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Lady Winters

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Chapter One: The Ice Palace

The conversations around the seemingly endless table droned on, despite one woman's obvious disinterest. Guests on either side of her attempted to speak with her but she dismissed them with a sip of her drink and a smile.

They expected her, as the hostess, to engage in the discussion in an intrigued and delighted manner. Despite this expectation, Celestia Winters' attention was on the grandfather clock across the room just like it had been for most of the luncheon.

The walls of the dining hall were lined with numerous works of art, all with a little price tag in the bottom corner. Celestia recognized a few of the pieces and the cost of them made her head hurt. Regardless of the cost, she knew that every single one of them had been bid on and the price driven up even higher.

When the clock struck half-past one, there was an echoey chorus of bells and Celestia's eyes lit up as they discretely swept around the table. The previously amorous party guests had looks of distress on their faces as their words died on their lips.

All at once, the guests clutched their throats, their lips turning blue. They swayed in their seats from side to side as they slowly lost consciousness. No one even had time to attempt to stand. Green eyes flickered to the clock once more. Twenty past. Faster than she had expected.

It was only when the last head hit the table that she pushed her chair back and rose to her feet. Rising to her feet, she swept around the room, one of the table knives twirling between her fingers.

As she passed each of her so-called guests, she made sure that they were well and truly unconscious. A satisfied grin stretched across her face and her gaze rose to the many stolen paintings displayed around the room.

One of them in particular caught her eye and an idea formed in her mind. It was small, much smaller than most of the others, and would fit perfectly in the bag she had brought with her. Using her chair, she balanced on the back of it and removed it from the wall.

“Maxwell.” The stoic man in the corner stepped forward and bowed his head. “Please clear my place at the table and then send out our little anonymous tip.” With the ease granted to her by years of training, Celestia jumped down from the chair.

Before her skirt had the chance to touch the floor, she walked briskly out of the room. A woman was waiting for her, holding the door to the alleyway open with a gloved hand so as not to leave fingerprints.

Someone else was waiting for Celestia in the alleyway, also holding a door open, but this time to a car. As she stepped inside, she ripped her gloves off her hands and threw them down on the seat beside her.

She shoved the painting into the bag, shoving down the feeling of guilt brewing in her stomach. The driver’s door opened and Maxwell slid behind the wheel. Within moments they were speeding away.

“Utterly ridiculous.” Celestia yanked the blonde wig off her head and tossed it aside. “A complete waste of my time.” She chose to ignore the smirk on Maxwell’s face as he drove them further away from the building.

“It did not seem like a complete waste of time.” In the mirror, Maxwell eyed Celestia with a knowing look. Heat colored her cheeks but he said no more about the painting hidden in the back seat.

“Also, despite its ridiculousness, you did beautifully. Your mother would have been proud.” Though Maxwell meant well, there was a dark look on Celestia’s face as she took a sip of water.

“No, she wouldn’t.”

From the bag on the floor, Celestia pulled out the file that had been her constant companion. As they raced through the town, she went over the notes she had made and added in a few final details.

The Treasurers were an elite group of art smugglers that Celestia had been targeting for months. Just getting an invitation to an event alone took her weeks and an unimaginable list of favors. Her family’s circumstances were a hindrance rather than the advantage that they were for most people.

She had been charged with infiltrating the group and setting them up to be caught by the local authorities. This part of the assignment had been rather tame and Celestia could almost convince herself that she was doing something good for the world.

The car, a top-of-the-line limo that Celestia herself would never have been able to afford, slowed to a stop in front of the large building that was Winters Manor. It had been, affectionately of course, called the Ice Palace for as long as Celestia could remember.

The door opened and Maxwell offered a hand to help her out of the car. Instead, she handed him the bag with the stolen painting. A smile appeared on his face and Celestia straightened up beside him.

“Donate it.” The butler nodded in understanding and walked around to the back of the limo. Once he was out of sight, Celestia turned her attention back to the building looming in front of her.

In recent months, the manor had made great strides toward living up to its name. At least, that is what Celestia thought as she stepped through the double doors and shivered. A dark cloud had been lingering over the manor for the past two years.

Waiting in the entrance hall was Lacey, one of the last few members of the manor's staff. She stepped forward to help Celestia out of her cloak, eyes widening slightly at the spatter of blood along the collar.

"Thank you, Lacey." Celestia pulled off her gloves and laid them on top of the cloak in Lacey's arms. They parted ways, Lacey towards the laundry room no doubt, and Celestia to the smaller of the manor's sitting rooms.

Waiting for her there was the stash of liquor that she had stolen from the kitchens and hidden from Maxwell. Out of all the things Celestia had done in her life, drinking underage should be the least of Maxwell's concerns.

Still, the butler took his role very seriously, and apparently that included bossing Celestia around as much as he could get away with. A small smile appeared on her face as she took a sip of the amber liquid in her glass.

The drink had never particularly appealed to her; the habit was born more out of a desire to numb her thoughts and escape the reality that she found herself in. A bit of it also came from being able to get on Maxwell's nerves.

"Lady Winters." The man himself. Celestia collapsed on one of the sofas and waved the hand with her drink in it. Her unspoken offer was ignored, as expected, and Maxwell continued to stare at her.

“Spit it out, Maxwell.” The buzz had already set in and Celestia’s patience was growing thin. Her tolerance had never been high, her glass was empty, and her body felt too heavy to go get more.

“I merely wanted to enquire about your well-being.” Laughter bubbled inside Celestia and it broke free, sounding a bit crazed even to her own ears. The butler simply stared at her as he waited for an answer.

“Oh Maxwell, you should know better than to ask about such things.” It hurt Celestia to know other people actually cared about her well-being when it has been on the bottom of her list of priorities.

“At least some good came of it this time.” Celestia forced a smile. “The ring was shut down and the paintings returned to their rightful owners.” The thought was laughable but it helped her sleep at night.

Maxwell still seemed to be expecting an answer and Celestia sighed loudly. Even if she wanted to tell him how she felt she probably wouldn’t even be able to come up with the words to describe it.

“I am fine, Maxwell. Now cease your incessant worrying.”

“Very well, my lady. Shall I have Martha send your dinner in?”

“I do not wish to eat.” There was no response and the door closed quietly as Maxwell left. Celestia brought her feet up under her and leaned her side into the back of the sofa, her empty glass still clutched in her hand.

It had started to rain. The drops hit the windows quietly, not loud enough to drown out Celestia’s overwhelming thoughts. Her eyes focused on a small door in the corner of the room, locked from the inside.

The locked room had been her mother's, just as the larger room Celestia was in had been. As the lady of the manor, Celestia's mother had greeted their guests in this room and entertained them for hours on end.

When she needed to escape, Celestia's mother went through that little door in the corner. No one knew what that room held but now, with the new life she leads, Celestia had a pretty good idea.

It had been locked for as long as she could remember and no one argued when Celestia ordered it to remain that way. A part of Celestia feared what they would find and most of her feared what they would learn about Celestia herself.

Resentment filled her as she continued to stare at that door. Images of the past two years flashed in her head. With a shriek of rage, Celestia flung her glass at the door, gaining a moment of satisfaction when it shattered against the wood.

When the last bit of glass hit the floor, Celestia rose to her feet. With bare hands she collected the pieces, not even noticing the cuts that began to appear on her hands. She left the pile of glass on the table and walked out of the room.

Chapter Two: A Man with a Crown

There was a loud commotion out in the hall yet Celestia's fingers did not falter on the keys of her mother's grand piano. The melody continued without pause as her father wouldn't have accepted anything less. It was moments like these that Celestia was most reminded of her parent's death but still, she played on.

Just as she struck the last chord, the doors of the room burst open. Celestia kept her back to the door and took a sip of the glass of water that had been set out for her. After letting the silence reach an uncomfortable level, she spoke.

"I do hope you have an adequate excuse for interrupting my practice session."

"I waited until you had finished."

"Yet I was still distracted."

"It was flawless, as always, Lady Winters. Nevertheless, pardon the intrusion, ma'am, but your next assignment has just arrived. Straight from the Headmistress." There was a hint of distaste in his voice but he knew better than to judge.

"Very well, thank you, Maxwell." He most surely bowed in response and Celestia waited for the closing of the doors, but it never came. Her foot began to tap impatiently on the floor and finally, Maxwell continued speaking.

"One more thing, ma'am, Mistress Payne is waiting for you in the drawing room." For the first time that morning, real annoyance coursed through Celestia's veins. She pushed back from the piano, the bench legs making a loud scratching noise against the marble.

"Well, she will have to wait." Rising to her feet, Celestia gave the sheet of music one last look before she strode from the room. The few servants that remained at Winters Manor hurried out of sight as she made her way through the halls.

She always conducted her business in the sitting room, using her father's study was too painful and she had never really viewed herself as Lady Winters anyway.

Celestia made herself comfortable on one of the couches as the doors opened to admit Maxwell. She had never understood how he got from one place to another without her seeing and he always just smiled when she asked.

“Alexander Edwards here to see you, Lady Winters.” The doors opened and closed once more. There was some shuffling behind her before she heard Maxwell make his exit.

“I passed Mistress Payne's carriage waiting on my way in, I assume she is here to ask after your sister again?” A small smile appeared on Celestia's face and she turned her head to face the man who had spoken.

Alexander had been her handler for as long as Celestia could remember. Orders from the Headmistress came directly from him, as did any assistance she may need while carrying out said orders.

“You assume correctly.” Her tone was light but Celestia's expression was serious. Alexander nodded his head and moved to sit on the couch across from her. From his briefcase, he produced a folder full of documents and a small black notebook.

The sight of that book made Celestia's palms begin to sweat and she resisted the urge to grab it and throw it in the fireplace. Alexander opened the book to a marked page and produced a pen from his pocket.

“Before we get started, we must debrief your last assignment. Did everything go according to plan?” Celestia nodded and Alexander continued. “The guests?”

“Taken in by the authorities.” Alexander made a note in his book.

“And the supplier?” Celestia’s throat dried and Alexander looked up when she didn’t respond immediately.

“Neutralized.” She reached for the cup of tea that had long since cooled and took a small sip.

“Excellent work, as always, Celestia. You timed it perfectly and the authorities arrived just after the guests awoke. There wasn’t even a rumor of outside involvement.” Alexander smiled genuinely and Celestia sat up straighter.

“What of the paintings?”

“The Headmistress did with them what she thought best.” Both of them knew that meant most of them, if not all, had ended up in the Headmistress’s private residence. Any slightly good feeling about the job evaporated and Celestia was suddenly glad she had taken that painting.

“As a show of thanks, the Headmistress doubled your commission.” A gasp threatened to escape Celestia but she maintained her composure.

“She has my thanks.” Both Celestia and Alexander knew how much this meant. The original commission alone was more than Celestia had ever made and with it doubled she could maybe make a dent in the family debt.

“On to the next order of business. As you know, the King and Queen were found dead in the castle a little over a week ago.” Celestia absentmindedly nodded at Alexander’s statement.

“What you may not know is that in the following days, numbers one through ten in the line of succession were also found dead, their untitled families as well.”

“Who is the target?” Reaching for the papers, Celestia expected to find one that showed a profile of some unknown person with a large red mark in the top corner. Instead, she found a profile of someone vaguely familiar that suspiciously lacked any markings.

“Not a target. A charge.” It took Celestia a moment to process Alexander’s words. When she did, she snorted in a very unladylike manner. Alexander was unfazed as he calmly waited for her to gain her composure.

“I kill people, Alexander. I do not babysit.” Celestia tossed the papers across the table between them. With a speed she hadn’t known he possessed, Alexander grabbed the papers and slid them back across the table.

“This, just like all your other assignments, is not a request.” The lightness was gone from his tone and Celestia automatically retook the papers. “Besides, I thought you would enjoy a break from the messier side of things.”

Looking down at the picture, Celestia finally recognized the man staring up at her. “This has the potential to get just as messy.”

“The Headmistress is prepared to pay any price.” Alexander’s statement made Celestia’s heart pound in her chest.

“What kind of man is worth any price?”

“A man with a crown on his head.” There was silence as Alexander began to pack up his belongings. Without saying goodbye, he left Celestia staring at the picture of the Headmistress’ future king.

The reason for Mistress Payne’s presence was no mystery and neither was Celestia’s eventual response to her question. It was the same routine they went through every year around this time.

Celestia knew she was smart. Everyone did. She was trained by the world's best and brightest and surpassed them all with ease. Yet, when she was with her sister, the youngest of the three Winters girls, none of that mattered.

Luna Iris Winters was a genius. It shocked them all when she was speaking in fluent sentences before her first birthday. Her father nearly had a heart attack when she solved his "unsolvable" arithmancy problem at five and a half.

All the private tutors in the world could not keep Luna academically stimulated. For a few months, she followed Lord Winters on his lecture tour across Europe. Then, she spent her days at her mother's side, learning everything she could from the resident botany expert.

Now, there was only Celestia, but she swore that neither of her sisters would have to learn the things that she did. That was exactly what she had told the woman in front of her countless times but the message was lost on deaf ears.

"I apologize, Mistress Payne, but I will not be allowing you to take Luna. I swore that my sisters would never follow in my footsteps and even if I did not, she is far too young." While the other woman was sitting, Celestia had chosen to remain standing.

"Too young for what?" With wide eyes, Mistress Payne took a delicate sip of her tea. Despite her gentle voice, she was just as imposing as she had been when Celestia studied under her, the ten years having done little to age her.

"For your curriculum, Mistress." It took most of Celestia's strength not to flinch under the other woman's piercing gaze. She had a look of displeasure on her face and Celestia felt a headache coming on.

"I have taken girls as young as three, Celestia." Her voice had lost its sweet tone and sounded more like the one Celestia remembered.

“It is Lady Winters to you and my answer is final. Maxwell will escort you out.” The doors opened as soon as Celestia finished speaking and Mistress Payne rose to her feet. Even she knew better than to ignore a dismissal, regardless of her annoyance at the host.

Mistress Payne was escorted out and Maxwell returned shortly after Celestia heard the car drive away. Her attention had been captured by the

“Lady Winters, might I give you some advice?” Maxwell stepped closer when Celestia nodded her head. “It would do you well to not burn bridges. Your position in society is precarious at the moment, as you know.”

“I have neither the time nor the patience to deal with incompetent people.” Her brashness would have made others cringe but Maxwell merely shook his head.

“Mistress Payne is a very important woman and she holds more power than you realize.” There was a tenderness in his voice that only made Celestia angrier. She was tired of everyone treating her like a child.

“I am well aware of the power she holds, thank you, Maxwell.” Her words made Maxwell nod his head and excuse himself, pulling the doors shut behind him.

Chapter Three: The Moon and Stars

The manor was quiet, save for the gong of the grandfather clock in the entrance hall echoing through the corridors. Upstairs, in a cozy room safe from the chill of the rest of the house, two sisters sat snuggled in bed.

“Can you read it? Just one more time?” Luna Winters batted her eyelashes at her oldest sister. Dark brown curls framed her doll-like face, her cheeks rosy from the warm fire glowing in the fireplace.

Happy to indulge her little sister’s every whim, Celestia picked back up the wrinkled letter that lay beside her. Her quiet voice filled the room as she read to Luna whose eyes started drooping.

“*And I will always love you, past the moon and the stars.*” The heavy weight against Celestia’s side signaled to her that her sister was fast asleep. Carefully, she extracted herself from Luna’s grip and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

She folded up the letter and placed it back in its spot on the bedside table. Scrawled on the front, in their mother’s thin writing, was a single phrase that made Celestia’s heart clench: *my girls.*

Blowing out one of the candles and taking the other in her hand, Celestia left the room, closing the door quietly behind her. Across the hall, she gently knocked on another door and waited until she was granted permission to enter.

The middle Winters sister was already in bed, her eyes focused intently on the book in her hand. When she heard the door open, Astrid looked up and smiled tiredly at Celestia.

“How is Luna?” It was the same question every night. Celestia remained in the doorway as she answered, not wanting to intrude.

“Coping as well as an incredibly intelligent child can.” Their worries for Luna were growing as the young girl closed herself off more each day.

“I saw that Mistress Payne paid a visit.”

“Yes, and she received the same answer as last time.” Astrid let out a little breath of relief.

“Victoria is perfectly qualified to teach you both.” Their governess was only a few years older than Celestia herself but she had an impressive array of degrees that made the Winters parents look past her age.

“Please try to sleep soon.” Celestia waited until she received a nod from Astrid before exiting the room.

Celestia’s own room was much colder than her sisters’, both in temperature and general comfort. Stripping herself of her clothes, Celestia wrapped herself up in a robe and took a seat in front of her vanity. Her maid was waiting for her and began to prepare Celestia for bed.

There was a dull pounding in her head and the silence was overwhelming. It had become common around the manor after Celestia’s parents died and it drove her crazy. So, she had taken up the habit of giving a running monologue.

“I wonder if I am doing right by them. Those girls deserve the world and I am trying my very best to give it to them.”

“My parents struggled but you never would have known it from the outside. They balanced it all so well.”

“I know I was a mistake. I know I was the catalyst for my parents’ downfall.” The brushing of Celestia’s hair faltered slightly and she looked up to meet Ann Brighton’s eyes in the mirror. She quickly lowered her eyes and resumed her brushing, making Celestia sigh.

“So much fell onto my shoulders when my parents died. More so than anyone realizes.”

It looked as though Ann wanted to respond but Celestia knew she wouldn't. No one ever did anymore.

Ann finished with Celestia's hair and took a step back, signaling that she was done with her task. With a sigh, Celestia rose to her feet and straightened out her robe. “Thank you, Ann. That will be all.”

“Goodnight, my lady.” The door closed quietly behind Ann and Celestia was left alone with her thoughts.

Chapter Four: To See The Sunrise

The assignment began at a ball, coincidentally one Celestia was hosting on behalf of one of her mother's charities. It was the first time Winters Manor had been open to the public in years and Celestia had never seen it so decorated.

None of it was funded by her of course, she merely provided a space for the charity and was grateful for the free meal. Her sisters had been long since been in bed when the ball started but she had snuck them some dinner before they fell asleep.

The first thing Celestia noticed about her charge was the way he seemed absolutely oblivious to everything going on around him. She had been watching him from the moment he had stepped into the room and her constant staring had never once drawn his focus.

Wanting to test her theory, Celestia had walked up beside him and eavesdropped on one of his conversations for the entirety of it. The woman he was speaking to had given Celestia an annoyed look but even that did not get his attention.

Celestia's lack of discretion would have normally landed her in hot water but it seemed her charge was not used to being under surveillance. That should have made her job easier but in this case it only increased Celestia's headache. Her comment to Andrew earlier was indeed correct; it would be exactly like babysitting.

When she had accepted the assignment, Celestia had hoped that she would be able to keep her distance. Unfortunately though, it seemed that James Fitzroy Attley would walk into danger without even knowing.

Caught up in her own thoughts, Celestia missed the woman leaving and only noticed when James finally turned around.

“Good evening, my lady. James Attley at your service.” His eyes had a warmth to them that made Celestia feel a touch of guilt. She extended her hand and allowed him to lead her to the center of the room.

“Lady Celestia Winters.” They began a waltz and there was a flash of recognition on James’ face.

“Ah, our lovely host.” He smiled and Celestia forced her lips out of a frown for a brief moment. They continued to dance and Celestia used their movement to continue her surveillance.

“Would you like to know a secret?” The uninterested hum was apparently enough of an answer and the man in front of Celestia leaned forward. As he spoke, his breath tickled her ear and she found her eyes slipping from their surveillance of the crowd.

“There is a woman here tonight that was assigned to my protection. I wonder if she will see you as a threat.” Without warning, he dipped her back and ducked his head close to her chest. “I am sure she is close by, shall we test it?”

“No. I am sure she is quite close indeed.” Celestia spoke through clenched teeth. In fact, she thought in her head, she is much closer than she would like to be. He pulled her back up and Celestia put as much distance between them as possible.

“I really must thank you. It was, after all, your father who assigned me this protection.” Unaware of the revelation he had just made, James spun Celestia around and clutched her tightly to his chest.

“My father is dead.” There was no emotion in her voice despite the panic Celestia was feeling. She prayed to whatever diety was listening that the stupid boy had just misspoke. Judging by the bewildered look on his face, however, Celestia knew there was no mistake.

“I just spoke with him earlier.”

“Where?” Celestia stopped them mid spin, causing James to stumble over his feet. A look of annoyance flashed across her face but the way Celestia was staring at him made him answer without question.

“His office.” In the abandoned wing, somewhere no one had entered in over a year. At least, that's what she thought. Breaking free from his grip, she stormed out of the ballroom, ignoring the cries of her name.

She raced through the great hall, ignoring the alarmed looks from the guests, and up the grand staircase. Passing her own bedroom and her sisters', Celestia finally reached her father's office. It took a moment to push aside the memories but she then thrust the doors open without a second thought.

Sitting behind the large oak desk was a man that almost looked like he belonged. If it weren't for the strands of gray running through his jet-black hair, even Celestia might have been fooled.

“Uncle.”

“How dare you show up here. After abandoning me and the girls in the wake of our parents' death. Your own brother.”

“Celestia-” The dagger that had previously been hidden in her long sleeve was in her hand and pressed against her uncle’s neck before he could even finish saying her name.

“You do not get to call me by my name.”

“Lord Winters?” The sound of her father’s title made Celestia press the knife in quickly, drawing blood, before stepping back and hiding it in the fabrics of her dress. Just as Henry pressed his handkerchief against his wound, James stepped into the office.

“Goodness, are you injured?”

“No, no, my dear boy. I am perfectly alright.” The previously white handkerchief had turned a pretty shade of red and Celestia watched as the blood began to drip down. James looked as though he wanted to assist but he smartly stayed near the door.

“Does the Headmistress know?” Her uncle jumped a bit in his seat and spun around so he was facing her. His face had started to pale and Celestia rolled her eyes before tossing him her own handkerchief.

“Who is the Headmistress?” The boy clearly had no sense of when to keep his mouth shut.

“No one.” Glares were thrown around the room as Celestia and Henry spoke in unison. James looked even more bewildered than before but Celestia paid him no mind as she turned back to Henry.

“You have thirty seconds to explain very clearly why you have orchestrated my assignment and, perhaps more importantly, why you have been posing as your dead brother?”

Henry opened his mouth but no sound came out.

“I would also like to know what you plan on doing after this because there is absolutely no way I am letting you get away with this type of deceit.” Henry gulped and Celestia noticed James’ eyes widened.

Before Celestia could continue with her tongue lashing, there was a shout from the hall followed by a chorus of screams. Green eyes wide, Celestia looked back and forth between Henry and James.

“Perfect, just perfect.” She ran forward and pushed one of the chairs in front of the door. “Get back.” The yells in the hallway seemed to be getting closer and Celestia swore. Reaching under her skirts she produced a dagger and roughly grabbed James’ arm.

“What the hell are you doing?” A single look from Celestia silenced him.

Hauling him over to the window, she shoved it open and pulled him up onto the ledge. She already knew the exact distance but she had to double check after calculating the extra weight.

“Are you just going to leave me here?” Blood was still dripping down Henry’s chin but Celestia knew he would survive without even a scar.

“You are not my responsibility.” Without looking back, Celestia dragged James out the window just as the office doors burst open. It took every bit of her strength to angle them so they landed on the ledge of the window below them.

The boy beside her was barely able to hold onto the narrow frame and Celestia had to wrap an arm around him to keep him upright. When he finally calmed down, he looked over at her, blue eyes glowing in the dark.

“I think I’m in love with you.” He sounded slightly dazed and Celestia wondered if he had hit his head against the wall.

“Shut up.” There was movement in the secondary kitchen on the other side of the window. Celestia crouched down, palming her dagger. A singular candle was lit and Celestia exhaled, it was only a servant, most likely grabbing something for the main kitchen.

James crouched down beside her and began whispering about something. It took all of Celestia’s self control not to smack him.

“Didn’t I already tell you to be quiet?” That seemed to finally get through to him and the dazed expression was wiped off his face.

“Don’t you know who I am?”

“I really don’t care who you are. All I care about is whether or not you live to see the sunrise and I can’t make sure that happens with your incessant chatter.”

That seemed to be enough to silence him for a few moments, giving Celestia a moment to think. However, the silence also exposed the increasing sound of footsteps coming from the main road. Celestia grabbed James and dragged him into an alley just as a dozen of the Royal Guard ran by.

“Weren’t those the good guys?” James’ naivety made Celestia scoff and she waited a moment before moving from her crouched position. Her charge scrambled to his feet and Celestia turned her back on him.

“I do not believe in such trivial things as good and evil.” The Royal Guard was most likely bursting through the doors of her home at that very moment. Her only solace was her sure knowledge that the entire Manor staff would protect her sister with their lives.

“Let’s go. It would do us both no good if you were caught, regardless of who it is.”

Chapter Five: Miss Dubois

The little town outside the Manor's grounds was quiet. Most of the residents were either at the ball they had just escaped or fast asleep in their beds. Luckily, James was still in a bit of a daze and was silent as he was dragged behind Celestia.

Their destination was located at the end of a small alley, surrounded by some questionable shops that even Celestia had never entered. By the time they arrived, James was beginning to come around and it took a sharp squeeze of his wrist from Celestia to keep him quiet.

"Gabi, open up." It took a few more soft knocks but, eventually, the door swung open. Illuminated by the light from her candle, the woman stared them down with a frown marring her otherwise perfect features.

Her eyes eventually landed on Celestia and the frown morphed into a wicked smile. "Celestia Winters. My, it has been a while. After last time, I thought I would never again find you darkening my doorstep."

"Last time? What happened last time?" Chocolate brown eyes swiveled to James as he spoke. Celestia had been standing in front of her charge, blocking him from sight, but the noble had stepped around her into the light.

"And who is this, Tia, dear?" Gabrielle seemed intrigued, like Celestia had assumed she would be given her profession. However, they were standing out in the open and Celestia's discomfort was growing.

"No one. And, there was no last time." There were noises of protest from both her companions but Celestia silenced them with one look. "Thank you. Now, I would really appreciate it if we could be invited inside."

The door was opened wider and Gabi stepped out of the way so that Celestia and James could enter the warm room. Papers lined one wall, the furthest away from the roaring flames in the fireplace.

“I am afraid that ‘no one’ is not a sufficient enough answer for me, darling.” Crossing her arms, Gabi fixed Celestia with an expectant look. It went against all of Celestia’s training but she trusted Gabi with her life.

“Gabi, this is James. James, this is Gabrielle Dubois.” Taking initiative, James reached for Gabrielle’s hand and placed a light kiss on her knuckles. Despite her darker complexion, Celestia could see a light blush on her cheeks.

“Certainly not James Attley, second in line to the throne?”

“The one and only.” Gabrielle’s mouth dropped open and, with a squeak, her hand flew up to her hair, which was wrapped in a brightly colored scarf. Despite her obvious alarm over her state of undress, Gabi looked as radiant as she always did.

Tendrils of her curly brown hair had fallen out of her scarf and framed her face.

“Gabi here is the editor-in-chief of a small paper and the biggest gossip in all of Europe. You are currently the sole topic of all the world’s conversation and so I believe the two of you will get along splendidly.” Judging by the gleam in Gabi’s eyes, Celestia’s statement was mostly accurate.

“The Gazette is not a small paper, darling, but I digress. What can I help you with?”

Gabrielle moved behind her desk and seemed to resume what she had been doing before they had arrived on her doorstep.

“What have you heard about the royal family murders?” There was a long stretch of silence. Gabrielle looked at James for a long time before she answered Celestia’s question with one of her own.

“Have you heard of the Shadow Court?” Gabrielle watched Celestia carefully, looking for anything that gave away what she knew. Eyes flickering to James for just a moment, Celestia worded her answer carefully.

“In passing, on one of my last jobs.” Celestia

“How did you get mixed up in the Shadow Court?” James’ question surprised both of the ladies and they turned around to face him. His expression had darkened and he looked nothing like his normal care-free self

“How do you even know what it is? I thought the nobles didn’t know it existed.” His knowledge of the court was alarming to Celestia and she found herself reevaluating what she knew about him.

“Most do not. So I ask again, how did you get involved with the Shadow Court?” James

“We could ask you the same thing.” Gabrielle had walked across the room and was now standing beside Celestia.

“I have only heard rumors. There has been talk of a Shadow Prince.”

“And have you met him, this Prince of Shadows?” A pen and paper had appeared in Gabrielle’s hand and she was furiously writing down everything James said.

“No one has. Everything is run by his mother who calls herself Lady Shadows.” James

“It seems that both of you know far more than I do about this.” Gabrielle and James exchanged a look.

“No one really knows anything. The whispers are so quiet that most people don’t even believe it when they hear of it.” Gabi

“Yes, and I believe that is exactly what the Shadow Court wants.” James

“Well, what I want is to know what they have to do with the recent murders.” Celestia

“I am afraid I have nothing more to tell you. All I can say is the whispers have been slightly louder as of late, coinciding with the royal murders.”

“Very well, thank you Gabi.” Celestia was about to turn to the door but, catching sight of James, she paused. “One more thing, Gabi. Could we possibly burden you with our company for tonight?”

It was clear Gabrielle had questions but she simply nodded and led the way upstairs. James was given the small cot in one of the many offices while Celestia was led to Gabrielle’s room.

“Gabi, there is no need for you to give me your room. Let me take the couch.” A yawn escaped Gabrielle before she could respond. Taking that as a response, Celestia gently pushed the writer into her room and closed the door.

After listening for a moment outside of James’ room, Celestia made her way back downstairs. The couch was an old friend of hers, many nights had been spent there after assignments. Celestia always went to Gabrielle’s to clean up before she returned home to her sisters.

Chapter Six: Shadow and Thorns

The next morning, Celestia was up before sunrise which turned out to be best as the shop started getting busy moments later. The sound of people was enough to wake James and he came stumbling down the stairs soon after.

They said their goodbyes to Gabrielle and hurried into the carriage that Celeste had waiting for them outside. The first few moments of the ride were silent and that was exactly how it would have remained if it were up to Celestia.

James, on the other hand, looked like he had wanted to speak from the moment he sat down. His gaze was beginning to get on Celestia's nerves no matter how hard she tried to ignore it and she finally looked at him with a scowl.

"Just spit it out already, Attley." The expression on his face was almost amusing but Celestia didn't crack. Once he got over his shock of being caught, James straightened up and cleared his throat.

"Why exactly were you chosen to be the one to protect me?" James' question seemed innocent enough but Celestia's guard was immediately up. Her position in life had always been questioned but no one had ever questioned her skill.

Unknowing of the offense he had just made, James continued. "I mean it is clear that you have skill beyond measure but you are in fact a lady, one with a household to run and sisters to mind." Celestia spun around to face him.

"You have no idea who I am or what I am capable of." The edge to Celestia's voice went unnoticed by James. He gestured out the window at Winters Manor which had just come into view.

“You are a noblewoman are you not? Heiress to the Winters Estate?” His tone made Celestia chuckle.

“Lady Winters, heiress to mounds of debt and a ledger a mile long. I was quite nearly born a bastard and most of society treats me like one.” She knew her words felt like a slap in the face as the man in front of her was a part of that very society but she couldn’t bring herself to care.

“Do you think I asked for this? Do you think I wanted my mother to have to soak her hands in blood just so I could maintain my legitimacy?” Celestia didn’t really want an answer from James. She wanted to scream at her mother, at her father, and most of all her grandparents who sat back and watched their children risk their lives to save the family from ruin.

“You are a murderer.” His statement fell on deaf ears as Celestia was lost in a world of her own. The faces of all her loved ones were morphing into those of her victims and her screams for them were drowned in a wave of blood.

The carriage coming to a halt jolted Celestia out of her thoughts and she shook her head to clear it. When the door opened, she was the first out, ignoring the hand Maxwell had offered her.

Something made her pause on the last step and she turned back slightly. James was still seated, staring at her with wide eyes. “You may think I am heartless but you are naive to think the world is all sunshine and roses.” There was no response.

“It is a dark world that reeks of greed and envy.” She finished descending the steps and walked away, calling out one last thing as she did. “Breakfast will be served in the morning room.”

All thoughts of targets and charges disappeared from her mind when she saw the two girls waiting for her on the manor steps. They ran to her and Celestia dropped to the ground, arms wide.

They bombarded her with questions and Celestia tried to answer each and every one of them as she led them inside. Ann was waiting for them at the door and she looked Celestia up and down, eyes filled with concern.

“I will eat with the girls and then change for the day.” That was not the answer Ann had been hoping for but it was clearly the one she expected as she was holding a warm shawl in her hands. Celestia accepted it gratefully and then allowed her sisters to drag her to breakfast.

They go their separate ways after dinner. Celestia says goodnight. James knocks on her bedroom door.

“Do you not have somewhere to live?” With her arms crossed, Celestia glared at the sheepish man in front of her. He had taken off his outer layer of clothes and wore only his trousers and undershirt.

“Should I not stay with you? For my own protection, of course.” He smiled and scratched his head in embarrassment. Celestia couldn’t help but roll her eyes. They stared at each other for a few more moments before she threw her hands up.

“Fine. You can sleep in my dressing room.” There was immediate regret on Celestia’s face when James beamed at her and walked into the room. He stood in the middle and looked around until Celestia pointed at the closed door that led to her closet.

Inside, there was a small lounge seat that James' feet would most certainly hang off of. Celestia had grabbed a warm blanket off of her bed and she handed it to James when he sat down.

“Do not leave this room until I open the door tomorrow. That is not for your safety but my peace of mind. Is that understood?” The new house guest nodded and stretched himself out, wrapping the blanket around his body as he did so.

Just as Celestia was about to turn out the lights, she noticed with a small bit of satisfaction that his feet were indeed hanging off of the end of the lounge. She shut the door gently and ran across the room to her own bed. With one last look at the dressing room door, she turned over and closed her eyes.

Chapter Seven: Hints of Deceit

“I am going and that is final.” Celestial pulled on her boots, ignoring the sputtering protests of James.

“Well what am I supposed to do? My safety is a bit more important than some petty revenge.” James stumbled backward as Celestia, whirled around, knife in hand.

“This is more than revenge, this is treason.” Noticing his distress, Celestia smirked and tucked her weapon into her clothes.

Celestia’s uncle lived in a lavish townhouse that had been gifted to him when he came of age. He rarely made trips to the manor after that and none of the family had ever stepped foot into his home, Celestia included.

Despite its smaller size, the townhouse felt just as cold and empty as the Winters’ Manor. The entrance hall was dark and there were no sounds of life, despite the front door being unlocked.

To Celestia’s uncle’s office.

“I thought your family was poor.” Looking up from her own stack of papers, Celestia stared at James who was holding a single paper in his hand.

“We are.” Celestia snatched the paper from him and her eyes raked over the family’s financial statement. There was a sinking feeling in her stomach as she saw the enormous withdrawals over the last few months. “Where did this come from?”

James wordlessly pointed to a drawer and Celestia pushed him aside so she could open it. The drawer held only a few additional papers, obviously important ones judging by the golden royal seal.

Celestia grabbed the top one and quickly skimmed it. Her eyes had only reached the second line when she crumpled the paper in her fist.

“My uncle had a life insurance policy on my father.” Reaching back into the drawer, Celestia felt around until she found what she was looking for. A false bottom popped open when she pressed on it, revealing a ring of old keys.

Celestia’s eyes flickered to the large wardrobe that she had tried to open earlier.

Hanging on the hooks were her father’s cloak and her mother’s silk shawl. Both of which her parents had been wearing the night they died. Celestia reached for the shawl and sunk to the ground, clutching it close to her chest.

Chapter Eight

“Did you think you would get away with it?” The voice made Henry jump and he spun around wildly, undisguised fear in his eyes. Before he could locate the source of the voice, he was slammed into the wall behind him.

The force made him squeeze his eyes shut, bracing himself for the next blow. When it didn't come, he tentatively opened his eyes and found Celestia glaring up at him. His face relaxed, making Celestia's jaw clench.

“Lady Winters.”

“Celestia, my dear niece. I'm sure we can work this out.”

“Do not call me that.”

“But why? It is such a lovely name.” Celestia's unoccupied hand formed a fist but Henry continued, unaware of her growing anger. “You were named for the stars that your mother longed to escape to.”

“Don't you dare speak of my mother.” Celestia tightened her grasp. “It won't earn you any mercy” Despite his increasing lack of air, Henry choked out one final remark.

“I'm glad that she finally escaped.” The grip on Henry loosened and Celestia shoved him away.

“Return everything you have stolen from this family and never return. If you fail to return anything, I will hunt you down and make sure to show you exactly how I've been keeping this family alive.”

Celestia nearly screamed when she turned on the lights and saw James lounging in one of her chairs. He was flipping through a newspaper and his eyes didn't pause their skimming as he spoke to her.

“Where were you?”

“Nowhere.” As discreetly as she could, Celestia discarded her weapons while she moved forward into the room and kicked off her muddy boots. Her destination was the bathroom, something James was conveniently blocking with his leg placement.

“Celestia.” As she passed by, James grabbed her sleeve and held it up in the light. It was speckled with Henry's blood. Celestia snatched her arm back and turned her body so the blood was out of sight.

Chapter Nine: Men in the Shadows

“Get up, we need to go to the market.” A groan from James was the only response Celestia got until she yanked the blanket off of him.

“Christ, Celestia.” He shot out of bed, dressed only in his underwear and glared at her. Celestia’s eyes had widened when she saw his state of undress and she thrust the blanket back at him. After covering himself, James sat on the edge of the bed.

“Why exactly have you woken me at such a ridiculous hour?”

“The market opens at sunrise and unless you brought a cook with you we have to figure out something to eat.” Celestia rolled her eyes as James groaned and laid back down. “Do you want to starve?”

Celestia pulled James close to her, closer than they had been the night they met on the dance floor, and dug her fingers into his arm. “Attley, look over my shoulder. Discreetly.” She gave him a moment to do so. “Do you recognise those men?”

A worried expression took over James’ face as he slowly shook his head. Celestia cursed under her breath and tried to think of where the nearest exit was.

Chapter Ten: From or For

Gabrielle began fussing over James as soon as she opened the door and Celesia was content to leave them to it. Her injuries were minimal while James had sustained a number of blows to the head.

Wandering over to the window, Celestia peaked through the curtains to see the streets swarming with palace guards. She shut them quickly and went to make sure the front door was latched securely.

Her hand lingered on the lock for a moment and she closed her eyes. A thought crossed her mind and her eyes flashed open before she turned around. "Where is your father, James?" Her sudden question startled the other occupants.

"Dead, he died when I was seven." James looked up from his lap, his black eye standing out starkly against his pale face. "Why?"

"Nothing. Just making sure I haven't missed anything." Deep in thought, Celestia wasn't expecting James to speak again. When he did, she refocused on him in time to hear his last question.

"You think he was involved?" - James. His lack of surprise made Celestia raise an eyebrow.

"You don't seem surprised." -Celestia

"I didn't know him well but I haven't heard good things." - James. Instead of responding, Celestia turned her back on him and walked back over to the window.

Celestia began to wonder to herself who exactly she was protecting James from.

Chapter Eleven: Attley Estate

“We need to search your father’s belongings.” - Celestia

“Everything is in his office at Attley Estate.” - James

“Will your mother be there?” - Celestia

“She shouldn’t be. Her presence was requested at a board meeting somewhere in the south.” - James

“We must find out everything your father knew about the Shadow Court.” Without a moment's hesitation, Celestia began rummaging through

“What is your number?” It took Celestia a moment to determine what he was talking about.

“I was thirty-three when my father died, so thirty-two.” She thought to herself for a moment. “No, wait, thirty-one. Some cousin died a couple of days after Papa.”

“Sixth. Celestia, you are the sixth heir to the throne and the highest-ranking female in the line.”

Chapter Twelve: Dream of Surviving

“I think your mother knows more than you think.” - Celestia

“James?” A feminine voice startled the pair out of their conversation and they spin around.

“Mother!” James sprung forward and swept his mother into a hug, spinning her around so Celestia was out of sight. With his eyes he gestured to the papers they had been going through and Celestia got the message, showing them into her bag.

When the papers were out of sight, James released his mother and she turned back to face Celestia. “Who is this, dear?” A panicked expression crossed James’ face but he jumped into action before Celestia could speak.

“This is Louise, mother. The woman I have been seeing.” James grasped Celestia’s hand and she fought all her urges to rip it away. “Louise, this is my mother, Wilhemina Attley.”

“Louise? Hm.” It is obvious that they didn’t fool Lady Attley but she didn’t call them on it. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“And what about you? You do not wish to become queen?” - Wilhemina/James

“Every little girl dreams of becoming a princess. I just dream of surviving.” - Celestia

Chapter Thirteen: Lady of the Shadows

“Celestia!” The door to the printing shop swung open and Gabrielle ran in. “There you are.” Celestia waited expectantly for Gabrielle to continue. “The Shadow Court is meeting. Tonight. In the basement of the pub on main street.

“Well you can’t walk in there looking like that.” Looking around, Celestia grabbed one of the paperboys’ hats and crammed it onto James’ head.

“I recognize most of these men.” -James

“The crown was taken from the rightful family and it is time we see it properly returned!”

Chapter Fourteen: A Plot Against The King

The end of the man's speech was met with deafening applause and cheers. Someone from the crowd shouted for a round of drinks and soon beers were being passed around. James still seemed to be at a loss for words and he didn't protest when Celestia dragged him further away from the group.

"We need to get into whatever room is behind that door." The door she was referring to was down one of the halls and was where the leaders had entered from. It had been heavily guarded the entire night but the path had been cleared once there was the call for beers.

As Celestia had expected, the door was locked and so she discreetly slipped the hairpin she had tucked away earlier out of her sleeve. It slid into the lock with ease and it only took a moment before she felt the latch click beneath her fingers.

Celestia's eyes darted behind them before she shoved James into the room and quickly followed after. The door shut behind them softly as their eyes adjusted to the dim lighting. There was a small desk and a cluster of chairs in one corner.

"I'll take the desk, you look for anything else that may be useful." There was a very obvious sigh from James but Celestia chose to ignore him.

"These aren't addressed to your father." Celestia passed one over to James for him to inspect while she pulled another one from the drawer.

There were about a dozen letters, all addressed to the same set of initials: *W.F.* They were written in a code that one didn't have to be a genius to decode.

“Celestia, this is a plot against the king.” His face deathly pale, James looked up from the letters in his hand. A sense of dread began to build in Celestia’s stomach but she refused to acknowledge it.

“Yes, what of it?” She shuffled around some papers, looking for something to distract him with. There was no questioning what James was thinking and Celestia braced herself for an argument.

“We have to stop it.” James reached for the other letters but Celestia snatched them away before he could grab them. Shoving them back in the drawer, Celestia controlled her features and stared at him blankly.

“No, my job is to protect you.”

“He is my cousin!” Leaning over the desk, James got as close to Celestia as he possibly could. Not one to back down, Celestia moved so their faces were inches apart and glared at him furiously.

“He is also mine!” There was a loud noise outside the door and they jumped away from each other. Celestia readjusted herself in the chair and James began pacing in front of the desk.

“Then why can’t we save him?”

“Because it is not my responsibility.”

“Why can’t you make it your responsibility?”

“Because I don’t want you to die!” Chest heaving, Celestia blinked harshly to stop the tears from escaping her eyes. “This would put you directly in the path of those looking to kill any and all heirs.”

James stared at her with wide eyes. The sounds of the party beyond the door were drowned out by the beating of Celestia’s heart.

“I thought you didn’t care.”

“Of course I do, you absolute moron.”

Chapter Fifteen: Covered in Thorns

They had run through the plan a hundred times but they would need a hundred times more before Celestia would be even the least bit confident in it.

She had chosen a deep red for the occasion. Dark enough to blend in but bright enough to stand out when she needed to.

“You remind me of a rose. Enchantingly beautiful but covered in thorns.”

Celestia watched from the ground as one of the men stepped out of the line and walked up to their leader. His face was unrecognizable due to Celestia’s blurry vision but she knew his voice. She had heard it a hundred times before.

Alexander Edwards whispered something to the leader of the Shadow Courts’ men and then orders to fall back were shouted. As most of the men walked away, one walked forward and crouched before Celestia.

“I’m so sorry Winters. Headmistresses orders. They’ll be safe.” Edwards backed away as Celestia staggered to her feet. She looked around wildly for James and finally spotted him leaning against one of the last remaining stalls.

“James!” Celestia ran to him and shook his shoulders. In a daze, he stared at her blankly. Knowing their time was running out, Celestia silently asked for his forgiveness before slapping him across the face.

The change was instant and James glared at her as he clutched his red cheek. “What on earth is wrong with you? There was no -“ Celestia cut him off.

“They’re going for the girls.” In no time they were running towards Winters’ Manor. A million thoughts were swirling around Celestia’s mind and nothing made sense anymore. Why was Edwards with the Shadow Court? Why had the Headmistress wanted her sisters?

When they reached the Manor, Celestia instantly knew they were too late.

“I vowed that my sisters would never have to follow in my footsteps. We have to get them back.” Arms wrapped around Celestia and she sagged into them. James pressed a lingering kiss to her forehead.

“We will, I promise.”

Chapter Sixteen: Cracks in the Ice

“Celestia?” The door creaked open, letting a small sliver of light fill the room. When she didn’t respond, James stepped into the room, opening the door more so as he did so. “Get your things, I’m taking you back to Gabrielle’s.”

Chapter Seventeen: The Prince of Shadows

“Do you remember when I asked you about the Shadow Court and you asked me how I knew of it?” - James

“Yes, why?” - Celestia

“I fear that I may be the Prince of Shadows.” - James

“Attley, who exactly am I protecting you from?” - Celestia

“Regardless of what is happening with the courts, The Headmistress wants you on the throne. Why did she choose you of all people to be her puppet king?” - Celestia

“Maybe it was bad luck?” - James

“No, the Headmistress is too smart for that.” - Celestia

“She chose you on purpose. She knew your mother ran the Shadow Court.” - Celestia

“She wanted to use you to make both courts bend to her will.” - Celestia

Chapter Eighteen: Long Live the King

“The plot is moving forward.” - Unknown.

Lady Celestia Winters, you are cordially invited to the Coronation of the King.

“I received one as well.” -James. Celestia rolled her eyes.

“Of course you did, I am merely surprised that I did.” Celestia held up the other slip of paper her invitation included. “I doubt yours came with this though.” She handed it to James when he reached for it.

“Your attendance is non negotiable. -A.E.”

“Alexander Edwards. My handler. The man who facilitated the kidnapping of my sisters.”

The dress Gabrielle had put Celestia in was pinching her in all the wrong places and practically cutting off her air supply. Her feet ached and it felt like her ears were beginning to bleed from the shrieking of the choir behind her.

Celestia had chosen to sit in the back, away from James and his mother who would surely recognize her now.

An unsettling feeling began to rise as the crown was placed on the king's head. Celestia left her seat and began walking towards James. The king stood, scepter in hand, and Celestia broke into a run.

The first arrow went through one of the metal rings on the crown, knocking it off the king's head and pinning it to the wall behind him. The second arrow was aimed at his heart but it found itself lodged in The Book of God.

Celestia threw the book down and her eyes scanned the crowd for the shooter.

Chapter Nineteen: Linger in the Shadows

Celestia's fist had barely left the door when it swung open. No one was there and so Celestia stalked into the familiar house and down the hall. The blood on her face was beginning to dry and crack as she clenched her jaw.

“Wipe the debt and I'll walk away. If you don't, I will personally burn the Academy to the ground.”

The Headmistress hadn't spoken a word since Celestia appeared in her office and she still seemed to be taking in her appearance.

“Very well. The debt will be wiped and your family left alone.” - HM

“Celestia, I must warn you, you're playing a dangerous game. The Academy is not a place to be burned, it is a fire itself, and it will not be easily extinguished.”

Chapter Twenty: Sunshine and Roses

Hidden in the shadows, Celestia Winters and James Attley stood hand in hand as the crown was placed on the new king's head.

The newly crowned king led the procession out of the church and, as they passed by, Celestia turned to James.

His attention was not on the event before them, but rather on her, as it had been since the moment he met her. At some point along the way, he had compared her to a rose, beautiful yet dangerous.

But now, he knew better. Celestia Winters, despite her cold last name, was the sun.

She smiled up at him and he looked at her like she was the sun that made the roses bloom.