

HEIR OF ILLUSION

MADÉLINE
TAYLOR



PIATKUS

CHAPTER

ONE

I cradle my lover's head in my hands, longing to shatter it against the hardwood floor.

My fingers trail over the smooth marble bust, finding it cold and unyielding. A perfect likeness. Holding his face up to mine, I search his hollow eyes for some kind of explanation or apology. But the only message he offers is an engraving on the bottom.

Long Live the King.

I set the bust back on the display, smiling when I notice the dark red smear I've left behind on his cheek. The blood on my hands tonight is Baylor's fault—it's only fitting that it should stain him too.

Glancing around Darrow's apothecary, I find it hasn't changed much since the last time I was here. He's replaced the chandelier with some obsidian monstrosity. Its shards reflect moonlight onto every surface. A few new mirrors hang throughout the shop, bringing the total up to twelve, and I spot an array of the so-called *healing* crystals he peddles to his clientele.

Lost in this sea of shiny trinkets, it's hard to know where to look.

But that's Darrow's genius.

He gives his audience an obvious fool, distracting them with excess and vanity. He never lets them see the sharpness of his teeth or the shrewdness of his gaze until it's too late.

The ceiling creaks in a steady pattern as I listen to his restless pacing upstairs. Despite being the owner of a fine country estate, Darrow sleeps here more often than not. I'd guess that has something to do with the fact that, unlike his country neighbors, Darrow's estate was purchased instead of passed down, and his money was earned instead of inherited.

Though it could also be the proximity to the city's brothels keeping him here in Solmare. I'm told he's a frequent visitor.

I debate with myself whether to ring the bell to alert him of my presence or simply knock over his expensive bust of the king's face. Watching Baylor's head break into tiny pieces would undoubtedly lift my mood.

Reining in my more destructive instincts, I reach for the bell. Most people don't appreciate receiving late-night visits from me. They typically end in bloodshed, like my previous meeting tonight. But if Della knew I was here, she'd want me to at least attempt civility, a perilous feat for someone in my line of work.

The moment the bell jingles through the dark room, Darrow's movements above cease. Several seconds pass before his soft steps pad toward the stairs. He probably thinks he's being quiet, but my hearing is far superior to his.

Darrow descends the staircase with a careless smile carefully painted onto his face. Despite the late hour, he's still dressed in a fine suit made of velvet and embroidered with gold filigree. Not a single one of his honey blond curls is out of place, each of them falling against his shoulders in a way that perfectly frames his strong bone structure.

I have to admire the flawlessness of his facade.

Laughter bubbles out of me at the sight of a jeweled dagger tucked into the waistline of his trousers. As if that would be anything more than a minor inconvenience to me. His gaze narrows as he searches for the source of the sound. Though his brown eyes roam over the spot I'm standing in—he's unable to see me.

As a *wraith*, I can disappear at will.

It's an extremely rare type of illusion magic that makes me a valuable asset. Or a formidable enemy. Even before the war that put Baylor on the throne, before the Goddess of Illusion disappeared, my brand of magic wasn't common.

"Show yourself," Darrow demands, only a hint of fear creeping into his hard tone.

Rolling my eyes, I release the illusion. If he's shocked by my presence in his shop, he quickly covers it underneath a charming smile. I pretend not to notice him unsheathing his ridiculous weapon.

"Lady Iverson," he croons as he saunters down the last step. "To what do I owe this unexpected visit from my favorite *pet*?"

Pet—the king's endearment for me. When I first came to live with King Baylor, he started calling me his little pet. Back then I thought it was sweet, but that was before I realized the name was a reference to how he'd collared and domesticated me.

It turns out I was the last one to be let in on that joke.

Keeping my face blank, I hold Darrow's gaze, not giving him the reaction he's hoping for. Behind the king's back, his subjects often spit the word at me. Similar to Darrow, they wield it cruelly, using it as a slur.

"Perhaps you require my assistance with a difficult matter?" he asks, a seductive grin pulling at his full lips. "I assure you, my lady, you would be in extremely capable hands."

I offer him my sweetest smile in response, one usually reserved for my master, before I brush my arm out and knock the king's

bust to the floor. Listening to it shatter is just as satisfying as I'd hoped it would be.

"Oops." I shrug as my smile turns wicked. "Sorry about that, Darrow."

He sighs, staring dispassionately at the shards of marble scattered across the hardwood. "Pity. You'd think by now the king would have you housebroken."

Only a second passes before my blade is at his throat. His hand, still holding his own dagger, comes up on instinct, but I quickly grab his wrist and pin it to the counter next to us. Though his body is tense, his expression is one of boredom, as if his current predicament is of no concern to him.

I tsk, shaking my head in mock disappointment. "Now, is that any way to speak to His Majesty's *wraith*?"

People call me *pet* so often they forget what my owner trained me for.

He maintains his calm expression, but his face pales slightly as he takes in my appearance. When at court, I am dressed for seduction, wrapped in revealing gowns made of silks and satins. But tonight, my trousers and long-sleeved shirt are made from durable leather, and my long red hair is pulled into a simple braid that hangs down my back. Underneath the dark cloak, he can easily make out the gleam from the weapons strapped to my stomach and thighs. And the blood under my fingernails certainly adds a nice effect.

He swallows roughly as his gaze dips to the ruby collar around my throat.

"Did he send you here for me?" Darrow asks softly.

It's a fair question. The king often sends me to kill his enemies. It's what I was doing before I arrived. I shake my head, dispelling the echo of the desperate pleas from the man I murdered tonight. Shutting down my emotions, I force myself to focus on the present.

“Should he have?” I ask. “You aren’t doing anything illegal here, are you, Darrow?”

“Come now, Lady Iverson.” His flirty grin is back, though it’s slightly less convincing. “I would never disrespect His Majesty.”

My brows raise. “Really? You were happy enough to disrespect *me*. Did you forget I speak with the king’s authority?”

He hisses as I lightly nick his throat with my blade. A drop of blood bubbles up, carving a path down his neck. The faint tease of its copper tang hangs in the air, tempting me to widen the cut, to fill the shop with his blood and send his soul through Death’s veil.

Being only half fae, Darrow is more resilient than a mortal, but it’s unlikely he would survive a deep cut to his carotid artery. Fractures form in his calm facade as his eyes shoot to the dagger still clutched in his restrained hand. I roll my eyes in exasperation as I release his wrist and lower my blade.

“Come now, Darrow. Do you honestly think I’d kill you?” I laugh as I step back, but we both know if the king ordered me to, I wouldn’t have a choice.

He pushes himself away from the display table as his free hand massages his neck, smearing a few drops of blood against his skin.

“Of course not.” His lips pull back in some semblance of a smile as he tosses a wayward curl over his shoulder. “I’m too beautiful to be murdered.”

I nod to his little jeweled dagger. “Did you truly think that would be enough to stop me?”

“Wouldn’t it be enough to stop most?” He chuckles, but it comes off forced.

Darrow has always been far too intrigued by the rumors about me. He often drops veiled comments, hoping to trip me up or trick me into confessing information very few are privy to. There are whispers, of course, rumors that circulate and get written off

as conspiracy. But men such as Darrow make it their business to trade in secrets and chase down rumors.

I've no doubt my story fascinates him more than he would prefer.

Forcing myself to relax, I tuck my blade away as I move to the other side of Darrow's display counter, giving him some space. When my foot lands on something hard, I glance down to find the scattered remnants of the king's bust. One side of his face is completely shattered, but the other half held up well. I crush it under my boot, enjoying the way it crumbles.

"His Majesty requires information," I announce.

He tucks his hands behind his back. "On what topic?"

"Your specialty," I say, unable to hide the bitterness creeping into my tone. "Enchantments."

Most fae are not capable of complex magic, typically only gifted long life and rapid healing. But some of us have been granted much more, the nature of it depending on which of the Verran Isles we're from. Someone from the Eighth Isle might be skilled at predicting the future, whereas a person from the First could find themselves able to communicate with all living creatures. But those of us from the Seventh Isle are far trickier.

We specialize in illusion magic. While I'm known as a *wraith*, Darrow is what we call an *enchanter*. They're some of the most feared magic users, with the ability to craft powerful objects and spells. Which is probably why all of Darrow's enemies meet their ruin under mysterious circumstances that can never be traced back to him.

"The king is wondering if you're familiar with any enchantments that bind one person to another?" I ask, sounding bored as I feign interest in his so-called healing gems.

"I would need more to go on. There are many ways to bind two people together. Some temporary and others more permanent."

His voice is tense. I wonder if it's because he doesn't enjoy me riffling through his things?

Oh well.

I pick up a pair of emerald earrings from the display and hold them up to my ears.

"Wouldn't these look pretty on me?" I bat my eyelashes at him.

He releases a long breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. "They looked prettier on the display. Be a good pet and put them back where they belong."

Rolling my eyes, I do as he asked. I've learned the hard way not to wear jewels crafted by Darrow. "The king is searching for a long-term binding method."

His eyes narrow with interest. Some of the color he lost earlier returns, along with his confidence.

"Long-term is more complicated," he says, casually leaning against the wall and crossing his arms over his chest. "There are ways of creating a binding potion, but it would need to be ingested regularly to maintain its effectiveness. And it's possible the recipient would build up a tolerance to it over time, meaning you'd need to keep increasing the dosage. It would work well for a few weeks, or even months, but I wouldn't suggest using it for any longer."

He keeps his posture relaxed, the very image of professional interest. But I can tell from the way his gaze watches me too closely, searching for any sign of disappointment over his words, that he's waiting for me to give myself away.

I don't.

"However," he continues, a dangerous gleam entering his eyes, "if he's searching for something that would last years, I'd suggest using an object."

"What kind of object?" I ask as I rest my elbows on the display case between us.

"Oh, anything would do as long as it was something they

could wear on their person at all times.” He shrugs, motioning to the gemstones in front of me. “Jewels work best. A ring or a bracelet.” His lips curve into a wicked smile. “Perhaps a *necklace*.”

It’s physically painful to stop myself from pulling at my collar, but by the grace of the Fates I somehow manage to stay still.

“Are you sure it’s the king who’s asking for this information?” He pushes away from the wall and prowls closer. “Or is that collar getting a bit too tight for you?”

My jaw clenches as I force myself to take a deep breath, feeling the air move unrestricted through my windpipe. There’s no reason for the collar to be triggered right now.

Darrow chuckles at my discomfort. “And here I thought you were ever the docile little *pet*.”

I bare my teeth at him as my fingers itch to claw at my necklace, to rip it from my throat and be rid of its suffocating weight. Like most deadly things, it’s beautiful. Dozens of deceptively alluring rubies encased in an intricate silver setting. The largest oval-shaped ruby sits in the center, against my trachea, while a slightly smaller one trickles down to my collarbone.

It’s exquisite, yet it hangs around my neck like a noose.

I keep my hands at my sides, reminding myself that pulling at it wouldn’t do any good. According to the enchantment placed on the collar, only the king has the power to remove it. When he fastened it around my throat, I was only ten years old. He said it would protect me and make it so no one would ever be able to take me away from him. He promised as long as I was wearing it, he would always be able to find me. At the time, I didn’t see anything wrong with that. Actually, I found the idea comforting. But after fifteen years, I no longer find solace in being tied to a master I’ve outgrown.

When the king explained what the collar would do, there were several things he forgot to mention. One being that whenever I

angered him, it would become tighter and tighter until I'm unable to breathe.

Until I suffocate.

I squeeze my fists, trying desperately not to lose my temper. "I'm aware you're the one who supplied the king with my collar."

"Possibly." He shrugs, crossing his arms again. "His Majesty has come to me for many things over the years. You can't expect me to recall every treasure."

I give him a bland look.

"We both know you remember this one well," I remind him. "Fifteen years ago, you opened your little apothecary in Highgrove. A curious place to do business, considering the circumstances of your birth."

Highgrove isn't the same as the rest of the city of Solmare. Money doesn't buy you entrance, blood does. It's controlled by the council, a group made up of members of the ruling families. Only those of noble birth are permitted to own property here. When a spot becomes available in the district, the entire council must approve the buyer.

Despite how hard he's worked to erase his mortal half, it's well known that Darrow is a half fae bastard. That's why the high fae of the ruling class have never fully accepted him. Oh, they're happy to use his services when they have the need, but no matter how fine his clothes or the number of secrets he uncovers, he will never truly be one of them.

They would never willingly welcome him into Highgrove.

He flashes me a sly grin, continuing his performance as a careless idiot. "What can I say? I made a compelling proposal to the council and they saw my value."

I narrow my gaze as my frustration mounts. "Do you honestly expect me to believe the high fae on the council went against hundreds of years of tradition and prejudice to open Highgrove to a half fae bastard merely because they liked your *business model*?"

He shrugs. "Stranger things have happened."

"Not without help," I insist. "This would have cost more than your secrets and backroom bargains. You would have needed royal intervention."

He doesn't answer, but we both realize it's true. The only person who can control the council members is the king.

I lean across the counter, my voice softer now. "I know how generous our king is with those who please him."

Something vulnerable flashes in his eyes, but it's quickly replaced by condescension. "I'm sure you do."

My jaw clenches. "He gave you the deed to this building in exchange for my collar."

"What if he did?" He sighs, pushing a curl out of his face. "What do you want me to do about it now?"

I lift my chin, meeting his gaze head on. "I want you to remove it."

Darrow starts to laugh, but my hard eyes tell him I'm not joking. "That's impossible," he says cautiously.

My hand returns to my blade and his brows shoot up as I remove it once more. A horrible screech fills the room as I drag the tip across the glass display case between us.

"You see, I don't think that's true," I argue, moving to stand before him. "You're paranoid, always careful to keep antidotes for every poison on your premises." His throat bobs as he watches me twirl the knife between my fingers. "You'd never make a deal that could come back to hurt you. You wouldn't have given the king something that could be used against you without knowing how to defeat it."

Every ounce of derision fades from his expression as he pulls his focus away from the weapon and meets my gaze once more.

"Sometimes the risk is worth the reward," he says softly. A faint trace of shame flashes in his eyes as he releases a deep sigh. "Iverson." I flinch at the pity in his tone, but he keeps speaking.

“There is only one way to rid yourself of the collar. The king must remove it himself.”

No.

Lead sinks into my stomach as my limbs stiffen. This has to work. There are no other options, nowhere else I can go for help. I can't keep living this way. Not after—I cut that thought off, knowing now is not the time to get lost in my guilt.

“You're lying,” I insist through clenched teeth.

Unable to stand still, I move through the shop, picking up every item I can find. Glass shatters as I knock several crystal bottles to the floor, searching for something, *anything*, that can help me.

“What are you doing?” he demands as I reach for a vial of purple liquid. Taking it from my hands, he carefully sets it back on the shelf.

“You have to have something that would work,” I mutter as I head for the back room, knowing he keeps special items hidden there. “You may play the fool, but I know you. You're too careful to take that kind of risk.”

He steps in front of me, grabbing my shoulders and pulling me to halt.

“Iverson, there's nothing here that would help you,” he says gently, his brown eyes imploring me to see reason.

But I can't.

A lump forms in my throat, and I'm sure I am choking, sure the collar has seized this moment to strike. I push Darrow away and step back. He nods, his eyes full of unwanted understanding.

I've always felt a strange kinship with Darrow. He may have helped the king destroy me, but we're two sides of the same coin. Both of us bastards who conned our way to the top, occupying spaces we have no right to.

And we're both hated for it.

Forcing air into my lungs, I turn his words over in my mind as I try to spot the lies he's so skilled at hiding.

"You said there's nothing *here* that would help me," I say slowly, watching his face close enough to spot the slight tightening around his eyes. "But what about somewhere else?"

All at once, his sympathy turns to annoyance as his expression hardens.

"Iverson, I think it's time for you to—"

He stops mid-sentence as my head jerks toward the door. An awareness settles over me, making the tiny hairs on my arms stand at attention. The sensation of ice pressing against the back of my neck and dripping down my spine sends shivers racing through me.

Someone is approaching the shop.

Their presence is heavy. Dominant. Oppressive in a way that rivals even the king. As I lick my lips I can almost taste them on the air. Like *deja vu*, it's familiar in a way I can't place, yet some distant awareness in the back of my mind recognizes the sensation.

Darrow stiffens, looking around for the source of my abrupt change. "What's going on?"

Confusion wrinkles my brow as I turn to face him again. "You don't feel that?"

He shakes his head, sparking a thousand questions on the tip of my tongue, but they disappear as my gaze is drawn back to the door. The presence is getting stronger with each passing second.

They're moving closer.

"Are you expecting anyone?" I demand.

"No," he promises, but the blood draining from his face tells a different story.

I remember how he was pacing upstairs, how restless he sounded. And when he came down, he was fully dressed. Strange for this time of night . . .

Fuck.

Sparing him a seething glare that promises violence, I wrap myself in an illusion. The feeling of a thousand tiny needles pricking my skin settles over me as I disappear from sight. Envy burns in his eyes as he stares at the spot where I was just standing, but I don't have time to enjoy it. Hurrying past the display counters, I tuck myself into the back corner and whisper silent prayers to the Fates. No one can know I was here tonight. Revealing my intentions to Darrow was already a risk. If this conversation got back to Baylor . . .

I keep my gaze on the front door, waiting for the source of this strange presence to appear. Unease claws at the lining of my stomach as the room begins to dim. I tell myself it's only a cloud passing over the moon, but then darkness begins creeping up the walls. It covers the windows, leaving only a sliver of light peeking through the glass panes.

Inky shadows slip through the cracks underneath the door as wisps of black smoke push deeper into the room. My heart stutters as they slither out and take the shape of snakes. Their crimson eyes seem to simmer as they turn their heads back and forth, searching for something.

Holy Fates.

Crouching down, I curl into a tight ball and make myself as small as possible. From my new angle, I can no longer see the front door, but I hear it creaking open. A few moments later, heavy boots thud across the hardwood, taking slow, steady steps. I can't see the newcomer, but I still sense their power. It's thicker now that they're in the room—a crushing weight ready to smite any enemy. I have no idea what sort of creature they are and no interest in finding out.

“I like what you've done with the place.”

The man's voice is rich and deep, sending shivers down my spine.

“Yes, I apologize for the mess, my lord.” Darrow, who is still in my line of sight, glances down at the evidence of my outburst apologetically. “I meant to have it cleaned up before you arrived. I wasn’t expecting you for another hour.”

His words are steady, but it’s clear from the lack of condescension in his tone that Darrow is nervous. The only time I ever hear him this accommodating is with the king.

“No matter,” the stranger replies. “I won’t be here long.”

Marble shards crunch under his boots as he steps forward into my field of vision. Even in the dim light, I can make out his shape. He’s tall, staring down at Darrow from a few inches above him. He wears a heavy cloak, black with a fur trim. Despite most of his body being hidden, I can tell he’s broad. His dark hair is pushed back, but there’s not enough light for me to make out his face clearly.

“Of course.” Darrow nods stiffly. “I looked into the matter you inquired about. I’ll go get my notes.”

He starts to retreat to the backroom, but one of the snakes slips around his neck like a rope. His mouth opens wide as his fingers reach for the shadow, desperately trying to pull it away.

Horror fills me as I watch the ugly scene, replaying the countless times my collar has tightened. Silently counting my breaths, I focus on taking one after another to keep the panic at bay. *I’m not suffocating*, I remind myself. Still, my fingers mimic Darrow’s, but both of our actions are futile.

“No need for that,” the stranger says. “I’m sure you can summarize it for me.”

Darrow responds with an unintelligible noise.

“Ah, my apologies.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “Let me loosen that for you.”

The shadows remain around Darrow’s throat, but they must ease their pressure a bit. He coughs several times before he is able to speak.

“R-right, of course,” the enchanter stammers. “I-I can do that.”

A fleeting, irrational spark of jealousy hits me. It takes me ages of verbally sparring with Darrow to convince him to do anything at all, yet this man has him cowering in subservience. These wayward thoughts are pushed aside as my attention snags on one of the shadow snakes slithering by the door. If I were to make it that far without being noticed, could I get past the strange creature unscathed? A shiver coils down my spine at the thought of trying.

"I spoke with one of my informants," Darrow says, sounding raspy from the strain. "He was recently reassigned from a low-level job on the wall."

"The wall?" that deep voice cuts him off.

"The one that surrounds the palace grounds," Darrow explains quickly. "He was one of the guards that used to patrol it."

"Ah. Continue."

Darrow swallows, his eyes flickering to the shadow snake still wrapped around his throat. "He works in the tunnels beneath the palace now. I think what you're searching for might be there."

My brow furrows. Hearing Darrow admit to committing treason and betraying the king doesn't shock me, but I tuck the confession away to use against him later. What does surprise me are these supposed tunnels. I've explored my home thoroughly over the years and have never found anything close to that.

The stranger shrugs. "Perhaps. Is he guarding something specific down there?"

Darrow nods. "A weapon he calls the *whisperer*."

A hiss escapes from one of the shadow snakes, sending a fresh wave of fear pulsing through me.

"Interesting." His tone turns thoughtful. "And did he mention anything else about this *whisperer*?"

"No. Nothing, my lor—" Darrow chokes again, clutching at the shadows as he tries to loosen them. This continues for several seconds before I hear him inhale a deep breath.

"You were saying?" the stranger asks.

“Only the price!” Darrow cries.

“What price?”

“My informant said they were warned never to touch it! Whoever wields it pays a steep price, but I don’t know what it is. That’s all! I swear!”

The man steps closer to Darrow, leaning over him.

“I believe you.” His voice is soft now, almost bored. For a moment, I believe the Fates have smiled on us and he’s going to leave, but his next words remind me why that kind of wishful thinking is so dangerous. “One more thing. Did you share this information with anyone else?”

My heart pounds violently against my chest. Despite the darkness, I can spot terror twisting Darrow’s handsome features. His jaw is hard and his lips thin as he stares at the enemy before him. Silently, I reach for my blades and carefully remove two of them. Any moment now Darrow is going to give me up and reveal my presence.

“No, my lord.” He shakes his head. “Only you.”

Shock tears through me, but I don’t have time to process it as the stranger tsks.

“What a pity,” he says, taking a few steps back. “I had hoped to find further use for you, but I don’t keep liars in my employ.”

I don’t need to see him to know what’s coming next.

The shadows tighten again as Darrow’s face twists into a horrific visage. His mouth hangs open silently trying to suck in air. His brown eyes are wide and bloodshot as they desperately search the room for some kind of help. I flinch each time his gaze passes over me, though it never lingers. He still can’t see me.

Does he think I left, or does he somehow know I’m cowering in the corner while he dies right in front of me.

I try to block it out, taking deep breaths to remind myself I’m not the one being strangled. Phantom pressure grips my throat, but I force myself to stay in the present.

Don't think about it. Don't remember how it felt to be denied air.

Darrow may not be my friend, but he's also not quite my enemy. I wouldn't wish this kind of torture on him. I wouldn't have killed him this way; I would have done it swiftly, a knife to the throat. This is cruel. Only one person deserves this kind of death, and he is currently across the city, sleeping peacefully in his palace.

I've always been aware that there's an absence inside of me—a missing piece. Something that would have made me good and whole and right. A tug pulls at that empty space now, the ghost of an instinct that never grew.

Is this why I will always let people down when they need me the most?

Faces flash through my mind: some I killed, few I loved, *one* I made a promise to. An oath sworn at the graveside of a friend I'd mistaken for an enemy.

Forcing the air into my lungs, I remind myself that I am not owned. I am not controlled or caged.

I am not the *pet* they tamed.

I am the *beast* they let inside.

And I keep my promises.

Pulling my arm back, I send the blade flying toward the stranger, but just before it can make impact, a shadow strikes out, grabbing it midair. My eyes flare as he turns around, facing my corner. The noose around Darrow's throat must loosen because the sound of his gasps suddenly fill the room, yet I can't bring myself to drag my gaze away from the stranger as he steps forward, the ghost of a smile on his face.

"I was wondering how long you planned to stay hidden."