thatcher failed to mention the length of the training process."

She nodded numbly.

"Did he also forget to mention we do not allow pets?"

Bart whined and slunk further behind Olivia's legs as if he had been listening to the conversation and sensed the topic had turned on to him.

"Can't we just go home?" Olivia asked, hating how timid she sounded as tears threatened to roll down her cheeks. "Gr--Master Thatcher said that no one is forced through the trials."

Praetor Kingsley sighed, he looked almost like he pitied her. "And that is true. No one is forced through the trials. The training, however, is a different matter. You are Master Thatcher's only tribute. The other candidates have fifteen or so each. One of them could leave now if they wanted to. But ritual demands that Master Thatcher have at least one. Miss Olivia, you must complete at least the training. Enlightened Hand law demands it."

She wanted to howl, to wail like Bart did on nights when the moon was full. She couldn't be stuck here alone. "He is an excellent guard dog," she insisted. "Not a night since I acquired him have I felt unsafe."

Praetor Kingsley looked down at Bart with one eyebrow raised. "Really?" he asked with no small amount of sarcasm.

"His hunting skills are unsurpassed. The hound managed to track me over the course of days through the middle of the woods."

"That is impressive, but more a sign of the dog's fondness for you than as a master of his ability."

"He makes me happy," she said, knowing she was grasping at straws.

"And why should that matter to me?" he asked, not in a rude way.

"He isn't a pet," she blurted.

Praetor Kingsley looked very bored when he asked, "What is he?"

"He is a working animal. The rule is no pets, he isn't one. He grew up on a farm. He can help around the manor."

He smiled and she felt hope. "You are very clever. Fine then, show me what he can do."

"What?"

"A command. If he is a working animal. Ask him to sit, stand, lay down, anything."

She turned to Bart, all of her worry and fear was in her eyes and she saw it mirrored in his soulful stare. "Bart, sit."

He stood there.

"Bart, please, just sit. Sit. Sit!" He wagged his tail pitifully as a dark haired, imposing man entered.

"Master Foster," Praetor Kingsley said, "please take this pet to Master Thatcher's room. He allowed the animal in and he will be required to deal with it directly. Also, ask him to join me here."

Olivia growled as Praetor Kingsley moved to hold her arms down. It was a preemptive maneuver on his part, as if knowing she would put up a fight.

She did. Her screams felt like they tore holes in her throat. She reached out for her poor dog. In her ear she heard Praetor Kingsley say apologetically, "Rules are rules, Miss Olivia. They are there for a reason. You tried your case and should be proud of yourself. Take comfort in that."

Olivia reached down and grabbed the softest part of Praetor Kingsley that she could clench her fingers around. It also happened to be a man's most precious part. She squeezed as hard as she could. It was while Olivia was in the process of wrenching at the Praetor's genitals that Grant arrived. His eyes widened at the sight before him.

"Olivia! No!" he scolded.

Praetor Kingsley made a strangled noise. Olivia released him and he buckled to the floor. Guards rushed in and carried him away. Other guards approached her, but Grant moved in front of her, shielding her from them. "I'll take care of this," he growled to the guards. "She is my only tribute; you may not take her."

That was all he needed to say, the guards turned and filed out of the room. Olivia nearly wished they had taken her.

"Olivia, stand by the window. Now!" Grant barked.

He sounded so angry her feet moved to obey him before she'd told them to. He left for a minute and when he returned he was no less angry. "The Praetor is going to be okay. How could you?" he asked, fury radiated off of every syllable. "You are my one tribute and how do you prove your worth? You assault the leader of The Enlightened Hand within your first two hours of being here."

"But..."

"No, you do not get to speak. You've experienced only a fraction of The Enlightened Hand's discipline. You will come to realize that while good deeds are rewarded, misbehavior is punished. Turn around."

Olivia did as she was told. She locked her gaze on the river, feeling as if it mirrored back her own wild, uncontrollable feelings. She heard a rustling from behind her but did not bother to

look, she would not give him the satisfaction. She heard something whoosh through the air and then smack with a crack against her bottom. The pain blossomed, shooting up her spine. She locked the cry of pain behind clenched teeth. She caught sight of the instrument he used to punish her. She might've laughed, it was so ironic, but if she opened her mouth there was no way she could hold back her cry of pain. His belt sailed through the air and smacked against her bottom. She viciously bit her bottom lip.

Olivia watched the water, resolved. Grant could give her these lashings. She would take this punishment and the next and the next and then she would do whatever it took to make The Enlightened Hand pay.