

Chapter One



It was getting easier to know she was around. In the gray of the season, with the sky as bland as a decades-old theater set, her amber hair served as a beacon—a flare among the rocky cliffs of his curiosity—warning him of the dangers ahead. He was no longer distracted by bright summer flowers, nor could she blend in with the daring autumn leaves as they had, by that time, finally fallen. For days, the sun had kept its distance behind thick winter clouds and, as a result, she was the only burst of color among the slate stones of the small German town. That particular day, he easily spotted her among the dark trees that shadowed the gravel beside the river and, as usual, Markus only vaguely watched her. Just enough to keep his distance.

Her umbrella that morning was small, black, and without decoration. She tipped it, as she tipped herself, over the waist-high wall of stacked stone beside the river. A gloved hand kept her balance on the wall while the other deftly manipulated both the umbrella and a slim, black case by its handle. Her gray scarf hung down toward the water.

He heard a splash when he went by her. Markus kept his eyes forward. She never saw him.

Several yards to the right of the girl he was avoiding, the trees and view of the river were interrupted by a small shop. It was a crumbling shop to match the crumbling sky. The owner, a conjured opposite of his chosen surroundings, was just outside the door, his arms crossed against a crisp, white shirt, sullenly awaiting Markus' approach.

"Enjoying your walk?" Bach asked in his usual accusatory tone.

Markus ignored the question. "I could use a good amount of 'Slug in the garden of Mr. Gian Napolo,'" he pronounced, as if he had any right to.

Bach sighed and led him into the paint shop where he immediately procured a large jar of greenish liquid. Then, as if Markus could be fooled, or perhaps just to make a point, Bach moved to the window, his wingtip shoes clicking elegantly over the pallid tile floor, and drew the shade as the girl approached on the path.

"Anything else?" the paintmaker asked, and tossed the jar to the slightly annoyed painter.

"Maybe, you know, a little trust." Markus held the jar up to the light. The contents lapped against the glass and, for a moment, he was certain he saw something swimming in it.

Bach re-crossed his arms. "It hardens quickly," he said, in lieu of the obvious retort. "I'd say you've got about thirty minutes before it's unusable."

Several hours after the tepid sunset, Bach, the paintmaker, and Gian, the professor of history, appeared together at the painter's door. In his satchel, Bach carried three bottles of wine. In Gian's satchel, was a thicket of papers he would likely begin grading at the table while the meal was still in front of him.

Markus led them to the dining room where supper had already been set out.

As they sat, Bach eyed the painter ominously. "Hello...there."

"Yes, hello," Gian repeated, less ominously, already distracted by something in his bag.

Bach emptied his satchel onto the table. The wine bottles rolled until each one precisely stopped at a diner's plate.

Markus righted his bottle. "What is it?" he asked impatiently.

Bach smiled. "Well, Gian and I were talking on the way here. We were wondering how long it's been."

"How long it's been since what?" Markus asked, though he knew already.

"Certainly that girl in Lisbon wasn't the last," Bach chided with a barely disguised smirk. "That was months ago."

Gian looked up from his bag to scowl at Markus. "That was the worst vacation of my life. I couldn't get that...smell out of my bathrobe. I had to throw it out."

"So many casualties..." The words slithered from Bach's mouth like a snake—a snake that withered and died under the painter's glare.

"I didn't kill her." Markus snatched the corkscrew off the table. "She just died."

Bach and Gian shared an eye roll as the painter stabbed the cork with unintentional vehemence.

“Is there no one else you can harass in the middle of the night?”

Violett’s parents had arrived home sometime after she’d gone to bed and Violett had woken to find her mother rummaging through the teenager’s armoire.

In the dark room, lit only by the light from the hall, Helen Pauler squinted at her. “Go back to sleep,” she said. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Violett sat up, disturbing the tiny black cat that barely bothered to arch its back before resettling under the covers.

“What time is it?” Violett asked through a yawn.

“I just don’t know,” her mother sighed. “Pretend I’m not here.”

“I don’t think so.” Violett rubbed her eyes.

“You do understand that I’m not saying you are boring...”

“Thanks. Should I be helping you?”

“Helping me what?”

Violett winced as a once carefully folded shirt was shoved back into a drawer from which it hadn’t come. “I don’t know, but you’re up to something.”

“The underwear thing occurred to me on the plane,” her mother went on. “I mean, you’ve got to be like, what, seventeen, and look at this...” Helen Pauler pulled a pair of blue, cotton panties out of the back pocket of her dusty jeans. “This is unacceptable.”

“Were you going to take those with you?”

“Maybe.” She closed the final drawer and sat with her daughter on the bed. “I miss you when we’re gone.”

“Me, too. I’m fifteen, by the way,” Violett told her, as if she didn’t know her mother was kidding.

Helen Pauler patted her daughter’s leg. “Shh. We’ll go shopping tomorrow.”

“No, thanks.” Violett fell back against the pillow. “Goodnight.” She received a kiss on the cheek.

“Goodnight.” Her mother paused before planting a kiss on the other cheek. “Don’t tell your father I was in here. He thinks I have dysentery.”

Violett rolled her eyes in good humor, comforted by the odd behavior her parents always brought with them. “Thanks for coming home.”

The train was crowded. Violett clutched her many shopping bags in one hand and her mother in the other as she was pulled through the narrow hallway to a compartment marked ‘Reserved.’

They sat just as the train lurched forward.

“You see,” her mother said, removing her gloves. “A few extra minutes in the station when we arrived and we’re not stuck riding in the bike car for two hours. It was the best advice my mother ever gave me.”

Violett smiled. “I thought ‘Don’t sleep with a—’”

“—That too.” Helen Pauler pointed a stern finger at her daughter. “That most.”

Violett kicked her bags. “Do you think all the new underwear will allow the friends I know are out there somewhere to find me?”

“I had them sew in the homing beacons at the counter.”

Violett smiled. “Very cool.”

The Paulers owned a hillside vineyard, a modest winery, and a modest house. All had been in the family for generations. The house was charming and the vines were charming but the 55 steps that veered off the road and climbed the hill up to the front door were cruel reminders that perfection came at a price. It was at the bottom of these steps that her mother paused.

“If your father doesn’t install a ski lift next week I’m going to take one of these grape vines and strangle him to death.” Helen Pauler sighed before slowly beginning the ascent. “I’m so serious this time.”

Violett wasn’t at all concerned.

Though Violett’s father had never stopped producing the wine that his grandfather had made a staple at most common tables in the area, Alex Pauler and his wife were known mostly as the good-looking archaeology team frequently on television. Their fluent English had secured them a spot in many documentaries and they’d often been consultants on movie projects within their areas of expertise,

which happened, between the two of them, to be many. This meant that several times a year, for weeks at a time, Helen and Alex Pauler were living somewhere other than the vineyard.

Their invitation to Violet to join them whenever school allowed had been, for the most part, completely ignored. Violet wasn't uninterested in seeing the world, she just couldn't bear to leave Fortuna, the tiny cat who'd followed her home from school one day. For this reason, Maria, a childhood friend of her mother's, had been asked to live at the Pauler house and take care of Violet's basic needs when her parents couldn't.

Though Maria shared the name of the legendary Austrian governess, Violet had never been able to convince her to sing or go canoeing. Maria was tall, gorgeous, and nice enough, but never actually got around to concerning herself with Violet's whereabouts. When Violet and Maria did happen to accidentally run into each other, Violet was almost consistently in the middle of some ridiculous activity, like stuffing her pockets full of raw beans, or dunking the bottom tips of her light hair into her teacup. Violet considered the fault entirely Maria's. The woman had no sense of timing.

Violet watched from atop the kitchen table, Fortuna in her lap, as her mother and Maria made a spectacle of assembling a birthday cake.

Her father came into the room and sat on the table with Violet.

"Happy Birthday," she said, patting his leg as her mother had done to her the night before.

"It was a brilliant day," he agreed reverently. Though it was Violet's birthday, her parents never failed to congratulate themselves on their spectacular production.

Then they watched—the way one watches a war documentary—as the two women flipped the cake upside down after the first failed frosting attempt in order to get a 'fresh palette.' Her mother had written '17' instead of '16.'

"I don't deserve this," Violet muttered.

Her father sighed. "I'm bringing your new mother up from the basement any day now."

Markus was disappointed with himself. He had been in control for so long and it was a shame that he'd caved without so much as an idea or strong desire to do so. It had only taken a glance from her at the restaurant where they'd both been dining alone.

While most of the other restaurant patrons were huddled outside on the sidewalk, attempting to be calm about the fact that they'd just witnessed a pretty young woman suffocate on the floor of their favorite bistro, Markus stared down at the contorted, lifeless body that had, just moments earlier, been wrapped in his poisonous embrace. It didn't make him sad. Not anymore. And that surprised him.

The ambulance arrived and Markus was pushed aside. He checked the clock on the wall. It had only been an hour. He could easily make the last train back to town. He walked out the back way, past the bathroom he'd followed her into and where he'd lost all control when she'd pushed him up against the wall and began to kiss him. He took a cab to the train station. He wouldn't tell Bach and Gian. It would just upset them.

Violett sat beside her music tutor as he writhed on the couch. Though dressed sharply in a tweed suit, and growing what appeared to Violett to be some kind of beard, he looked like a child in the middle of a tantrum. Her hand went to his back to comfort him but his mouth snapped at her. She tried not to laugh.

"Maybe it's okay," she tried. "It could have floated down the river to some other girl who's actually capable of wielding its power."

He lifted his head off the pillow. "You're a monster," he hissed.

"Yeah." She returned her hand to his back. "But you can relax. I'm not after you."

Violett got up and pulled a book from the shelf. As her tutor righted himself and smoothed his suit, his devoted pupil sat in a chair and began to read.

"Ugh!"

Markus looked up from his magazine to Bach, who tossed a bread roll at him. "What?"

"Don't read at the table. I'm getting car sick."

"I suppose that makes sense to you..." Markus baited, but closed the magazine.

Bach took another roll out of the basket and buttered it. "So what were you reading about?"

Markus smiled at Bach's predictable hostility-turned-curiosity. "Just some kids," he answered.

"What's wrong with them?"

"Nothing. They died."

"Oh." Bach shifted his position. "Did you kill them?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"—By the way..." Gian looked up from the essay he was grading. "Has anyone noticed the scarf I'm wearing tonight?"

The other two looked at him.

"Well," Gian continued, "it was a gift. You can both be rightly ashamed that you didn't think of it first."

"Oh, just get on with it, man," Bach demanded, but with a smile, hinting that he was in a rare good mood.

"I am." Gian wiped his mouth before proceeding. "Did I tell you she's making the costumes for the play they're doing at the school?"

"You did!" Bach replied, exaggerating his delight. "What a clever girl!"

Gian tossed him a stern look, which Bach fluently avoided.

"That's a little out of character isn't it?" Markus piped in. "I thought she kept her distance from that kind of thing."

"Did you really...?" Bach muttered, leaning toward the painter.

"Well," Gian replied, either ignoring or having not heard Bach's comment, "usually, yes. But her mother went in for a teacher meeting and told someone how she just sits in her room and sews this together with that..." He shook his head. "The poor girl was ambushed when she went to class the next day by some do-gooder teachers."

"Can she really sew?" Bach prompted, obviously knowing the best part of the story.

"No!" Gian replied eagerly to Markus. "What her mother had really walked in on was Violetta stapling her curtains together, you know, so they couldn't be opened. She had them on the bed when her mother came in and just assumed—"

"—her daughter was doing something normal?"

Gian scowled at Bach. "I don't like this. She's done nothing to you."

Bach chuckled. "You're right. I am sorry."

"Anyway..." Gian flung another look in Bach's direction. "I'm teaching her how to sew."

"You know how to sew?"

"Yes, Markus. A man should have many surprising talents."

"Oh." Markus drank some wine. "I didn't know that. Mine are all so obvious."

Violetta was sure that everything she was going to need in life she'd learned years ago. How to read, for example, had been helpful beyond, well, words. What had not been helpful, for example, was the quadratic equation. She'd only ever had use for that in school, and though school was, technically, her life at the moment, Violetta was pretty sure she'd be spending much more of her future not doing math. She knew that she hadn't mastered all the necessities, but she suspected that those things just took practice, not—not ever—a properly placed semi-colon. So, for the past year or so, Violetta had been getting up before dawn each morning and walking down the hill and through creepy river fog to school mostly for the sake of her desire to blend in.

Violetta had always been on speaking terms with her classmates but just barely; just enough to make them think she was shy, not malicious. She was actually neither. Observing from a distance was just more interesting to her. She had plenty of conversations with the celebrities in her head anyway, so she felt that her social bases were sufficiently covered.

Though the awareness that he was making a decision was minimal, Markus saw her coming and crossed the street. Over the years, she had become to him a common street hazard, like a crack in the sidewalk. Usually, he could automatically avoid her and never give it a second thought, which is probably why he didn't notice when she unintentionally mirrored his crossing. When he did notice, she was only a few steps away.

He panicked. He'd managed to sneak by her many times before, but the suddenness of the situation unnerved him and he darted into a store, knocking a mannequin's head off with his mismanaged bundle of canvas. Stunned, Markus watched the placid expression on the lifeless face as it rolled out the door, and before he got the sense to go after it, the girl was stooping down on the sidewalk, flicking the wooden head with vague concern. When she seemed satisfied that no great monstrosity had occurred, she picked up the head and came toward him.

Fearful as he was that he might have to explain himself, Markus stood rigidly in place, but the girl surprised him when she indifferently set the head down at the foot of the mannequin and, without more than a glance at the living man behind it, walked back out the door.

The paintmaker was waiting for him outside the shop, already on his third cigarette, chronicled by the pile on the windowsill.

"Your punctuality lacks umpf," Bach unenthusiastically chastised as soon as Markus was within earshot.

"Where's Gian?" Markus asked, instead of apologizing.

"He's got that girl until three."

Markus took a cigarette from the pack by the window. "I just saw her and she didn't look to be either coming or going from a music lesson."

Bach shook his head. "Poor bastard."

Markus used Bach's cigarette to light his own. "Nah. He loves it. I sort of envy him, actually." He exhaled slowly, to give the paintmaker an extra second to understand him. Then, "Did I say 'them?'"

"No." Bach pushed his cigarette against the wall, no doubt to keep himself from setting Markus on fire. Then, after adding the butt to the pile by the window, the paintmaker stepped forward, his cheek close to the painter's. "Whatever you're trying to tell me with these little hints, I don't want to know it."

Though Bach couldn't be fooled, Markus turned his expression to one of bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

Bach's stance softened, purposely disappointing the painter. "You have been paying an awful lot of attention to his stories lately."

"I'm a good friend," Markus retorted, but even he couldn't keep a straight face as he said this and his smile was quite large when he finished the words.

Bach pointed his finger at him. "He'll kill you. And if that doesn't work, I'll kill you."

Markus took a cigarette from Bach's pocket. "Looking forward to it."

He met a woman in a pub that night. A few hours later she just died.