

Chapter Seven

I slept for fourteen hours. Straight through the night. I woke early the next morning feeling almost back to my old normal self. The IV had been removed, a Band-Aid placed on the inside of my elbow.

I was thirsty when I woke up. There was a glass of water next to my bed and I managed to pull myself into a sitting position. I took a delicate sip. At first, my dry throat burned from the drink, but soon the water was soothing and I drank the whole glass.

There was a bell and a note in Anton's slanting handwriting telling me to ring it when I woke up. But the thought of ringing a bell for help seemed too absurd and rude. Anton had taken me in and saved my life, I wasn't going to treat him like a servant. I pulled the covers off of my legs. I was wearing a hospital gown and a pair of thick socks.

I stepped out of the bed and onto the floor. My legs were shaky and I was unsure on them. Leaning against whatever I could find, chairs, a desk or the wall, I made my way to the window.

The world was covered in white. It blanketed the ground, it hung from trees, it covered the driveway. I could see a raised portion of the snow and I figured there must have been a car buried in there. The world was silent, the snow muffling any sounds.

This was the Lev mansion. It was located next to a large lake on a huge piece of property. I had only seen it from afar. A large, modern looking mansion surrounded by a tall wrought iron gate. It was strange to see it from the inside. I had to re-orient myself.

Everything I touched was perfect. The desk was made of a hard wood with intricately carved drawers. The paintings were all excellent, hung on the walls in gold frames. The bed had a series of lion heads carved into the headboard. They roared, their mouths open, their manes shown in great detail, each tooth was carved to perfection.

I stretched, raising my arms above my head and standing on my tiptoes. I moved my head from side to side and then I heard footsteps on the stairs. I hurried back to bed and pulled the covers around me, finishing just as Anton knocked twice on the door.

"Come in," I called out, my voice clearer than it had been before.

“You’re awake,” he said as he entered. He held a tray in his arms. There were orange juice, fruit and a covered plate. He moved with a stately elegance, even holding a tray of food he still looked like a king, or maybe czar would have been the better word. “Are you hungry?”

I nodded. I was hungry. My stomach felt empty. He found a stand, placed it on the bed and put the tray on top of it. He lifted the lid off the plate revealing steaming scrambled eggs, toast and bacon. It looked beautiful and smelled even better. My stomach growled loud enough for him to hear.

“Go ahead,” he said nodding to the food.

“What about you?” I asked as I pulled the food closer.

“I ate already,” he said. He sat down in the stiff chair and faced me.

I felt very self-conscious under his gaze. But I was too hungry to ignore the food in front of me. I dug into the eggs and toast, relishing every bite. But my stomach had shrunk in the last few weeks and after just a few bites, I was full.

“You need to eat more than that,” he said. “You need your strength.”

“Oh, I’m trying to get down to a size zero,” I joked, but he just shook his head.

“You’re a beautiful woman, don’t try and change yourself. You should look like a woman.

I looked away. I had only very recently come to appreciate my curves. Growing up my father had told me that men don’t date fat women. He was always judging my food choices, asking me if I was really going to eat that. I let my stomach settle and then went back for more. Taking a few more bites.

“So, this is your house?” I asked.

He nodded, “It’s been in the family for generations.”

“It’s lovely.”

“When you’re feeling better I’ll give you a tour,” he said. “Although you won’t be able to see the grounds. There’s about three feet of snow out there. You’ll have to wait until summer to see the rest.”

“The bookstore!” I cried, sitting up. “I forgot about it.”

“It’s alright,” he said with a calm shake of his head. “I called Sarah and Harold and told them you were sick. They understand. Besides, with all this snow, no one’s going anywhere, anytime soon.”

I should have felt nervous or uneasy. I was in a strange man’s house. No one knew I was here. But I didn’t feel scared. I felt safe and protected.

“I can see why people think you breed lions,” I said motioning to the headboard.

“It’s the family name,” he said. “My family came from Russia. We were noblemen, lords, property owners. At one point some grandfather watched over thousands of serfs. My family were good lords, they looked after their people well. They protected them. But the revolution was a madness and my great-grandparents were forced to flee. We’ve lived in Williamstown ever since. I teach at the University of Maine, ancient Greek history. Although, at the moment, I’m on sabbatical.”

I nodded and reached for the glass of orange juice. I was terribly thirsty and my dry throat was crying for something to drink.

“Now is the point in the conversation where you tell me where you’re from. What your history is. How you ended up in that abandoned office building.”

“I just drift from place to place,” I said, avoiding his eyes. “I always have.”

“You’re lying,” he said. There was a long pause where he waited for me to speak, but my tongue was glued to the roof of my mouth. I couldn’t say anything. “You are too pretty to be a drifter. Your skin is clear and your teeth are perfect.

You aren’t addicted to anything. I think something happened and you ran away. Will you tell me what it was?”

“It was nothing like that,” I said, my voice a quiet whisper. “I just ran out of money in this town.”

“And you didn’t have anyone you could call?” He asked.

I shook my head. Tears were forming in my eyes. I didn’t want to cry in front of this man. I already looked so weak in front of him. I couldn’t stand to fall any further.

“No,” I said. “There was no one for me to call.”

“I’m very sorry. It’s hard to be all alone in this world. I have my family, my sisters and my father. I couldn’t imagine a world where I didn’t have anyone to lean on. It seems like it would be a very hard life.”

“I get by,” I said.

“You almost died of fever in an abandoned building in the middle of a blizzard. That doesn’t exactly sound like getting by.”

“The only reason I was sick is because your illegal breeding animal trapped me in a barn overnight.”

“You were trespassing,” he reminded me. “Not that what happened is any of your fault.”

“So you are breeding lions?” I asked.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head. “I promise you, I am not breeding lions. I would never do such a thing.”

“So where did it come from?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he finally said.

A yawn surprised me and a sudden tiredness came over me. “You should get some rest,” Anton said. “You are welcome to stay here as long as you would like. I’m happy for the company. There’s a bathroom through that door and please let me know if you need anything. All of the staff were sent home due to the storm, so it’s just you and I. But I can help you with anything and we can call the doctor back if we need him.”

I nodded, but already I was sinking back into the soft and warm bed. Anton took the tray away and I watched his tall form as it moved through the doorway.

Chapter Eight

By the next day, I could get out of bed easily enough and even manage to keep my eyes open for more than a few minutes at a time. The world was still covered in snow and silent. Anton and I were still isolated in his mansion.

He had washed the clothes I had been wearing the other day. I dressed in my baggy jeans and found t-shirts, smelling clean. It was early, but I wanted to move around. I was tired of lying in bed all day.

I opened my door a crack and looked out into the hallway. The house was huge, ornate and silent. The floors were made of a shining wood with soft red carpets interspaced. There were delicate end tables and huge portraits. It was like no place I had ever seen before. It was so rich and fancy, I felt terribly out of place.

I tiptoed down the hallway stopping to admire the portraits. Some were massive, taking up an entire section of the wall, others were small enough to be held in my hand. I could see Anton's likeness in them. His eyes, his nose, his chin, they appeared on the portraits on the wall. His family line stretched back for generations.

I came across a stairwell and went down to the first floor. There was a grand entryway and I walked down around the stairs and towards a grand library. The room was cavernous, books lined the walls all the way up to the second floor. There was a huge fireplace with a roaring fire and Anton was sitting in a chair in front of it.

"Hi," I said from the doorway.

"Hello, please come in," he said without lifting his head. My arrival hadn't startled him. He must have heard me coming. I walked into the library feeling very small around all of the tall shelves of books.

I sat down in the chair opposite Anton and looked over at him. He marked his page in his book and then set it to the side.

"Tea?" He asked. There was a beautiful porcelain tea set next to him. I nodded and he poured me a cup and handed it over.

"Um...I wanted to thank you for saving me. I just realized I hadn't done that yet. I probably would have died if you hadn't come," I said, sheepishly. He didn't say anything. "But I was thinking I should probably get out of your hair."

“Why do you think you’re in my hair?” He asked. “I enjoy having you here and you can’t leave. You’re feeling better, but you’re definitely still sick. You had a fever of one hundred and four degrees the other day. Had it risen any higher and I would have taken you to the hospital. You still need your rest.”

“I don’t want to be a burden,” I said.

“You aren’t a burden,” he replied. “Besides, where would you go? Back to the office building? You almost died there. You can’t stay there. That building has no running water, electricity or heat. We’re not even halfway through winter. This won’t be the last of the snow or the cold and since you don’t have anyone to call, why don’t you stay here? There’s plenty of room.”

I thought it would be uncomfortable to be in a stranger’s house, but it was such a big house with so much interesting stuff to look at, that it was impossible to be bored. Anton gave me a tour. He showed me the library and his mother’s collection of first editions: Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, letters from Mark Twain. They rested behind a pane of thick glass.

“Do you want to look closer?” Anton asked me. But I shook my head. They were too valuable, too nice. I didn’t want to tarnish them with my dirty fingers.

He led me to the formal sitting room filled with high-backed comfortable chairs, elegant antique side tables, fireplaces and decorated fire screens.

I giggled and he looked over at me. ‘What?’ He asked.

“Well, good sir,” I replied. “This is a terribly fancy room. I feel rather underdressed,” I said pointing to my oversized jeans and baggy t-shirt.

“You look fine,” he said. “You should buy some more clothes. You can order them online, I’ll pay for them-”

“You don’t have to buy me clothes,” I interrupted.

“I know that I don’t have to, but I would like to. You can’t keep wearing the same thing.”

He offered me anything from his sister’s closet, but I only shook my head, telling him that he should never offer to give a woman’s clothes away without her permission. Her clothes wouldn’t fit me anyway. She was a solid foot taller and about twenty pounds lighter than me. She was one of those willowy girls that always made me feel rather squat.

He waved his hand in front of his face and said, “she’ll never know. She’s running an artist’s retreat in Phoenix, she won’t be back for months.”

It was awfully tempting. He led me up to her room. It didn't look like anyone else's. It was huge, with bright windows. There were canvases, paint and shawls spread all over in a sort of organized chaos. In her large walk-in closet, there were dresses, skirts and tops hanging from hangers. To my surprise, I was able to find a long sweater dress that actually fit me.

"I might borrow this," I said. He smiled and told me to take whatever I needed, his sister wouldn't mind.

"Can I see your room?" I asked.

He led me down the hall and up another flight of stairs. His room was isolated, far and alone in the East Wing. The room was dark. Long, heavy curtains blocked the windows. When we entered, he pushed the curtains aside brightening the room with sunlight.

There was a huge, four-poster king-sized bed in the center of the room. Much like the bed in my room, there were lion heads carved into the headboard. There were lions everywhere in this room. Above the fireplace, which had fresh ashes from a recent fire, was a huge oil painting of a lion at rest. It was lying on its side, its tale mid-sweep. It stared out from the painting challenging the viewer.

I remembered the lion from the barn, the way it had looked for me, hunted me. The lion in the picture had the same expression. I was the prey, it was the predator.

There were books and notepads piled up on an old-fashioned desk with a MacBook. I walked over to see what he was working on. I could feel his eyes on me. His notes were indecipherable, mentions of Sparta and Sophocles interspersed with phrases written in Greek.

There was a greenhouse. It was warm and smelled of fresh earth and flowers. There was a herb and vegetable garden and roses and hydrangeas in full bloom even in winter. I walked slowly through, smelling the air.

"It's so warm in here," I said, turning to him. He was walking beside me, his hands clasped behind his back.

"I imagine you've been very cold these last few weeks," he said. "I wish you would have accepted my offer sooner. Why didn't you?"

"Because you were a stranger," I said. "Most of the time when men offer to 'help you out' there are some strings attached."

He shook his head in disgust, "I would never have done that," he said.

"Most people aren't that charitable," I said.

“Well, as you can see, we have a lot of space and besides,” he looked down and paused for a moment. “If you hadn’t been here I would have been forced to endure this storm on my own. You’re doing me a favor, keeping me company.”

I smiled at him. He was too nice for a rich person. He should have been snider and condescending. He was so kind and generous and open and honest. I wasn’t sure what to do with him.

I couldn’t hold back a yawn and I covered my mouth sheepishly.

“Maybe you should go back to bed,” he said. He led me back up the ornate stair, his hand settled on the small of my back. It was an intimate gesture, but a comforting one as well. He stopped at the door. It was almost like we were on a date and he was dropping me off on my doorstep.

“Thank you for the tour. You have a lovely home,” I said.

“I’m glad you think so,” he said. “I meant it when I said you should stay as long as you would like. No strings attached, I promise.”

I gave him one last look and then walked into the room. He closed the door behind me. I had to stop for a moment to catch my breath. When we had been standing in the doorway, for just one moment I thought he was going to lean in and kiss me. We had been standing so close.

The doctor had left a pair of scrubs for me to sleep in and I changed and crawled back into bed. As I closed my eyes I imagined living in this house. Taking tea in the sitting room, sitting with Anton as he worked through his thick books. I could be a teacher at the local school, I could garden in the greenhouse. I slipped into sleep, dreaming of another life.