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*To my beautiful, little sister, Alfrenique,
who is both tough and sweet.
I love you. Thank you for your service.*



PART ONE

CLARENCE, 1840

A very glanced at herself in the full-length mirror as her lady-in-waiting, Charlotte, styled her thick, coiled hair. Her dark birthmark covering the entire left side of her face and the way her belly rolled as she sat caused her to look away—she always looked away. There was nothing about her to admire, and her mother, Fiona, made sure she knew that. She had accepted this fact a long time ago, but today, she was feeling particularly self-conscious. Today was not an ordinary day. She was preparing to meet her future husband,

the King of Trenton, Christopher. Maybe God would smile upon her with kindness, and by some miracle, she would catch her husband's eyes and hold his affection.

Charlotte pulled Avery's hair out of her face and secured her coils with a beautiful pink bow. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and Avery noticed her nervousness.

"Charlotte, what's wrong?"

"You are the bravest person I know, Princess Avery. Be careful. Everyone is not always what they seem," said Charlotte.

She was going to ask Charlotte to elaborate but her mother walked into the room. When her mother saw her hair pulled out of her face, her brows furrowed, and her delicate nose wrinkled.

"Charlotte," Fiona paused, using her dainty fingers to massage her forehead. "Avery's hair must be combed into her face to distract the King from her obvious curse. He is already doing our kingdom a favor by marrying her. The man should not be forced to suffer beyond his measure."

Avery swallowed hard, willing herself to fight back her tears. Though she had heard her mother's disparaging comments many times, they still cut deep.

"Yes, your Majesty," said Charlotte with a curtsy.

Charlotte quickly removed the bow and Avery's wild hair tumbled into her face, covering her birthmark and her chubby cheeks. Fiona walked closer, but kept her distance, afraid that Avery's curse would somehow transfer to her.

"You may not be the most beautiful, but Avery, promise me you will do all you can to please the King. If he wants a docile queen, be that. If he wants his freedom, allow him the pleasure. Our kingdom is depending on you."

Her mother had already sold her to the King. He needed a wife with royal blood and her kingdom needed his resources and alliance. The thought of leaving the only home she had ever known brought her great discomfort. However, she would gladly endure a million uncertain fates if it benefited the people of Clarence. All honor to Clarence.

What would Father do if he were still alive?
she thought.

Her father, the former King of Clarence, was a man of the people. He loved them, and they loved him. Every decree he made or treaty he signed was intended to bring prosperity and advancement to Clarence. He taught her to put her territory first, and she would honor her father.

“Avery, are you listening to me?”

“Yes, Mother.”

Fiona gave her a half smile. “Good. Now hurry. The King’s men are waiting to escort you to him.”

* * *

Avery started shifting her weight; the lush, red seats of the King’s chariot were no longer comfortable after an hour of nonstop travel. During the entire ride, she had kept her gaze on the passing scenery, determined to remember every bit of Clarence in its agrarian beauty. Maybe she could visit soon after the wedding. Maybe not. Another

uncertainty. Regardless, nothing would separate her from her memories.

Now that they had finally made it out of Clarence, the view no longer appealed to Avery. Her gaze roamed the chariot, and she noticed the two guards responsible for her safety. She didn't know their names, but she would certainly offer her appreciation once they arrived at Trenton.

Suddenly, a wave of uncertainty, fear, and the thought of her soon-to-be husband rejecting her almost choked the little joy that Avery clung to. Yet, she held onto one thing: her soon-to-be husband, like her, cared for and was committed to the welfare of his people. At least they had that in common. That simple fact calmed her heart even as her mind wrestled with a sea of negative thoughts.

*What if the King cannot stand the sight
of me, like Mother? What if he takes one
look at me, realizes I'm cursed and sends
me back? What if—*

Suddenly, a single arrow pierced the neck of the royal guard sitting to her right. The blood from his wound gushed out and sprayed over her. She screamed as she spun her head in the direction the arrow came from. There was no one in the path of the chariot. Avery ducked low to protect herself. The injured guard folded over, and his heavy body crushed her. The driver in the front called out for her to take cover right before he was struck with an arrow. The chariot veered off the road, and Avery's entire world went black.



P A R T T W O

TRENTON

Avery's eyes popped open, and her wrists strained against the rigid ropes tying her to a metallic bed frame. She fought against the restraints, but all she was doing was rubbing her flesh raw.

"You are going to hurt yourself, Princess Avery of Clarence."

Avery's wild eyes darted to the corner of the room where she saw a giant of a man sitting, his dark chocolate eyes watching her intently. His brown complexion reflected hers, but his chiseled

features and unwavering focus intimidated her. However, she would not allow him to see how much he affected her.

“Let me go now,” said Avery through gritted teeth.

The man stood, and Avery’s voice got caught in her throat when he straightened to his six-foot-five height—based on her best guess. Her father was six feet even and this menacing stranger was inches taller than her father. The stranger swaggered over to her; the air of confidence he exuded spoke of his importance. He sat to the side of her, his large body invading her personal space and causing the bed to sink under his weight. There was nowhere for Avery to go, and she couldn’t strike him, making her angrier.

“I can’t do that, Princess Avery.”

“Why not?”

He leaned closer, his face inches from hers. His fresh scent wafted through Avery’s nostrils, and she hated to admit that he smelled wonderful.

“You are about to make the biggest mistake of your life—a mistake that will not only ruin your kingdom, but it will also ruin mine. I care about the people of Trenton too much to let that happen.”

Avery’s eyes expanded as she realized that her soon-to-be-husband, the King of Trenton, Christopher, had kidnapped her. This made no sense. Both kingdoms decided their marriage would be mutually beneficial, but now that she was face-to-face with him, he was having second thoughts.

It’s my curse. It’s always my curse.

Her eyes took in his handsome face, and she realized that perhaps he wanted someone equally as beautiful. Not a cursed woman like her. He deserved that much. Christopher was as gorgeous as he was described to her. However, they missed one small detail about him—the scar along the right side of his cheek. It didn’t take away from his looks. Instead, it added to his rugged, masculine charm.

A boldness consumed Avery, and she spoke her mind.

“Christopher, King of Trenton, you are an unfair man. A man who does not keep his word. I know I may not be to your liking, but we agreed to solidify our kingdoms through marriage. Without this alliance and partnership, both of our kingdoms would suffer. Is that what you want?”

He raised his dark brows. “Not to my liking? You don’t know what I like, Princess Avery.”

Something in his gaze and tone made her feel seen. She shook off the feeling, knowing that she was deceiving herself.

“Then why are you sending me away?” Avery asked, her voice low and hesitant.

“Firstly, I’m not Christopher. My name is Cole. Secondly, I’m not sending you anywhere. I need your help.”



P A R T T H R E E

With her heart thudding in her chest and deafening her ears, Avery fought against the ropes harder, cutting through her skin. Blood trickled down from her wrists, but she didn't care because her goal was to get away from Christopher...Cole, or whoever he was.

"Stop it. You are going to hurt yourself, Avery," he said, then placed his large hands on her arms to still her.

"Don't touch me. Don't you dare touch me!" She spat at him, but he was quick and dodged.

He stepped away from her, placing his hands up in surrender. Avery ignored her stinging wounds and kept her focus on her kidnapper.

Show no fear, Avery. Show no fear to your enemy, her father's words replayed in her mind.

"I promise you. I mean you no harm. If you could just give me a moment, then I can explain all of this to you. Please give me the chance."

Cole's eyes were kind, but she wouldn't allow that fact to soften her defenses. She wanted nothing to do with him. All she wanted was to be married to the King of Trenton, Christopher.

"Explain," she said, her back stiff as the soft bed beneath her cradled her form.

Cole told her he and Christopher were twins, with Christopher being born exactly thirty minutes before him. Traditions dictated that Christopher was supposed to be the rightful ruler when their father died.

"But our father, in all his wisdom, knew the man that Christopher was. A man who would bring

disgrace to our family's name and to the people of Trenton. Our father blessed me, declaring me King before his last breath."

"If what you are saying is true, then why aren't you the King of Trenton?"

"What I'm saying is the truth. My brother stole the crown from me through dishonesty. At the time, our father declared me fit to rule, but only the three of us were present in the room—our father, Christopher, and me. Instead of obeying our father's dying wish, he decided to lie to the elders. It became his word versus mine. The elders judged in his favor; in favor of tradition."

"What do you need with me?" asked Avery.

He shortened the distance between them. "Marry me."

Though Cole's story was convincing, she couldn't confirm if he was telling her the truth. Whether he was or wasn't didn't matter. If she failed to marry Christopher, the actual King of Trenton, in ten days, then their marriage treaty would be void. In their agreement, their marriage would mean a

steady supply of food, wood, and oil for the people of Clarence. How could she turn her back on her people to help a man she barely knew?

Avery shook her head. "I'm sorry for what happened to you, but I will not forfeit my people's future. They need me."

"You're just as selfish as my brother."

His words were sharp, affecting her more than she'd like to admit. All her life, she was raised to think about the good of the Kingdom. Every move she made was for her people.

Selfish? I'm not selfish, she thought, inwardly soothing herself.

"Your father once thought you were an honorable man, right? What would he think of you now?"

Cole opened his mouth then closed it. His jaw tightened then he turned and left, slamming the door behind him.



P A R T F O U R

Hours passed, and Avery remained tied down, alone, and frantic, trying to figure out a way to escape. She had given up on trying to force her wrists from her restraints because it was causing her more harm than good. For the first time since her capture, she surveyed herself. Her pink dress had splatters of bright red blood on the front. The smell of iron filled her lungs, making her a bit nauseous. Avery shifted her weight with a quarter turn to her left to take a look outside the room's window. From where she lay, she could see the mountains in the distance.

Avery was in a foreign land with what seemed like no way out. As she considered her fate, tears pricked her eyes. The bedroom door opened, and Avery turned her face to conceal her emotions.

“I brought you nourishment,” said Cole.

Avery kept her wet gaze from him. “I don’t want anything from you. Just untie me and let me go.”

Cole sighed. “Avery don’t be stubborn. Eat and gain your strength. You must be hungry.”

Fresh tears rolled down her eyes and saturated her cheeks. “I’m not stubborn. I’m selfish, remember? And what do you mean that I must be hungry? I may be plump, but I’m not greedy,” she said, her voice raised.

Silverware clattered, then she heard his footsteps approach her.

“Look at me,” he said.

Avery ignored him until he placed his fingers under her chin and turned her gaze to meet his.

“I meant no disrespect, Avery. I’m sorry. It’s just that you’ve traveled long, and I just thought... Please accept my offering.”

“I want nothing, and I mean nothing, from you. Leave me alone.”

Cole’s face fell, but Avery didn’t feel an ounce of guilt. She turned her face towards the window and waited for him to leave. When he left, she thought about how to escape and get to her future husband. She wasn’t sure where she was, but she was determined to leave.

More time passed and the brilliant sunlight was replaced by darkness, and that’s when Cole returned to her room. She didn’t ignore him then, watching as he entered with a small stack of books. Books were her weakness, and she almost propped up to investigate the titles—almost. Quickly, she reprimanded herself and relaxed her head and neck, feigning disinterest.

“I brought some books for you. Maybe you’d like to read them,” he said.

He sat in the chair at the foot of her bed and began reading the titles and summaries of each book. Avery wanted to rip the books from his grasp and read every one of them. She did all she could to contain her excitement, but a small squeal slipped out. There was no helping it.

“Good, you like those titles. I was hoping you would.”

“I don’t read much,” she said.

“Liar,” he said, then a stupid smile stretched along his lips.

Avery’s heart sped up and she squirmed under his charm. She wasn’t used to this much attention and she was both uncomfortable and exhilarated at the same time.

“You don’t know anything about me,” said Avery.

“We could change that.”

Avery really needed to get away from him. “I would like a bath. I’m covered in blood, and I feel disgusting.”

Cole paused to consider before he agreed. "I'll draw you a bath."

All Avery had to do was wait until he untied her and then she would take him down and escape. In the time she was there, she hadn't heard or seen anyone else but him. Once she subdued him, no one would stop her from escaping. She smiled to herself.

"Are you ready?" he asked, pulling her back to the present.

"Yes."

With a gentle touch, he removed the rope from her left wrist, but before he did the same to her right, he stared down at her.

"Don't do anything stupid, Avery."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I want to feel clean. Is that a crime?"

He continued making direct eye contact with her as he removed the rope from her right wrist.

Freedom, she inwardly screamed, relishing the way her circulation was restored to her hands.

Cole helped her out of the bed and walked behind her as she made her way to the bathroom. She stopped at the door frame and spun around to face him.

“You aren’t following me in there,” she said, pointing to the bathroom.

“I had no plans to. Everything is ready for you. Enjoy. I’ll be standing right here.”

When the bathroom door closed, Avery started looking around. The bathroom had no window, so she had to find another way out. Yes, she was covered with blood and a bath would be heavenly, but she had a greater goal. She hit the water a few times to prevent Cole from growing suspicious. Avery then ripped the hem of her dress and secured it into her pocket.

“Oh, my goodness,” she screamed, then kicked the tub.

“Avery, are you all right in there?” asked Cole, pounding on the door.

She didn't answer. Instead, she positioned herself to the side of the door and readied herself for a fight.

"Dammit, I'm coming in."

Cole kicked the door open. His forehead wrinkled as his gaze searched for her. Avery kicked him hard in his sensitive member and watched as his knees buckled. While he groaned, and his face contorted in pain, she punched him in the nose. Cole's large body hit the floor with a loud thud, and she ran out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom. Avery bolted for the window. After a few tries, she was unsuccessful at opening the window. Unwilling to give up, Avery grabbed the chair Cole had been sitting on earlier and was about to smash the center of it when Cole held her arm.

She hadn't heard him coming. For such a big guy, he was able to move as if his feet were padded—when he needed to. Avery flashed him off and hurled the chair in his direction, but he dodged it. He tried grabbing her, but she kicked him, and he backed away from her for a second. The distance she had been awarded with the kick was quickly

swallowed up when he charged at her and caught the sleeve of her dress.

“Have you gone mad woman?” he asked her.

One slap to his throat temporarily subdued him, bringing him to his knees. Avery took the ripped material of her dress and wrapped it tightly around his neck. She pulled harder and harder, hoping to choke him to sleep—she had no plan to murder him. With one hand, he grabbed at the cloth, and with the other hand, he yanked her forward, causing her to loosen her grip on him. He slammed her to the ground and then threw his body on top of her, his grip firm on her wrists that were positioned above her head. The two were panting, blood trickling from his nose. It didn’t look broken, so there was nothing to feel guilty about.

“I told you not to do anything stupid, Avery.”

She tried squirming out of his hold, but that did not work. “It was worth a try. If you are expecting me to apologize, just know that it isn’t going to happen.”

“Hell, who taught you how to fight like that?”

PART FOUR

“My father. Give me a sword and I’ll show you how well I can defend myself,” she said in between breaths.

“A beauty and a fighter,” he said, a wicked smile on his face.



P A R T F I V E

A fter three days of being tied to the bed and Cole visiting her four times a day — three for meals plus hygiene and one for reading — he brought her some good news. Nothing would beat him telling her that she was free to go, but this would have to suffice.

“I’m taking you out for some fresh air today,” he said.

Avery’s eyes searched his. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll fight you, win and escape?”

“There are risks to everything. I’m willing to take that risk. But we all know I’ll win if we get into a fight. *Again.*”

He removed her restraints, and Avery took some time to wiggle her fingers and rotate her wrists. She sprung off the bed, and it was then her eyes landed on the beautiful, pink cotton dress he had brought for her to change into after her morning bath.

“A new dress, a bath and now fresh air? Are you doing all of this so your neighbors don’t get suspicious?”

Cole stepped closer to her and spun her around so that her back was facing him.

“I have no neighbors,” he said before gathering her hair and securing it with a ribbon.

Avery yanked the pink ribbon out of her hair, and her mother’s poisonous words resurfaced in her mind. “My hair can’t be pulled back.”

Cole took the ribbon out of her hand and tried to secure it into her hair again, but she stepped away from him.

“Why not?” he asked.

Avery quickly brought her long hair forward to cover the left side of her face. "I'm ready to go outside if you are."

"Avery?"

"Are we still going outside, Cole?" she asked.

"Yes, after you get ready."

She took her time, savoring the fresh, warm water splashing on her skin. Sweet oils were laid out for her in the bathroom, and she generously applied them to her skin following her bath. She left the bathroom to find Cole sitting and waiting. When his eyes landed on her, he stood and then walked over to her. He reached for her and looped his arm through hers, and the two stepped outside the room and into the hallway of a modest, wooden-framed home. Avery scrutinized every inch of the one-story flat as she and Cole walked through the abode. The build appeared structurally sound but cheap. Based on what Cole claimed, he was technically a Prince.

What Prince lived in a little wooden box of a house?

Was he lying to me? she thought, then looked up at him.

“What is it?” he asked, unlooping their arms and allowing his hand to descend to the small of her back.

If he was lying, his eyes didn’t betray him. Avery shook her head then returned her focus ahead. Her attention was then suddenly diverted to a closed door at the end of the hallway where the sound of chatter could be heard. Instead of exiting through the front door, Cole led Avery to the door where the voices had grown louder. Without knocking, he opened it, and Avery counted ten men. They were stocky and fierce but quickly stood in Cole’s presence with their heads bowed.

“Your Majesty,” the men sounded as one voice.

“I am taking Princess Avery to explore the grounds,” said Cole.

They looked up, and all eyes were directed towards her. Avery watched their expressions, and their faces remained neutral, as if they didn’t notice that she was cursed.

“Yes, Sir,” they said.

Cole led her out of the room, and the two went outside. Avery stopped and took a lung-filling inhale, slowly releasing the air. The air was refreshing, and the rural backdrop brought her peace.

“You really don’t have neighbors,” she said.

Avery looked at the small wooden home, which appeared much bigger inside than it did from where she stood outside.

“I don’t lie,” he said.

Avery watched as he lowered himself to the grass. His eyes remained on her.

“A Prince living in a place like this.” Avery gestured towards the wooden home. “I want to believe you, but something doesn’t make sense.”

Cole patted the portion of the ground beside him. Avery obliged and sat.

“When my brother took the throne, he got rid of anyone that opposed his rule. I was the first to go, and ten royal guards came with me. He threatened

me with death if I ever returned to the palace. With me out of the Kingdom, Christopher has chosen to withhold my inheritance. However, I'm more resourceful than he thinks."

Avery shook her head, satisfied with his explanation.

"I've answered your question truthfully. Answer mine. Why did you almost break my fingers earlier for trying to secure your hair with a ribbon?"

Avery exhaled, trying to calm her nerves as more of her mother's words broke through her psyche. She swallowed the lump in her throat and blurted out the truth—the ugly truth.

"I'm cursed."

She gathered her hair back, allowing him to see her entire face. Now that there was no hiding, she wasn't sure how he would react. She closed her eyes, unwilling to see the disgust that would inevitably grace his face.

Maybe he'll get up and leave? Maybe he'll finally release me, afraid of the curse's possible transferable effect? Maybe he'll —

She felt his hand run over the left side of her face, and his tender touch caused her to open her eyes. Cole's chocolate-colored eyes were bright with curiosity—no disgust, no fear.

"This isn't a curse, Avery." He smiled. "It adds to your beauty, not take away from it."

Tears sprung from Avery's eyes and she couldn't control them. His thumbs wiped them away.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," said Cole.

"I..." She paused to allow herself the opportunity to string together a comprehensive thought. "You remind me of my father."

"I'll have you know that I'm not that old. Don't allow my height to fool you."

Avery chuckled. "No, no. I wasn't calling you old, Cole. My father knew how to make me feel seen and worthy. I haven't felt that way since he died. Well, until you."

PART FIVE

“You are worthy and anyone who tries to make you feel less can go to hell.”

Avery reached up and touched his forearm.
“Thank you.”



P A R T S I X

Eveing came and Avery found herself lost in a world of fiction as Cole sat by the foot of the bed reading what she assumed was a dull, thick nonfiction. Avery looked over at the cover of his book and rolled her eyes—just as she assumed.

“I saw that,” he said.

She covered her face with her book.

“Don’t play innocent,” said Cole.

Avery lowered her book, unable to help the teasing smile that pulled on her lips. “What are you reading anyway?”

“The Life and Death of the War King by—”

Avery feigned a yawn, causing Cole to shake his head.

“All right, what are you reading?”

With a large smile plastered on her face, Avery moved closer and shoved the book near his face.

“The Scandalous Diaries of a—”

Cole interrupted her with a round of ‘boos’. Avery slapped his knee, which resulted in him offering her a half-hearted apology. Soon, they fell into another comfortable silence until Cole’s confession disrupted the moment.

“I was selfish and wrong for detaining you against your will. I thought I was doing what was good for Trenton.” He exhaled. “I fooled myself into thinking that I was in the right. But causing you suffering was never my intention. Avery, I never wanted to harm you. I just wanted to see Trenton restored to its former glory. I’ll escort you to my brother’s kingdom tomorrow.”

Avery didn't miss the haze of emotions that clouded his eyes. There was no denying that his guilt was crushing him.

"Please forgive me," he said, his eyes searching hers.

Avery slipped her hand into his. "You are forgiven. I understand the desperation to do whatever you can for your people. We were raised to put a whole nation before ourselves. If I wasn't thinking about Clarence, I would never have agreed to marry a complete stranger. But here I am. I just hope he doesn't see my curse —"

Cole's look grew intense, and Avery cleared her throat before correcting herself.

"I mean my beautiful addition. I hope your brother doesn't see it and take off running. The truth is, Clarence needs this alliance as much as Trenton does."

"I still think marrying my brother is a mistake, but I commend your bravery. If he looks or treats you as anything less than the most beautiful woman

he has ever laid eyes on then he is both blind and stupid.”

Avery’s cheeks heated up and she turned away from him. Cole gently returned her attention to him.

“I mean every word, Avery.”

“I know you do. Thank you for your kindness.”

Cole nodded then stood. “I’ll let you get some sleep before we travel to the palace in the morning.”

“Oh. Good night, Cole.”

He stood then walked to the door.

“Wait. Aren’t you going to tie me back up?”

Cole turned around, a sensual smirk on his face. “Only if you want me to, Avery.”

Words failed to leave her salivating mouth.

“Good night, beautiful,” he said, then closed her door.



P A R T S E V E N

A very wasn't sure she could sleep after Cole's sultry look and compliment. After several attempts of talking herself down from her emotional high, she was finally able to close her eyes and fall asleep. However, one hour of restless sleep later and she was up again. A movement caught her eye, and she quickly sat up in bed, hoping her tired eyes were playing tricks on her. Suddenly, arms reached out in the darkness and grabbed her off the bed. Before she could scream for Cole, a cloth gag suffocated her attempt.

"We must go now," whispered a masked man.

The next thing Avery knew, she was being rushed out of the room through the window. The night was still, but her heart and mind raced with worries. She tried punching and kicking her kidnappers, but when that failed, she resorted to scratching. They bound her hands and placed her into the back of a chariot. Then off they went. Avery glanced back at the modest abode she had grown familiar with as a single tear rolled down her cheek.

Cole.

* * *

Avery woke up hoping that what she remembered about last night was just an awful dream. The gold trimmings on the walls of the large room, the sweet, light fragrance that lingered in the air and the silk bedding that hugged her skin made her heart sink. This was not Cole's humble abode. She quickly leaped off the bed and was about to scurry out the large wooden door when raised voices coming from the other side stopped her.

"Who did you bring me?" said the loudest voice.

“The Princess of Clarence. Princess Avery Montgomery of Clarence, your Majesty.”

“That is no Princess. Tell me the truth at once, who have you brought into my palace?”

Avery heard some scuffling followed by an ear-splitting scream. She ran back to the bed and hid her face under the covers before the door opened. Large footsteps assaulting the floor caused her heart to quicken. Then the room grew still.

“Uncover yourself,” said a commanding voice.

With trembling hands, Avery pulled the covers down and faced the authoritative figure staring back at her. Her mouth gaped open, and she saw the spitting image of Cole, except with darker, less kind eyes and no scar. The large man stepped away and turned his face.

“Your mother never told me you were *marked*.”

Avery knew that look all too well, and she tried to hold back her tears as she spoke, her voice soft and timid.

“I wish she was honest with you about my condition.”

“I wish she was too.” He shoved his hands into his pockets.

Avery swept her hair into her face, hoping she could conceal her birthmark enough for him to look at her. He never lifted his eyes to meet hers. An awkwardness filled the room and rendered Avery into a small, insignificant speck in his presence. She would neither catch her future husband’s eyes nor hold his affection. This was her true curse. However, Clarence would profit and that was a blessing.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you, Christopher,” said Avery.

“It’s Your Majesty. You will address me as such.”

“I thought that you’d want us to become familiar with one another since we are promised to wed.”

He shuddered.

Distant yelling and heavy boots distracted Avery from her broken heart and shame. Christopher walked out of the room to investigate the commotion,

and Avery followed him from a distance, stopping at the open door. She inched further out of the room, her eyes following Christopher as he descended the winding golden stairs.

“Where is she? Where is she, Christopher?” asked a muffled voice.

Avery tiptoed down the stairs. Her feet hurried when she heard what she thought were punches, followed by slaps and then a grunt. When Avery reached the final step, she carefully leaned against the wall in front of her and peeked around it to see what was happening. Christopher’s large body was blocking most of her view, but she noticed that three of his guards had their swords pointed down and someone was kneeling. Christopher finally walked away to pace and that’s when Avery saw a bloodied Cole. Her heart constricted in her chest, and she almost ran to him.

Remember where your loyalty lies. Not for your sake, but for the sake of Clarence, she thought.

The thought kept her from taking another step further.

"I'm not going to ask you again, Christopher. Where is Avery?" asked Cole before he spat out blood.

"I don't answer to you," Christopher snapped, and his guards pulled Cole to his feet.

"You would have never gotten that title if Father's dying wishes were honored. You are a disgrace to our father's memory. You have turned your back on all he has taught us, and you have turned your back on our people and for what?"

"Father may have wanted you to rule, but the old man was short-sighted like you. The people this, the people that. That's all he ever talked about, and when he died, the people of Trenton moved on as if he never existed." Christopher shook his head. "I won't make the same mistake caring for a bunch of worthless and ungrateful people. My concern is to protect my inheritance and legacy at all costs."

"Father would be ashamed of you."

"Little brother, I never asked. Count yourself lucky that I've spared your life for Father's sake. I won't be so kind next time. Get him out of here."

“Avery! Avery! Answer me if you’re here. Please,” shouted Cole as he was being dragged out.

Avery’s eyes welled up with tears, distorting her vision. *What have I done?*

Suddenly, Charlotte’s warning came to mind. *Everyone is not always what they seem.*

How did Charlotte know?



PART EIGHT

While Christopher was distracted, pacing and muttering to himself, Avery found an open window on the lower level of the palace to escape through. She gathered the hem of her dress in her hand and took off running. From a distance, she could see Cole's buggy inching further and further away. Avery thought it useless, but she had to try to get his attention. With her arms flailing above her head, she started shouting Cole's name.

"What are you doing out here?" called one of Christopher's guards from a white chariot.

The bulky man stopped and rushed over to detain her, but Avery was quick. He unsheathed

his sword, the metallic blade reflecting the moon's beam. Avery glanced in Cole's direction, but his buggy was no longer in sight.

"I don't want to hurt you. Just come with me," he said.

"Let me go and no one has to get hurt," said Avery, observing his relaxed stance.

The man smirked then returned his sword to his sheath. Avery staggered her feet, distributing her weight evenly. She raised her hands to protect her face. When the guard lunged at her, she swept her feet under him, causing him to fall backward. She was about to stomp him when she noticed that he wasn't moving, and blood started pooling at the back of his head. Avery placed a finger under his nose and felt the warmth of his shallow breath.

Avery ran off, but realizing she could no longer catch up to Cole, she returned and stole the chariot the guard had been driving. After fighting with the connections, she was able to detach the chariot from the white-maned stallion. The horse was patient with her even after she failed twice to mount him.

The third time, she was successful and straddled the horse for dear life.

Don't look down. Don't look down, she warned herself.

She was able to direct the horse through an unguarded side fence and made it onto the road undetected. There was no Cole in sight and Avery prayed that he was further ahead of the winding road.

“Come on, horse, go faster,” she said as she patted the creature on its head.

When the command and the gesture did not give her the result she wanted, she dug her heels in its side, and the horse took off at top speed. Avery's hair wildly danced around her face as the horse navigated the terrain. Up ahead, she saw Cole and started shouting out his name.

“Cole! Cole!”

After several attempts to gain his attention, he finally turned around. Seeing her, Cole stopped and waited for her to catch up to him. Avery was getting close, and she squeezed her heels into the

horse's side to stop it, but it prompted the horse to go faster. She whizzed past Cole, screaming for his help. For a split second, Avery thought about jumping but quickly disregarded the dangerous idea to spare herself the broken bones and road rash. Cole guided his buggy to her left.

"I can't stop," she said, her eyes frantic.

"Pull on the reins, Avery," he said, pointing to a brown strap dangling from either side of the horse's neck.

Avery pulled hard and the horse slowed his gallop before coming to a stop. With her heart pounding and her head feeling light, Avery folded at the waist, dropping her head on the horse to catch her breath. Cole's strong arms scooped her off the horse, placing her wobbling feet on the ground. She clung to him for stability.

"You're safe, Avery," he said as he smoothed her coarse hair, pushing it out of her face.

Avery lifted her gaze and met his. Cole's face was bruised and bloodied, but his eyes were kind as

they bore into hers. She tiptoed, and with a gentle touch, she trailed her fingers over his face.

“I want to be your ally,” said Avery.

“That would mean—”

Avery stopped him, her index finger pressing against his masculine lips. “I know what this decision means, Cole.”

“What about your people?”

“My people will be much better off with you as the King of Trenton. Don’t let me regret this.”

He stepped closer to her. “You won’t.”

She allowed her hands to run over his biceps before she squeezed. “I believe you.”

The neighing of horses and the stomping of their heavy hooves forced Avery’s gaze in the direction she was coming from. She thought she had left Christopher’s palace undetected but seeing him leading his army of men on horseback told her otherwise.

“We have to hurry,” she said to Cole as she gripped his arm.

“Avery,” he said, his feet planted firmly.

“Cole, hurry,” she said, pulling him to his buggy.

“Avery, look.”

He pointed in the opposite direction, where a small fraction of Christopher’s army was also approaching. They were blocked on both sides. Avery’s heart sunk as she looked around. Nowhere to run. Christopher dismounted his horse then headed for them.

“What do we have here? First, my brother wants to steal my crown, and now he wants to steal my wife?”

Cole placed himself between Avery and Christopher.

“It doesn’t have to be this way, brother. Do the right thing and peacefully transition power. Do what our father wanted. Honor him and honor our people, Christopher. You are my brother, and I will make sure no harm comes to you,” said Cole, his unwavering conviction pure and fierce.

“Is this what you want, Princess Avery? You want to put your people’s lives at stake because of the words of my lying brother?” asked Christopher.

Avery stepped out from behind Cole’s shielding. All the King’s men had dismounted their horses and had their swords drawn at them. She thought about her father and how he would resolve this situation. Her father would be brave and bold even in the face of death. She would be, too.

“You are not the man I thought you were, King Christopher. You don’t care for the welfare of your own people. How can I trust you to care about mine?”

Christopher’s eyes narrowed and his countenance fell flat. He snapped his fingers, and his men descended on Cole. Cole fought them off with what strength he had left, but they eventually subdued him with brute force. His face was pressed between the ground and one of the men’s boot. Avery threw herself to the ground beside him to make sure he was still breathing. His breath was shallow, but he was still alive. Thank God, he was still alive.

“You are an evil man, and I will not marry you,” Avery told Christopher, her eyes distorted with tears.

Christopher fanned his hand, causing his men to disperse, leaving Cole motionless on the ground. Avery stayed by his side. When Christopher started advancing towards them, his sword unsheathed, Avery threw her body over Cole’s. Christopher gripped her hair in his hand, twisting it into a painful knot. Tighter and tighter, he wound her hair around, causing her scalp to burn. He forced her to her feet and was about to fling her but she kicked him in the knee. When he staggered at the unexpected attack, she kicked him in his middle, and he fell backward. His men rushed over to him, but he cursed them, refusing their help.

Avery prepared herself for a fight. Like her father taught her, she separated her feet and raised her hands to protect her face. If the King of Trenton wanted a fight, she was willing to oblige—*no holding back, no mercy*. When she realized that Christopher

refused to sheath his sword, she quickly reached for Cole's and armed herself.

Christopher struck hard and fast, but she wielded Cole's sword with expert precision—just the way her father taught her. Avery matched him, and when he least expected, she bested him, piercing his thigh and drawing blood. He swore and his men blocked him from more harm. This time, he accepted their protection without protest.

Avery backed up and stood over Cole, offering him her fierce protection.

*If they want to get to him then they will
have to get through me first.*

"I think you have forgotten who I am, but I will remind you. I am the King of Trenton. I am Christopher Charles Winters. You do not have a choice in this matter. We will marry and unite our kingdoms. Do I make myself clear?"

"I will not marry a traitor like you. I would rather die than watch you destroy my people. You may not know loyalty or honor, but I do."

Christopher poked his head out from behind his men. His darkened eyes were challenging.

“You may not be afraid to die, but are you prepared to watch Cole die?”

“You will not harm Cole,” she said, tightening her grip around the sword’s handle.

With another snap of his fingers, Christopher’s army of men pounced. Avery angled her sword and struck the first three men who lunged at her. She wasn’t sure where the sword connected, but she knew it did. If it wasn’t the feeling of the sword’s blade cutting through flesh that gave it away, it was the men’s shrill screams that told her she had done great damage. Still, her expert skills weren’t enough for an army of trained men. They knocked the sword out of her grasp and pinned her to the ground, fastening her hands with a rope. Once she was subdued, they helped her to sit up.

Christopher hopped over to his brother. He removed his sword, hovering the tip above his brother’s head. Too weak to move, Cole just laid

there as death lingered. Christopher swiftly lowered the sword and Avery screamed out.

“Please, don’t. Please!”

He stopped mere inches from Cole’s skull. Avery sobbed.

“Your Majesty.” Avery lowered her head, appealing to Christopher’s ego. “Humbly, I ask that you spare your brother’s life. I will return to your palace. I will honor our marriage treaty. I will advance your kingdom. Please, your Majesty.”

Christopher exhaled before bursting into manic laughter. He then secured his sword. In three steps, he reached for her and pulled her off the ground.

“If you go back on your word, I will do everything to make sure you regret it. Do you understand me?” He squeezed her upper arm.

“I understand, your Majesty.”



P A R T N I N E

Avery could hear the bustling outside the bedroom door as everyone in the King's palace readied themselves for the royal wedding. She sat up in bed, her eyes puffy, back rigid, and her head pounding. For the past two days and three nights, she had been trying to work out a master plan to escape Christopher's hold and reunite with Cole and her people. However, no resolve crossed her mind—no matter how hard she thought. She was trapped, and if she were smart, she would just accept her fate. But she couldn't give in. Avery bowed her head in humble expectation.

“God of my people, hear my cries. I need your help, merciful Father. My people are depending on me, and I am depending on you. Hear me. Save me.”

Avery lifted her eyes and saw a white, sealed envelope that had been pushed through the small opening at the bottom of the door. She quickly got up and went to it, but she hesitated when she stood over the unopened envelope. After several moments, she decided to open it.

You have friends in this Kingdom, Princess Avery. Like Cole, we, too, care about the people of Trenton. We will help you to escape at the right time. Be patient.

Avery flipped the paper around to see if more was scribbled on the back, but it was empty.

That's it? Be patient? So many questions ran through her head and each unanswered question increased her irritation.

Her wedding to the King of Trenton was in a few hours. She didn't have the luxury of being patient. If action needed to be taken, then it needed to be

taken now. Not later. Now. Once the treaty was signed and the ink dried, that was it. She would belong to Christopher—a corrupt and selfish King.

The palace was too heavily guarded for her to pull the same stunt she had the first night she arrived. She wouldn't make it onto the road. Every idea Avery conceived was thwarted by logic. Then her thoughts went dark, but she quickly cleared it. She wasn't evil. She'd defend herself if she had to. But she refused to harm another intentionally—even if it was Christopher on the receiving end.

A soft knock at the door quieted Avery's spiraling mind. She didn't answer, prompting another tap on the door. Silence. The door opened, and Charlotte stuck her head in. Her brown hair tumbled into her face.

“Good morning, Princess Avery. I'm so happy to see you. Your mother and I just arrived, and I was sent to assist you with getting ready.”

Avery pulled her into the room and closed the door behind her. “You tried to warn me about Christopher. At first, I didn't understand, but now

I do. I've seen the devil that he is. What do you know about him?"

Charlotte lowered her gaze.

"Charlotte, talk to me. Please."

"My mother served King Winston Winters, Christopher and Cole's father. She served in this very kingdom up until his dying breath. She heard when he blessed Cole to take the throne before he passed. Apparently, no one knew she was there." Charlotte looked up with tears in her eyes.

Avery held her and it gave her the courage to continue.

"Christopher saw her, and because she knew the truth, he killed her and attempted to kill his brother. Cole helped me to escape the kingdom because I was Christopher's next target. Cole saved my life, and I will forever be indebted to him. He is the true King of Trenton."

"Charlotte, I'm so sorry for what happened to your mother. I promise you that Christopher will not get away with the evils he has done."

“What are you planning, Princess Avery?”

“I...I don't know.”

* * *

The King had sent three ladies to Avery's room to help her prepare for the ceremony. One tamed her thick, coiled hair, another gave her a warm bath, and the third helped her slip into the ridiculously elaborate white and gold wedding dress. She was all dolled up but still had no plan to escape the King.

“Are you ready, Princess Avery?” asked one of the ladies.

Charlotte threw her a nervous look. Time had run out. Avery lifted her chin and straightened her back. If she was going to sign her life away, she would not cower in fear.

“I'm ready,” said Avery.

Charlotte held her arm. “Um, I think the Princess needs some more time. Could she have some more time?”

The other ladies were dismissed, leaving only one in the room—the one who helped her into her dress. When the others left, she locked the door and looked frantically at Avery.

“Princess, I need you to get out right now.”

Charlotte stepped between the two of them. “You do not speak to the Princess of Clarence like that.”

The woman bowed. “Please, you don’t understand. I was sent to help you escape the palace. But we need to hurry.”

Avery and Charlotte exchanged glances.

“Did you write the letter?” asked Avery.

She shook her head. “No, but I delivered it. Please follow me.”

Led by the woman through the halls, Avery and Charlotte held onto each other. They entered the throne room and Avery spotted Christopher and her mother speaking.

Was this a trap? she questioned as she took cautious steps towards them.

Her mother's lips curled into a half smile, and she offered her a dry compliment from where she stood. Christopher didn't bother to look at her. He instead acknowledged the lady who helped to get her ready.

"Margaret, take Princess Avery to the back until the ceremony begins. Also, put on her veil," he added the last part with disgust.

Margaret bowed and ushered Avery and Charlotte out and into a private room. As soon as they entered, Margaret demanded that Avery take off her dress. When Avery didn't move fast enough, Margaret and Charlotte helped her to undo the delicate clasps at the back. Margaret removed her clothing and the two switched garments. She opened the curtain and showed Avery the path she had to take. Below were three buggies loaded with goods—food, money and wood.

"You need to go in the second buggy. Joe drives that buggy, and the guards won't search it. He is one of the most trusted transporters the King has. No matter what happens, don't look up."

“Why are you doing this?” asked Avery.

“The people of Trenton have suffered long enough. We trust you and Cole to end our suffering. Journey mercies.”

Margaret plopped her bonnet on Avery’s head and secured the delicate strings under her chin.

“You’re all set. Hurry.”

Avery and Charlotte slipped out the back and followed Margaret’s instructions. Avery kept her gaze down and her bonnet low to conceal her identity. The two made it to Joe’s buggy without incident. After surveying the cramped space, they knew it was only enough space for one person.

“Go on, my Princess. I know you will be a fierce Queen the next time I see you.” Charlotte kissed her cheek. “My prayers go with you.”

“I will not forget you, Charlotte. Thank you.”

Charlotte helped Avery into the buggy and covered her with the thick blanket under the produce. Avery lay still and waited for the buggy

to take off. Her heart sped up when royal guards stopped them.

Keep your head down, she reminded herself.

“Joe, you know the King wants you here for the wedding,” said the strong voice of the guard.

“I know. I’ll be back before the King misses me.”

“Godspeed, Joe.”

That was it.

They were off and traveling a long stretch of bumpy road. Avery wasn’t sure what to do. She and Margaret didn’t exactly discuss a step-by-step plan. Though her angst threatened to get the best of her several times, she remained patient. The pins and needles sensation taking over her legs made it hard to remain still, but she endured. Suddenly, the buggy stopped and Avery’s breathing slowed. She reached for the loose, ragged piece of board she had seen when surveying the inside. It was no sword, but she could use it to inflict some damage. The cover was tugged from her and she quickly sat

up, aiming the board to kill. She locked eyes with Cole and immediately threw her weapon down.

Although bruised, he was still handsome, and his kind eyes made him look even more so. He reached for her, scooping her out of the buggy and crushing her to his chest. She relished the feel of his hands on her and the masculine scent lingering in her nostrils.

“Thank you, Joe, for all your help,” said Cole.

Avery pulled herself from his hold to look at Joe. The man’s silver hair and deep-set wrinkles testified to his age. His dark brown eyes spoke of his wisdom.

“You wrote the letter?” asked Avery.

Joe bowed his head. “Yes, your Majesty.”

Avery touched Joe’s shoulder, and he raised his gaze to meet hers. “Thank you, Joe.”

Avery returned her attention to Cole. “We have two kingdoms to save, Cole. Are you ready to give up life as you know it for the good of our people?”

PART NINE

He linked his hand in hers. "As long as we are doing this together Avery, then, I'm ready. I want to show you something."



P A R T T E N

The three of them ventured deeper into the dense forest. Cole held Avery's hand as he led her and Joe to the clearing. The clashing of metal on metal and shouts grew louder and louder, the further they traveled. The sounds blended together, and Avery felt the Earth beneath her tremble. Avery started looking for a weapon, not understanding why Cole was so relaxed. He must have sensed her tension because he stopped and turned to her with a small smile.

"I'm not leading you to a situation where your guard must be up. I am taking you to *our people*."

Avery exhaled as she watched him push away a few branches, and then he brought her forward to behold the glory of his hard work. A large group of men and women were training together with swords. They weren't adorned in any fancy clothes, but their garments were functional, allowing them the fluidity to move, attack and strike without restraint. She was looking at warriors. A loud cry came from the crowd, and they faced Avery and Cole before they all fell to their knees.

"Our King. Our Queen. We offer our loyalty. Your command is law," they decreed, and Avery was moved.

Avery surveyed the crowd, her eyes wet with tears. She turned her gaze to Cole, and he used his thumb to wipe away the droplets from her eyes.

"You did this?" she asked, her emotions choking her.

He squeezed her hand. "No, *we* did this Avery. These people joined the resistance because they believe in what we stand for. Honor for the people of Clarence and Trenton. Prosperity for the people

of Clarence and Trenton. Advancement for the people of Clarence and Trenton. Your people are my people and my people are yours.” His eyes shone with conviction and truth. “We attack tonight. We claim our freedom and take back our rights tonight. Clarence and Trenton forever!”

“Clarence and Trenton forever!” shouted the crowd of over one hundred people.

Their strong voices, their skills and their loyalty gave Avery hope, and she pledged in her heart that she would do everything in her power to honor and protect them.

“As you were,” said Cole.

Avery threw herself at Cole, who embraced her fiercely and protectively. He smoothed her hair before directing her gaze to him.

“I know this wasn’t what you dreamed of when coming to Trenton. I know I complicated everything, but—”

Avery placed her finger on his lips, silencing him. "You are better than any dream I could have ever had, Cole." She ran her thumb along his cheek.

He smiled at her. "Because I'm trying to spare myself from your anger and powerful strikes, I will seek your permission before attempting. May I kiss you, the most beautiful, intelligent, and fierce woman I'll soon have the pleasure to call my Queen?"

Avery pretended to contemplate his request. "I thought you'd never ask."

Their lips locked and their people cheered on their display of affection.

"Long live the King and Queen. Long live the King and Queen. Long live the King and Queen!"

The End.

—elle—

*Special Message
to the Reader*

Thank you for taking the time to explore my latest passion project, *Marked*. I enjoyed creating the characters and mapping out the plot that led to their growth, discovery and ultimately, their love. I'm a lover of both a 'happily ever after' and a good cliffhanger. This time I chose to leave you guys with the former. I hope that you had a great reading experience. It would mean so much to me if you could leave an honest review of this book on any social platform or wherever you discovered this gem. Share with the curious others what made you connect with the characters and their challenges. Not only does your share help others to find and enjoy my books, but it also lets me hear from you,

SPECIAL MESSAGE TO THE READER

my valued readers. I can't thank you enough for your support. My library of work continues to grow and awaits you! Continue to journey with me. Grace and peace!



Get to Know Chantol

I'm an island girl through and through; a lover of warm weather, clear skies, and beaches. Though I was born in Spanish Town, Jamaica, I spent most of my childhood in Nassau, Bahamas where my sixth-grade teacher helped me to discover my hidden passion for stringing words together on a blank page. Regardless of the challenges and hardships I have faced in life, I have never stopped telling my story through the characters I cultivate in my head. I believe my writing has purpose and

meaning and I hope to use my truth and learned experiences to give hope and share love with the world around me. When I'm not crafting another story, I'm working full-time as a registered nurse.



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