

## Chapter 24

Ivy

I haven't seen Abbie since she told me her mate wants her to leave with him. She spends all her time with him, which doesn't bother me. Besides, I am happy for her. If it couldn't be both of us, I'm glad one of us found a loving mate. But I know she is anxious about the king not letting her leave.

However, the king is acting strangely, too. Every night, I wake to find the king in my room asleep, only for him to be gone when I wake up in the morning.

At first, I thought I was going crazy. The king is here at random hours during the night; I always wake to his scent. Then, by morning, it's like he was never here at all. His coming and going is making it harder. If he doesn't want me, he needs to just leave me be. It's selfish of him to keep putting me through this agony.

His coming and going is driving me insane.

He never says anything; just stares if I catch him and accidentally wake him, or he ignores me completely. My heart tugs painfully for those two nights. I don't know what he wants, but it's clear he doesn't want me. But as his scent settles in the room each night, it feels like being rejected all over again. I start praying Abbie can convince her mate to let me join because I can't live like this.

The breeze is cool as the day slows down, and all the servants prepare for dinner and end-of-day tasks. Tugging the white sheets from the clothesline with Abbie, we fold them, bringing the corners together and placing them in the basket. Our interactions have been flat out most of the day, and she has been quiet for most of it. I know she is itching to tell me something because she has tried a few times, but then she falls quiet because someone is always around.

A guard, another servant, so amongst the blowing winds and the flapping sheets, she moves closer to me before reaching over and dropping something into the front pocket of my apron.

I glance down before putting my hand in the pocket and feeling around for what it is. My fingertips brush something cool and metal, and I twist my wrist in the oversized pocket and look at what it is. It's a watch.

“When the big hand is on the twelve and the little one on the seven, I am leaving,” she whispers, and I stare at her, scared. She chews her lip before glancing around nervously. Then she reaches into her shirt and produces a small key from her bra. She drops it in my pocket.

“I stole the key from Gannon; it’s for the laundry door,” she whispers, nodding to the one we just came out of. Behind the kitchens, it runs alongside the far gardens where the fruit trees meet the forest.

“Run along the river and head west. Keep going, and you will find a bridge. Meet us at the bridge. He said he will help me get you out. Be there at 7 PM sharp,” she whispers, and I nod, pulling another sheet down from the clothesline. My lips quirk in the corners.

“You convinced him,” I smile, my heart leaping inside my chest.

“Yes, but he said if you’re late, we can’t wait. He said he doesn’t want to be caught waiting outside the town limits,” she tells me, and I nod. Gazing at the sky, the clouds are moving in dark and heavy, and it’s going to be one hell of a storm when it hits. I just hope I won’t get caught in it.

“And you’re sure he won’t tell on me?”

“He promised me,” she whispers before reaching over and gripping my arm. “We will be free, just not the freedom we used to long for, but actual freedom, freedom to live,” she whispers, with tears in her eyes. “Always and forever.”

“More than my life,” I say in return.

“More than my life, always more,” she repeats. We finish dragging the clothes in off the line and walk back through the laundry doors when Abbie shrieks. I turn to look back at her as she rubs a spot on her back and growls. Laughter reaches my ears, and Abbie turns to see a rotten apple splattered against her back.

“Peter, you little shit,” Abbie hisses, dropping her basket and chasing after him, picking up rotten apples that had fallen beneath the trees. Peter, the stable boy, always finds a way to cause mischief and get away with it. I watch his mop of curly hair bounce up and down as he runs off, dodging Abbie’s advances.

Abbie shrieks when he pelts another her way. She lobs one back, and I laugh at her trying to hit him with the apples while her shrill cries and his laughter fill the silence.

Abbie retrieves another apple and tosses it where he goes to dart behind the castle wall just as Dustin walks around. The mushy apple smacks him in the face, and he freezes on the spot, stunned for a second before wiping the mush off.

Abbie snickers, trying to muffle her laughter at hitting the guard. Peter hides behind him before popping his head out and sticking his tongue out at Abbie. Dustin wipes the mushy apple off his clothes, growling. I laugh at the sight of bits of apples sticking to his crisp, clean uniform, and a chunk stuck in his stubble.

Dustin's eyes go to Abbie, and she points at me; my eyes widen, and I shake my head, but he looks ridiculous with apple mush stuck to his face, and I chuckle. He raises an eyebrow at me.

"You think this is funny, My Queen?" he asks, a hint of a smile on his lips. I snicker before stopping when he walks over to the apple tree, making Abbie squeal and rush toward me before using me as a shield. Dustin picks up a gross-looking apple that's nearly crumbling in his hand.

Dustin tosses the apple in the air a couple of times, letting it mush up more before he laughs and throws it. I shriek and duck, falling on top of Abbie, only to hear him gasp, and Peter burst out laughing, holding his tummy and pointing behind us. Abbie and I look behind us to see Clarice covered in the rotted mush.

We both tense, waiting for the scolding as she steps closer, examining her soiled apron.

She looks back up, and her eyes go to us on the ground. Abbie and I both point to Dustin standing by the apple tree with Peter. We glance in their direction to find Dustin pointing the blame at Peter.

Clarice glares, and we all freeze in place as the old woman stalks toward us before ripping her apron off. “Apple war it is, then,” she huffs, a look of wild excitement on her face. Then she runs over and scoops up some apples. Abbie and I giggle before jumping up and joining the fray.