

## What does that mean?

"Mirabelle"

There is a mournful pause while the truth at last sinks in. "The Goddess Almighty, you're ruined, and you didn't even eat the gingerbread," my aunt says, nally. "What's more, just displaying your waistline to its best advantage would be no help at this point. People would simply assume that you had, as one might say, taken care of the problem."

"After the prince refused to marry her," my father says heavily. "I would assume it myself, under the circumstances."

"It's unfair," I say ercely. "With Mama's... ah... reputation, people naturally expect that I might be rather iratious..."

"That's an understatement," my father replies. "They think you will be a baggage, and now they know you're one. Except you're not."

"It's the beauty," my aunt says, preening a little. "The she-wolves in my family are simply cursed by our beauty. Look at dear Rosalyn, dying so young."

"I don't see that it's cursed you," my father says, rather rudely.

"Oh, but it has," Zenobia insists. "It has, it has, it has. It taught me what could have been, had I not had the chains of birth holding me back. I could have graced the world's stages, you know. Rosalyn too. I expect that's why she was so..."

"So what?" My father interjects, leaping on it.

"Irresistible," Zenobia says.

My father snorts. "Impure, more like."

"She knew that she could have married the nest in the land," Zenobia says. "And you see, that same dream caught our darling Mirabelle in its coils and now she is ruined."

"Rosalyn could not have married the nest in the land," my father says. "There's a reason for the Royal Marriage Laws, you know." He points a nger at me. "Didn't you even think of that before you created such a scandal with the young prince? For Christ's sake, everyone knows that he went and married a German she-wolf a few years ago. In Rome, I believe. The lycan king himself had to get involved and annul the marriage."

"I didn't know until yesterday," I say. "When the prince told me so."

"No one tells young she-wolves that sort of thing," my aunt says dismissively. "If you were so worried about her, Cornelius, why didn't you trot around to those parties and watch over her yourself?"

"Because I was busy! And I found a she-wolf to chaperone her, since you were too lazy to do it yourself. Mrs. Hutchins. Perfectly respectable in every way, and seemed to grasp the problem, too. Where is that she-wolf? She assured me that she would keep your name as white as the driven snow."

I sigh, "She refused to come downstairs."

"Afraid to face the music," he mutters. "And where's your governess? She is another one. I told her and told her that you had to be twice as chaste to make up for your mother's reputation."

I shake my head, "Mrs. Flaxen took offense last night when you said she was a limb of Satan and accused her of turning me into a doxy."

"I had a spot or two of drink," my father says, looking utterly unrepentant. "I drowned my sorrows after I was told to my face... to my face! that my only daughter had been debauched."

"She left about an hour later," I continue. "And I doubt she is coming back, because Tinkle says that she took a great deal of gold with her."

"The gold is irrelevant," Zenobia says. "You should never make the best servants angry, because they invariably know where all the valuables are kept. Far more important, I expect your governess knew all about any billets-doux that the royal twig might have sent you?"

I shake my head, "He didn't write me any love letters, if that's what you mean. But early one morning about a month ago he did throw strawberries at my bedchamber window. She and Mrs. Hutchins said at the time that we mustn't let anyone know."

"And now Flaxen is out telling the world about it," my aunt announces. "You really are a fool, Cornelius. You should have paid her ve hundred pounds on the spot and shipped her off to Suffolk. Now Flaxen is out there turning one strawberry into a whole eld. She will have Mirabelle carrying twins."

I think my governess would likely leap at the chance. We have never really liked each other. In truth, she-wolves rarely like me. From the moment I debuted four months ago, the other debutants clustered into groups and giggled behind their hands. But no one ever lets me in on the joke.

Zenobia reaches out and rings the bell. "I can't think why you haven't offered me any tea, Cornelius. Mirabelle's life may have taken a new corner, but we still have to eat."

"I'm ruined, and you want tea?" my father moans.

Tinkle opens the door so quickly that I know he has been listening in, not that I'm surprised.

"We will have tea and something to eat along with it," Zenobia tells him. "You have better bring along something to reduce swelling as well."

The butler frowns.

"Cucumbers, vinegar, something of that nature," she says impatiently. When he closes the door, she waves at my bosom. "We must do something about that. No one would describe you as plump, my dear, but you are not exactly a wraith either, are you?"

I count to ve again. "My gure is exactly like my mother's. And yours."

"Satan's temptation," my father says morosely. "It isn't seemly so uncovered."

"No such luck," I say. "I got a prince, but the king of darkness never made an appearance."

"The prince couldn't be even a minor devil," my aunt says consideringly. "I'm not surprised he didn't manage to seduce you, now I think on it. He's a bit of a nincompoop."

"There shouldn't be styles that make a young she-wolves look like a matron with a babe on the way," my father states. "If there is, I don't want a part of it. That is, I wouldn't want a part of it if I were the type to wear dresses. That is, if I were a she-wolf."

"You're getting more foolish every year," Zenobia observes. "Why my sister ever agreed to marry you, I will never know."

"Mama loved Papa," I say as rmy as I can. I have fastened on to that fact years ago, in the aftermath of a confusing evening when I had encountered my mother with another gentleman in an intimate setting, engaged in a very intimate activity.

'I love your father,' my mother had told me at the time. 'But darling, love is just not enough for she-wolves such as myself. I must have adoration, verses, poetry, owers, jewels... not to mention the fact that François is built like a god and hung like a horse.'

I had blinked at her, and she had said, 'Never mind, darling, I will explain it all later, when you're a bit older.'

She never got around to it, but I somehow managed to garner enough information to interpret what had caught my mother's attention with regards to François.

Now my father's eyes icker toward me. "Rosalyn loved me the way the prince loves you. In short: not enough."

"For goodness' sake," Zenobia cries. "This is enough to send me into the Slough of Despond! Let poor Rosalyn rest in her grave, would you? You make me rue the day she decided to accept your hand."

"It's brought it all back to mind," my father says heavily. "Mirabelle takes after her mother; anyone can see that."

"That's quite unfair," I say, scowling at him. "I have been a model of chastity this season. In fact, through my entire life!"

He frowns. "It's just that there is something about you..."

"You look naughty," my aunt says, not unkindly. "The Goddess help Rosalyn, but this is all her fault. She gave it to you. That dimple, and something in your eyes and about your mouth. You look like a wanton."

"A wanton would have had a great deal more fun this season than I had," I protest. "I have been as demure as any young she-wolf having her rst mating season... you can ask Mrs. Hutchins."

"It does seem unfair," Zenobia agrees. A golden drop of honey suspended itself from her crumpet and swings gently before falling onto the pale violet silk of her morning dress.

"I hope that you told the Luna that I was never alone with the prince at any point," I say.

"How could I do that?" Zenobia inquires. "I'm not privy to your social calendar, my dear. I was as shocked as the dear Luna, I can tell you that."

I groan. "I could strip naked in the street, and still no one would believe that I wasn't carrying a child, no matter how slim my waist. I'm quite sure that She is saying wretched things about me all over London. I truly will have to live abroad, or in the country somewhere."

"French men are very easy to please, though there is that inconvenient civil war going on," Zenobia says encouragingly. "But I have got another idea."

I can't bring myself to ask, but my father asks wearily, "What is it?"

"Not it... him." She says.

"Who?" He asks.

She smiles, "young Silverhowl."

"Young Silverhowl? Who the devil's that? Do you mean Alpha Silverhowl... Llewellyn Silverhowl's heir? Because if his son is anything like his father, I wouldn't let Mirabelle near him, even if she were carrying a child." My father huffs.

"Very kind of you, Papa," I murmur, helping myself to a crumpet since my aunt has not offered me one.

"Reducing, my dear. Think about reducing," Zenobia says in a kindly yet rm tone.

I tighten my mouth and put extra butter on my crumpet.

My aunt sighs. "Yes that one, Cornelius. Really, I wonder how you manage to make your way around the House of Alphas, with your spotty knowledge of the high packs."

"I know what I need to know," my father says. "And I don't bother with that I don't need. If you meant him, why didn't you just say so?"

"I was thinking of his son," Zenobia explains. "The man's got the beta title, of course. Now let me think... I do believe that his given name is something odd. Reason, Ryson... Rhys, that's it."

"He sounds like a Wales harbor town," my father puts in.

"Mrs. Hutchins called me a light frigate this morning," I say. "A harbor might be just the thing for me."

Zenobia shakes her head. "That's just the kind of remark that got you in this situation, Mirabelle. I have told you time and again, all that cleverness does you no good. People would like a she-wolf to be beautiful, but they expect her to be ladylike, in short: sweet, compliant, and rened."

"And yet you are universally taken for a lady," I retort.

"I am married," Zenobia says. "Or I was, until my dear mate passed on. I don't need to show sweetness and light. You do. You have better polish up some ladylike chatter before you get to Wales to meet Young Silverhowl. I have never met him, of course."

"Neither have I," my father says. "Are you trying to match Mirabelle off with a green pup, Zenobia? It will never work."

My aunt shakes her head, "He's no pup. He must be over thirty. Thirty-ve at least. Surely you remember the story, Cornelius?"

"I pay no attention to stories," my father says testily. "It was the only way to survive under the same roof with your sister."

"You need to do a treatment to clean out your spleen," Zenobia says, putting down her crumpet. "You are letting bile ferment in your system, Cornelius, and it's a very powerful emotion. Rosalyn is dead. Let her be dead, if you please!"

I decide it's time to speak. "Aunt Zenobia, why would you think that the Alpha would be interested in matching me with his son? If indeed that's what you were thinking?"

"He is desperate," my aunt says. "Heard it from Luna. Nemble, and she is bosom friends with Lusa Gryme, and you know that her mate is Silverhowl's half brother."

"No, I don't know," Papa says. "And I don't care either. Why is Silverhowl desperate? Is his son simpleminded? I can't recall seeing any sons around any of the clubs."

"Not simpleminded," Zenobia says triumphantly. "Even better!"

There's a moment of silence as both I and my father think about what that could mean.

"He hasn't got what it takes," my aunt claries.

"He hasn't?" My father asks blankly.

"Minus a digit," Zenobia adds.

"A nger?" I venture.

"For goodness' sake," Zenobia says, licking a bit of honey off one nger. "I always have to spell everything out in this house. The man suffered an accident as a young man. He walks with a cane. And that accident left him impotent, to call a stone a stone. No heir now, and none in the future either."

"In fact, in this particular case," my father says with distinct satisfaction, "a stone isn't a stone."

"Impotent?" I ask. "What does that mean?"