

Chapter One

Tomorrow, someone else will die in my bed.

Someone died in it last month, which is how it came to be called mine.

The infernal clock moved confidently toward 1 a.m., and I turned my head to look at the window. The window of this room is a miserly gesture from the contractors, producing more fog than visage. I watched the gold orbs—the lamps on the lawn of the hospice sputtering off and on in the darkness—that dotted the fogged glass.

That was the last moment I lived as an *iver*, one whose eyes are veiled.

One orb did not sputter but moved, gliding between the others, moving closer to the window, growing larger and brighter until the light consumed the entire view. I winced from the searing glare and tried to shield my eyes, but the IV line pulled taut. Wrestling with the line to get some slack, I saw the next movement out of the corner of my eye. I bit down hard on my tongue, my body jerking in reflex, and felt the warm blood run back to my throat.

Outside, a hand wiped the fog away from the glass, and I watched the water beads running down the inside of my window. There was no searing light, only this mammoth hand with deep creases in the palms wiping down the window until we both could see each other. A man's face was against the glass, but no breath fogged his vision. He was a giant, grim man, with an ring in one ear and dark glasses, and he was staring in at me. Even through the morphine, fear snaked along my arms, biting into my stomach, constricting around my throat. I tried to scream, but I could only gulp air and heave little gasps. His expression did not change as he lifted his hands, curling them into fists. I flinched at the last moment, thinking him to be Death, expecting to receive the blow and die.

Then I grew suddenly warm, like the feeling you get stepping from an old, dark city library into the busy street and a warm spring sun.

Death didn't even hurt, I rejoiced. I could slip into it like I slipped onto that street, eyes down, my thoughts my own, and simply turn a corner and be gone. I lifted my fingers to beckon him. *Yes*, I thought. I saw the beautiful Rolex on my birdlike wrist and saw that it had stopped. *It is time*.

When I looked back up, he was beside me, staring down, not speaking. I wasn't dead. His frame was monstrously large, hitting what must be seven feet tall, with a width of muscle strapped across him that was inhuman. As he watched me, his chest didn't move, and his nostrils didn't flare, but heat and warm breath radiated from him. When he laid his hands across my eyes, I was too scared to move my head away. His palms covered most of my face, and a sharp buzzing drilled into every pore. He began to move his hands elsewhere, touching and bringing to life every splintered inch of my body. When he got to the cancer, with

one swollen lymph node visible even through my stained blue gown, he rested his hands there until the swelling sighed, and he swept it away with his hand.

“Wait!” I screamed.

I didn’t want to live. I hadn’t known that was going to be an option. I deserved to be damned. To return to my life was too much to ask of me. I was finished.

“You’ll still be dead by morning,” he reassured me. His voice was deep and clean, no telltale dialect or inflection. Taking off his glasses, I saw he had enormous gold eyes, with a black pinhole in the center that stayed round and cold. There was no white in them at all, and they were rimmed all the way around the outside with black. I stared at them, trying to remember where I had seen eyes like this. It had been years ago, this much I remembered.

I had to shake myself back to the present moment. Clearly, morphine was not setting well with me tonight. I wanted to die in peace. That’s what I paid these extravagant sums for. My hand moved to the nurses’ call button. Mariskka was just down the hall, waiting for her moment to steal my watch. I knew she’d come running.

He grabbed my hand, and the shock seared like a hot iron. Crying out, I shook him off and clutched my hand between my breasts, doing my best to sit up with my atrophied stomach muscles and tangled IV.

He leaned in. “I have something for you.”

“What?”

He leaned in closer. “A second chance.”

Second chances were not my forte. As the most celebrated editor in New York City, I had made a killing. I loved the words that trembling writers slid across my desk, those little black flecks that could destroy

their life's dream or launch a career. I bled red ink over every page, slashing words, cutting lines. No one understood how beautiful words were to me, why I tormented the best writers, always pushing them to bring me more. The crueller I was to the best of them, the more they loved me, like flagellants worshipping me as the master of their order. Only at the end, lying here facing my own death, did I understand why. They embraced the pain, thinking it birthed something greater than themselves. I saw how pitifully wrong they were. There was only pain. This is why I was ready to die. When you finish the last chapter and close the book, there is nothing but pain. It would have been better never to have written. Words betrayed me. And for that, I betrayed the best writer of them all.

"Burn any manuscripts that arrive for me," I had ordered my nurse, Marisska. "Tell them I'm already dead. Tell them anything."

"I'll let you write the truth," the man whispered. I focused on him again.

"I'm not a writer," I replied. My fear tumbled down into the dark place of my secrets.

"No, you're not," he answered. "But you coveted those best sellers, didn't you? You knew you could do better. This is your second chance."

It caught my attention. "How?"

"I will dictate my story to you," he said. "Then you'll die."

Taking dictation? My mouth fell open. "I'm in hell, aren't I?"

He tilted his head. "Not yet."

I pushed away from the pillows and grabbed him. Blisters sprang up on my palms and in between my fingers, but I gritted my teeth and spat out my words. "Who are you?"

“The first writer, the Scribe. My books lie open before the Throne and someday will be the only witness of your people and their time in this world. The stories are forgotten here, and the Day draws close. I will tell you one of my stories. You will record it.”

“Why me?”

“I like your work.”

I started laughing, the first time I had laughed since I had been brought to this wing of the hospice, where the dying are readied for death, their papers ordered and discreet pamphlets on “end-of-life options” left by quiet-soled salesmen. I laughed until I was winded. He rested his hand on my chest, and I caught my breath as he spoke.

“Let’s go find Marisska.”