

Prologue

Maggie Hansen did not want to die. Not that she hadn't nearly managed to do so on more than one occasion in the past. All things considered, those situations had been entirely her fault. Tonight, for once, she was a mostly innocent party. The light drizzle that began to fall in the fog rolling in off the Humber caused the already thin muslin of her gown to cling to the ample curves of her body. The brunette clutched the small, worn purse that held the key to her rented room closer to her chest. There would be safety at the house of the bawd, surrounded by other women luckier than she at finding paying company for the evening. She was at the last of her coin, and after tonight she would not even be able to afford the rented room. In the morning, she would be reduced to the streets, a common hackney whore — assuming she survived the night. As it was, Maggie was quite certain she was being followed.

She was not sure when she became aware of the shadow following her through the side streets of Easthaven. The darkness drew closer, but it never stepped into the light to show its face and never made a sound. Every terrifying story she heard told by the women of her profession came to mind. If her stalker sought the rewards of honest pay, he would show himself. What gain could be found in remaining hidden? Women had disappeared in Easthaven before, never to be heard of again. Few cared for the loss or absence of a common country whore. Maggie could feel her heart racing and the trickle of rainwater running down her face and between her breasts like perspiration. She needed to get out of the dark. She needed the safety of light, even if there was no one to see her. On the other side of the street, a street lamp beckoned, dimmer for the rain and mist in the air. Beyond it loomed the tall, dreary faces of older townhomes, securely buttoned down for the night. Between herself and relative safety lay the wide, empty expanse of the street. Throwing caution to the wind, Maggie dropped her hands down to gather up her skirts and ran.

The shadow fell onto her path like a bird of prey swooping down upon a little field mouse. Just when Maggie had nearly reached safety, a strong arm clamped around her stomach, wrenching her into the hard chest of a man. A second hand, broad and soft as an aristocrat's, flew to her face to stifle her scream into his palm. Without thinking, she began to twist and kick in his hold, flailing her legs in a tangle of skirts against the unyielding strength of his body.

"Gentle, gentle, gentle..." the voice, throaty and rough, though young, chided her under the heat of his breath. His long fingers dug into her cheek.

"Be gentle, now," he continued. "I will be as gentle as you are, sweet one." The whispering lips on her temple curved into a smile against her skin. "Do not scream. My ears are just! — so! — sensitive!" He jerked her backward, punctuating each word with a drag of her body deeper into the darkness of the alleyway from whence he came. "Should have stayed out of the rain, sweet. There are only monsters who come out on nights like —"

He grunted suddenly, and with no sign of a second assailant, Maggie and her attacker both went flying through the air as though shoved by some great force. Her stalker rolled on the ground, releasing her to fall into her own heap on the cobblestone, and snarled, "You —"

The man froze, and his gaze, as bright as two polished gold coins, fixed toward the end of the alley, widening for what he saw. Her attacker scuffled backward on the grimy, cobblestone pathway to scramble to his feet. "Apologies," he mumbled, dropped a bow, and pivoted on his heel to flee into the darkness.

The new arrival stood quietly over Maggie Hansen — a tall silhouette at the opening of the alley. Beneath his umbrella, the pale cut of his jawline and the rain soaked gold of his hair seemed to glow faintly shone through the haze. "It is all right. You are safe from him..." He spoke gently, like a parent soothing a frightened child after a nightmare. Her rescuer extended a hand, inviting her back to the light beneath the security of his umbrella. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head reflexively, as if she had no thought or choice other than to answer her savior. Words formed in her mind but could not quite make it to her lips. She barely managed to gather her legs under her to try for a rise as she clung to his hand. Some part of her mind wrestled with the way in which her attacker had been bested, and with the respect he meted out to the man who had saved her from almost certain death.

"No," she managed a word, finally. "You stopped him before he could do his worst." Her tone carried the faintest hint of worship.

He held her hand, as cool to the touch as the golden-eyed shadow, and led her to the street lamp. Even in the safety of the light, he kept his fingers curled around hers. He seemed to have been cut from marble, with a face as chiseled and pale as a Grecian god. Although darkened by the moisture in the air, his blond crown seemed as if it had been woven from gold. He wore an expensive suit, black, and double-breasted with golden buttons atop a silk vest; a vest matched to the storm-blue of his eyes when he looked at her.

“There...” He lifted his hand, his umbrella balanced on the crook of his arm, and touched long fingers to her chin. Turning her face up to examine her, he offered a small, polite smile. That close, she smelled a scent of age like old books from him, only amplified by the moisture in the air. “Safe and sound, but not for long in this weather and this darkness.”

He let his fingers drop away from her face, and keeping his hand on hers, he bent forward in a half bow. “It would please me to escort you to my home. I can spare you the rain.” His blue eyes lifted to hold hers.

Maggie nearly did not hear his words for how intently she lost herself in his eyes. They seemed to go on forever in depth, so perfect a match for features almost divine. “Me?” Her fingers fluttered to rest on the fullness of her bosom. “You’re wanting me?” She almost seemed surprised by the fact, and then, as if the very indecent proposal finally sank in to remind her of who and what she was, she stood a little straighter. He was not some dashing lord swept off his feet by the damsel he had rescued from a fate worse than death. He was a man like any other, walking the darkness of Easthaven’s streets looking for the pleasures he could pay for.

“I’m not cheap, I’ll have you know.” She looked him dead in the eye. Who knew the next time she would land an offer from a well-padded noble such as he appeared to be. She would have to make tonight pay for as many more days of boarding as she could eek out of it. “And I don’t do those strange things. No whips and such. Just a toss, but I’ll make it one you won’t soon forget.”

The man nodded, extending his hand into the darkness. “My Lady. My carriage is not far. Please. I assure you, my intention was far more humanitarian.” He leaned in close to offer a quiet murmur: “But I am sure you will not be disappointed by my wealth.”



The carriage ride swept them from town, into the heart of the surrounding forests. The man filled their time with polite, if distant conversation, asking of her name and life as he sat alongside of her in the carriage. After well over an hour, the trees began to clear, and by the time the mud and

dirt of the off-beaten paths gave way to the tamed length of a courtyard, the rain had picked up to a thundering pace.

He stepped out first, splashing into a puddle on the cobblestone and offered his hand to help her vault over the water. “Mind your step, Maggie.” Before them, like a white-armored sentinel in the fog, stood a castle. Its walls and spires reached skyward, disappearing into the rain, seemingly without an end.

Maggie had never seen anything so grand as the castle before them. In town, she had heard such a place might exist, but no one seemed to have ever actually seen it. Most only knew of the woman in black who sometimes rode into town and out again. The woman never shopped or did anything else to indicate she worked as a housekeeper for the place others whispered she came from. There were none in town who claimed employment there, and surely something so big as this needed a small country of servants for management.

Distracted, the woman settled into the escort of her company for the evening. No, his wealth did not disappoint at all. Fortune had finally shone on her with favor. The first stirring of excitement turned in her stomach. She might be working tonight, but this golden god was by far the most beautiful man she had ever seen. Despite the gentleness of his touch, she knew he would be, if nothing else, a satisfying ride. All things considered, she felt like a princess being invited to a ball, and she found she could not wait until the dancing began.

Maggie’s escort led her beyond the large, front doors, through the gilded halls, and past tall paintings and Roman-styled sculptures on white pedestals. With a hand against her back and the other still curled lightly around her own, he encouraged her deeper into the castle. Finally, they arrived in a white-paneled room, trimmed with gold. Plush, high-backed chairs of blue velvet and comfortable sofas and chaise lounges were arranged in such a way as to house a multitude of guests. The walls themselves were bare, save for a large mirror hanging above the fireplace, reflecting the entirety of the room. He stepped between the seats, leading her directly across from the fireplace to the back of the room where the longest sofa waited.

“The ride and the excitement have left you weary, Maggie.” He helped to ease her down into the gold embroidered pillows. Touching a hand to her cheek, he lifted her face, and his eyes found hers again.

“Oh, I’m not at all ti —” Maggie began the polite denial of the blond’s suggestion she needed rest, but it faded away into a hesitant and confused silence as she found herself lost in his eyes again.

Everything about her body felt soft and heavy, as if she could not quite control her own movements. She wanted to sit up straighter but found herself leaning into a recline.

“It is all right,” he assured her, resting her head on the pillow and tucking her arm across her middle. “You can sleep now.”

“Yes...” she murmured. “So very tired. Maybe just a little nap...” And after? She could not remember what came next. Her gaze fluttered, a beat of wings, as she tried to fight the power his eyes alone seemed to hold over her. She managed to raise her hand toward his face. “*Beautiful...*” she slurred softly before giving way to the encroaching darkness.

Fifteen minutes under normal circumstances might mean any number of innocuous things. It could be the amount of time remaining before the bell for dinner might sound, the duration of a musical performance, or the precise time it might take to complete two dances on one’s dance card. In the case of the not-so-honorable Maggie Hansen, late of 10 Whitting Alley of the town of Easthaven, it was the amount of time it took for the last drop of her life’s blood to be drained from a body as sadly shrunken in death, as it had been ample in life.

A rusty red stain now sullied the low neckline of her gown, and the round column of either side of her throat showed puncture wounds: some neat and clean edged, while others bore evidence of a more jagged savagery. Part of the bodice of her dress had been torn away and the round fullness of one breast had been likewise punctured in a grotesque echo of a lover’s kiss. The length of rounded arms bore witness to an onslaught with wounds that peppered her thick wrists and forearms. For all of this seeming savagery, an expression of ecstatic pleasure remained frozen on the face of the woman, sealed there with her last breath in a macabre tribute to the price paid for the theft of her future.

Maggie Hansen did not want to die, but she died in a haze of pleasure.