



VICTORIA

RAINE
WEAVER

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VICTORIA

“I’d hoped you’d be well on your way by now.”

Victoria remained composed as her stepfather entered the house. With her fingers knitted tightly together and resting in her lap, she waited until he deposited his top hat and cape in the hallway and entered the drawing room before venturing to speak. “I imagine that’s been true for some time, Papa. But I’m still here.”

Phillip Harvey filled the room, all heavy tread and broad shoulders, smoothing his silver-streaked hair as he sighed. “You know very well what I meant, Victoria. I thought you’d be asleep by now.”

“That can’t be true. You’re quite out of breath, Papa. And you brought the stench of your whore home with you, so you must have rushed to get here.”

His shadow loomed over the Morris chair which held her as he drew near, frowning. “You will not speak to me in that manner, young lady. And we will not have this discussion. It is my house, and I demand respect for as long as you live here.”

Victoria clasped her fingers tighter, pushing them into the dove-gray material of her lap. She looked at him through the spikes of her lashes, keeping her voice quite even. “Then I shall have to learn respect, since I intend to remain here. I cancelled my engagement today. I will not be marrying Thomas.”

Quietly swearing beneath his breath, he stomped away from her toward the crystal decanter which awaited his attentions every evening. “Victoria, I weary of these discussions. It’s late, and—”

“Yes, it is. And I am anxious to go to bed. I simply thought you had a right to know. There’s no need for discussion. I spoke to Thomas this afternoon, and everything is settled.” She allowed herself a faint smile. “He seemed rather relieved, actually.”

“This engagement is *not* over!” His voice seemed to rattle the rafters of the house. “That man will pay his debt to me one way or—” Calming himself, he poured a glass of sherry. “And you intend to spend your life as a spinster, cloistered in that sad little room of yours?”

“With all due ‘respect’, Papa, I would rather die untouched than risk bringing a creature into this world that might fall under your influence in any way.”

Phillip Harvey tasted his wine, grunting with satisfaction. “So I am to be the villain in all this, eh? I am the one to blame because you are bland. Plain. Without talent or spirit, or anything a man might find attractive.” His gaze flicked up and down her body as he bared his teeth, grimacing. “Your mother wasn’t blessed with brains, but at least she had beauty.”

Victoria gave him a curious stare. “Is that why you killed her?” She had expected an angry reaction. She simply hadn’t anticipated his speed. The back of his hand tore across her cheek, knocking her some distance away from the chair. She landed with a painful thump on her side, his pointing finger in her face before her head stopped reeling. “Don’t you ever—EVER—say that to me again. Understand?”

Waiting until he returned to his drink, Victoria slowly stood. She felt slightly unsteady, and the electric lamps had become coils of light to her dazed eyes. Facing him without flinching, she delicately dabbed at a small drop of blood at the corner of her mouth, as if it were a bit of butter. “May I go to my room now?”

“I am not a violent man. Why do you make me do these things?” He emptied his glass and poured another. “I know I’m only

your stepfather, but I've been decent to you, despite our differences.

If your mother were alive—”

“You killed her as surely as if you'd fed her the poison yourself. You accused her of carrying on with that young Mr. Dean who lives near the Square, just to turn her attention away from your own dalliances. She was foolish. She didn't want to live without your love.” Claspng her hands again, she stared at him defiantly. “I, however, will *thrive* without it. Now—may I go to my room?”

“Your room, your room!” Making a grand gesture with his arm, he turned away from her. “What is the great attraction there? You'll rot in that cursed room of yours. It's my own fault. I should never have allowed you to be educated. Don't you want a husband, children? Someone to take care of you, make you feel...” His eyes were on her again, his nostrils flaring in distaste. “Someone to make you feel like the woman you refuse to be?”

“No children. *Ever*. I'll not be responsible for subjecting an innocent to what I've endured. And I have no need of a husband to 'take care of me'.” She smiled for the first time, giving vent to the pleasure she felt at airing her true thoughts, the feelings she'd held in

check for years. “You are growing old, Papa. Your fortune will be mine soon enough, and that will take care of me very well.”

“Wretched woman. No man will *ever* want you. I should throw you out on the street.”

“But you won’t. You can’t. What would your society friends say? Poor, pitiful Victoria, mistreated, and now made homeless?”

“Ill-begotten bitch—”

She waved a weary hand. “Enough. I’m late. I’m going to bed now.”

He snorted, spat on the floor. “You can never be late for bed if no one’s ever waiting for you there.”

“I have my own routine, sir, just as you have yours,” she demurred, heading for the stairs. “Don’t worry, Papa. All I ask is that I’m allowed to live my life as I please, in the comfort of my room. If you arrange your schedule just so, we need never even see each other.” Gathering her skirt, she took the steps with a surge of new confidence and energy. “Goodnight, Phillip.”

“Phillip’, is it?” With narrowed eyes, he twisted his lips as if the wine was sour. “You have some spirit in you after all. Unlike your mother, you’ve learned that when I *push*, ‘tis wise to push back. And

push *hard*. Away with you, then,” he scowled. “Off to your virginal bed, and may the devil take you there.”

* * *

“No man will ever want you”.

Victoria repeated the words as she carefully folded the gray frock and placed it in her wardrobe. It was a dark, monstrous piece of furniture, solid mahogany, and her few simple dresses were quite lost inside. She’d had it since childhood. No doubt her mother had presumed her daughter would be the gay social creature she herself was. But Victoria was quite content with her books, her studies, her thoughts.

And if she’d lived, no doubt her mother would be as disappointed with her as her stepfather was.

Removing her two petticoats, she laid them out in the dresser of her bureau, taking a quick glance at the clock.

‘Late. You are going to be late.’

She *was* late. If she didn't hurry, she would miss everything. With fingers that fumbled in haste, she wrestled with her corset, finally freeing herself and flinging it across the room in frustration.

'More wasted time. If you don't hurry...'

Tugging her cotton chemise over her head, she paused, drawing in deep breaths. Her skin prickled as the cool evening air raised gooseflesh, bringing her body to life. Folding the garment with care, she placed it in its own drawer.

Suddenly breathless, Victoria sat at her vanity, staring at the image before her. Her skin was blemish-free, white as alabaster, cool and impassionate as marble. Pulling the silver combs from her hair, she allowed it to tumble over her shoulders, finger-rolling the ends to curl around her throat. Mouse-brown. No richness, no shine. Nothing to distinguish her from any other woman at any other time. The wide, dark eyes stared back at her. Haunted eyes, eyes that sometimes seemed to see someone else in the glass, that seemed to *belong* to someone else.

'Hurry! He waits for you!'

Impatient now, Victoria stood, reaching for the elastic of her drawers. Her fingers drifted inside the opening, softly stroking the

dark curls as her eyes drifted closed. He would do this for her. He would breach the part, his long fingers masterful and sure. He would find the hidden recesses, the soft, sensitive spots that longed to be touched. And he would make her legs go weak beneath her, leave her gasping for air...

The small clock on her mantle chimed a single note.

'It's time! It's time!'

Victoria felt her dampness spread over her exploring hand. Slipping one finger into her mouth, she lavishly licked it, using it to skim the tip of her nipple, smiling at the reflection of it hardening for her. Warmth began to pulse between her legs as her body impatiently rocked in the instinctive motion of mating.

With an effort, she tore her hands away from her body, quickly stepping out of her drawers. No. No, she would not do this. She would wait for *him*.

Pirouetting like a dancer across the room, she reached into the hidden drawer of her small secretary, removing the sheer black peignoir she'd secretly mail-ordered from Paris.

Victoria ran toward the balcony door of her bedroom and flung it wide, stepping out into the moonlight and cool breeze of midnight.

The peignoir wafted behind her like the fragile wings of a moth, gently caressing her bare body with silk as her eyes searched the shadows. He was there. She was sure of it. He'd been there every night since that first one, when he'd nearly frightened her to death.

She had come out for a breath of air on a particularly warm evening, and seen his shadow moving amidst the bushes beneath her window.

Such a start he had given her! She hurried back to bed with palpitations and smelling salts, afraid of every sound that seeped through her walls from the Square.

But the next night she'd gathered her courage and peeked through her curtains. He was there again, and again the next night, and every night thereafter, whether the clime was fair or foul. Watching. Waiting, just for her.

She had never so much as seen his face; but he had become her lover. A solid, constant shadow, predictable as the sun rising, the dark side of her own nature come to life.

A wave of warmth swept over her as he tossed back the flaps of his mackintosh. His fingers moved to the laces of his pants. Victoria smiled. He was eager tonight.

Her trembling fingers cupped her breasts, felt them plump in her hands as an offering to him. He never thought her too small, too flat, too plain. She excited him. Tweaking her nipples, she shuddered as heat flowed beneath her chilled skin. She closed her eyes for a brief moment. Dreaming. They were his hands, his fingers making her breathless as she leaned over the edge, hovering above the city.

The chilled wind blew her hair away from her neck, and she opened her eyes to find he'd taken his shaft in hand. Brutally hard and long, it protruded from the edge of the boxwood bushes, pointing directly at her. The bulbous glans gleamed in the crescent moonlight with a sweet, tempting sap, and Victoria licked her lips in delicious anticipation.

When he'd first exposed himself to her, she'd nearly fainted. She'd run, again, to the safety of her little room. But curiosity drove her to the window over and over. She never saw more than his privates and his hand. After a time, she found it was all that interested her about him.

It was her erotic awakening.

Her hands moved downward, sliding over her ribcage, her pinched waistline. His fingers also moved, laving the bobbing head of

his hardness with the pearly fluid that seeped from the tip. She watched for the eyes she had never seen, knew they watched her as she slipped her forefinger inside the moist mound of her pubis, found the ultra-sensitive nub, and audibly gasped at the sensation of her own touch.

Slowly using tiny, delicate circling motions, she stoked the heat between her thighs. Her breath came in short, shallow bursts as she watched her lover's huge hand grasp his cock as he slowly, purposefully began to thrust.

Victoria's hips began to undulate, moving with the increasing pressure of her finger until she could barely continue to stand. She thought she could hear his rough breathing, detect a quiet curse escape his dark lips as his own pace became frenzied, almost desperate.

It made her smile again.

She linked her first two fingers together, sure he could see how her feathery strokes had become harder, faster, demanding her own orgasm to come quickly. There! There was a definite groan. It sliced through the night like pain, intensifying her hunger. Her excitement

became a fever, possessing her entire body, curling her toes into the damp wooden flooring. Yes, indeed—the devil *would* take her here.

This was the only life in her living. The secrets she kept in the dark were all that gave her reason to rise each morning. And for now it was enough. Her boiling blood began to mount in exquisite pressure in her sex, and she grasped the railing to keep from falling.

In the beginning, she wondered who he was. She thought at first it might be Thomas, wreaking an intimate revenge against the man he owed so dearly. That notion had been dispelled by their first proper kiss, two weeks ago in the parlor. No fire, no passion leapt between them.

Now she suspected—*hoped*—it was young Mr. Dean, the clerk at the bookstore so wrongly accused of a dalliance with her mother. Yes, she liked the idea of that. She liked the idea of the two of them, silent conspirators, secretly tarnishing her stepfather's perfect reputation, his image. His sanctuary.

After a time, she didn't care what mask he wore in the light of day. It might be anyone. It might even be the man who lived in this very house...

The low grunt beneath her became a prolonged groan, the hand grasping the satin-steel rod moving so fast she could barely see it.

Victoria's head swam, but she kept her eyes on the dark form, waiting for the signal. The signal that would tell her it was time.

It came in a burst of steaming release, glazing the tiny leaves of the boxwood, spurting like a small geyser beneath her.

At last, thank God, at last, for she could stand no more. With a practiced hand, she gathered her fingers at the entrance of her hot, grasping sex...

And pushed.

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