

# DRAFT

## CHAPTER ONE

### Deja Vu Again

Emily stirred and stretched, smiling at the achiness of her limbs and body. She turned over and hugged a pillow close, breathing in the scent of sandalwood. How she loved that smell. It was David's smell.

David!

Eyes popping open, she saw the fancy patterned wallpaper. Springing to a sitting position, she looked around the room. Moonlight poured through the windows and a fire still burned in the fireplace. She was in David's room. In David's bed. But David was gone! He had promised to be there. No! Not again! Her mind screamed. This can't be happening! Things were different this time. They hadn't made love in the shower. Develyn hadn't been lying-in-wait for her return to David's bedroom. They hadn't killed David. Or had they? She wasn't sure what was real and what was a vision.

Heart pounding, she threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. Grabbing the robe he had been wearing, she tied the belt about her waist and flew to the door. When she flung it open, she heard the sound of shattering glass. Please, God, no! She prayed. Please don't let this be happening! Not again!

As she ran, Emily saw Robert pass at the end of the hall heading toward the stairs. His long hair was loose and mussed from sleep, and he was wearing his old blue robe over his blue pajamas.

Her heart leapt at the sight of him and she desperately wanted to run up to him and hug him, but

she wasn't sure if any of it was real or just another horrible vision. Hesitantly, she called out.

Robert stopped short and waited until she neared before he anxiously whispered, "Miss Emily! Are you all right? Did you hear it too?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine. Do you have your pistol?"

Robert looked confused, but he nodded. "Aye, but how did you know?"

"I can't explain it right now, but can I have it, please," she asked, turning her head toward the noise coming from below.

With eyebrows meeting over his nose, he withdrew it from his pocket and handed it over.

Not exactly sure why she wanted it or what she planned on doing with it, Emily hurried down the stairs on trembling legs. The sound of a man's growl turning her blood cold.

As she stepped onto the icy marble floor, she squeezed the toy pistol in her sweating hand, the plastic creaking dangerously, as her mind raced.

Please don't let David be dead! I can't lose him again!

I can't go through it again! But what if he is? What if I walk in and find only Develyn alive? Sitting there like last time. What will I do!? Squirt him with Holy water so that he's paralyzed and Robert can do what he's wanted to do for the last thirty-five years? Even after knowing all I do. That Develyn had only wanted to end his brother's suffering, do I help kill him for it? God, what do I do? I didn't even get a chance to take a picture of David this time! She thought frantically.

Oh, God, this is all so crazy! How did any of this even happen? . . .

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Wilhelm, Prussia  
Castle Stanovich  
October 2, 1792

Count Konrad Von Wahran sat atop his gray Old Don stallion as he peered down onto the wide valley below. Tall, brown grass swayed in the cool breeze. Orange leaves of the trees rimming the creek that meandered along the valley floor shimmered brightly in the afternoon sunshine.

Konrad's full dark eyebrows were drawn over his sharp green eyes as he contemplated his predicament. He had traveled more than two hundred miles to meet a woman he was expected to court and subsequently, quickly, marry.

How ironic! He thought with a derisive snort. The very thing that had brought him and his mother to this embarrassing point was the thing she had expected him to do save them from it.

Enter into a loveless marriage for a secure fortune.

Being the son of two people who had been thrust into such a union, Konrad had witnessed, first hand, how destructive such a cold and calculated arrangement could be.

After twelve years of civil indifference, both of his parents abruptly ceased all pretenses and sought refuge from their miserable coexistence in their own way. His mother shut herself away from the man who was her husband and buried herself in books about true and everlasting love. While his father traveled the world, flinging himself, and the family fortune, at as many

women as he was physically able; the last one in Paris, being the very death of him.

With the slightest shake of his head, Konrad decided ultimately that despite him and his mother's current dire circumstances, if, by the end of the visit with Count Stanovich, he was not certain he could love the woman, Ivannia Stanovich; he would not seek her father's permission to court her. Much less ask for her hand. Konrad knew the only woman he would ever stand before God and utter those vows with would be the one he truly loved and the one who would truly love him.

The jangle of a horse's harnesses from behind him, reminded Konrad, he was not alone. Joseph Kurtz, who he had regarded as more of a friend than a servant, waited patiently with two pack horses that carried trunks and satchels that contained a fine new and costly wardrobe meant to impress the Count and his daughter.

Without turning or speaking, Konrad heeled his horse into motion. It had taken only a few steps when the faint sound of a high-pitched squeal reached their ears. Both he and Joseph tensed instantly, each reaching for their swords sheathed beneath their heavy, gray woolen capes.

From the trees below emerged a horse and rider, who, judging by the rich emerald hooded cloak was a woman. With another squeal and peel of laughter, the rider glanced over her shoulder, and when she looked forward again, the wind caught the hood of her cape and blew it backward, revealing vibrant red hair.

A moment later the subject of the woman's laughter, a young man in a brown cloak, emerged from the trees, vigorously heeling his mount in a desperate attempt to catch up to her.

Entranced, Konrad watched as the woman and horse galloped daringly across the valley floor and boldly charged up the steep incline. As she and her chestnut mare raced up to him, he couldn't believe his eyes.

The woman was a beauty the likes he had never seen before. Lightly freckled pale skin, sharp classical features, large, striking green eyes the same color as his own, and a wealth of red hair that hung loose, wildly, about her shoulders and down her back.

As the woman battled to keep her feisty horse still beneath her, she dipped her chin regally and boldly met his eyes. "Good day, sir," she addressed him with a breathy voice. "I am Princess Valaree Stanovich, daughter of Count Holce Stanovich. I bid you welcome to his land on this fine day. Shall I see you and your man to the castle?"

Reacting to the excited filly, Konrad's stallion began to snort and neigh and dance anxiously as it tossed its massive head and pawed at the ground.

Struggling to keep the powerful animal under control, Konrad nodded and with a wide white smile, replied, "Good day, Princess Valaree. I am Count Konrad Von Wahran. I am honored by your presence and humbled by your offer. However, Princess, your filly must be in season and perhaps it would be best if I continue onto the castle without you—lest we are both unseated due to these beasts' passion for one another."

Surprise flashed across her pretty features and her cheeks reddened, but her eyes never left his. "Yes, I believe you are right. Good day then, Count Konrad."

"Until we meet again, Princess Valaree," he was quick to say with a dip of his chin.

"Yes, until then," she replied, as a smile curved her pink lips.

As he and Joseph trotted away, Konrad chuckled aloud at the incredible turn his life had just taken. He had found her! The woman he could envision himself taking those sacred vows with, but as fate would have it, she was not the woman he had come to meet. "Well, Joseph, I believe *that* was the woman I shall take as my wife."

Joseph had caught the heated looks and had felt the tension that passed between his Master and the woman, it was as visceral as the two animals' attraction to each other, so he wasn't surprised by Konrad's revelation, but he felt it was his duty to remind him of the purpose behind their visit to Stanovich Castle. Scratching at the three-day growth of blonde hair along his chin, Joseph said, "But what of the other sister? It is expected that you ask for her hand."

Konrad knew Count Holce Stanovich could very well refuse him if he were to ask for his youngest daughter's hand, but he did not care. He would wait. Even if it meant certain destitution for him and his mother, he would wait until the day Princess Valaree could wed.

With a shake of his dark head, Konrad chuckled again and said, "Expectations and consequences be damned! I shall marry no other than Princess Valaree Stanovich!"

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Castle Stanovich  
October 17, 1792

Valaree waved the intricately carved ivory fan before her flushed face. She was overly warm, but not from her

latest dance with the rotund Count Freidrick or the over crowded ballroom, but rather from Count Konrad Von Wahran's heated gaze from across the room.

A gaze she had met frequently over the past two weeks.

It had been by calculation that Valaree was the first to greet Count Konrad. After all she had heard about him, she and her groomsman had ridden out to the river the same time for several days in a row and it was on that fourth day when she spotted him. The man that was the expected suitor for her sister.

However, it quickly became apparent that the Count did not wish to court Ivannia and that his interests in fact lay with her. And while Valaree felt bad for her sister, she could not deny her deep attraction for him. Granted, in her young and secluded life, she had not met many noblemen, but Count Konrad was, without a doubt in her mind, the most handsome and dashing of them all.

Valaree had been relieved when she first discovered he was taller than her by several inches and found the wide expanse of his shoulders most pleasing. His short cropped hair, as well as his thin mustache and short pointed beard, was black as coal. His skin was sun darkened from the time he spent out-of-doors and his eyes, green like hers, were mesmerizing; she felt as if she could stare into them for eternity. He spoke eloquently, and with every word, the deep resonating tone of his voice triggered fluttering in her stomach. And as she watched him, between the dancing couples, speaking with her father, her stomach not only fluttered madly, but she flushed warmly as she wondered what it would feel like to be embraced in his strong arms. Or if his mustache would tickle if he were to kiss her. . .

Lost in her thoughts, Valaree watched dazedly as the Count maneuvered through the crowd of elegantly dressed noblemen and women, and her heartbeat quickened with each step he took closer to her.

Licking her suddenly dry lips, she squared her shoulders and smoothed a hand over the golden lace stomacher of her emerald silk gown. He stopped before her, and with a gallant bow, asked if she would accompany him on a walk along the gallery.

Although nervous at the thought of being alone with him in the darkened seclusion of the great hall, Valaree answered with practiced decorum. "No dance, then, Count Konrad?" she murmured, as the fine red line of her right eyebrow rose artfully.

A smile tugged at both corners of his mouth, revealing perfect white teeth and his green eyes twinkled at her. "No, Princess, there will be time enough for that later. At the moment, I wish to speak with you privately."

With a demure smile and graceful nod, she placed her trembling hand on the sleeve of his black brocade coat and they left the ballroom, oblivious to the pair of hate-filled pale green eyes that followed their exit.

As they walked along the torch-lit gallery, where magnificent tapestries, the Stanovich coat of arms and family portraits proudly hung, the music began to fade and the frantic thudding of her heart filled Valaree's ears.

Her hands were perspiring inside her gloves and her knees felt weak. She swallowed with effort and licked her dry lips again. "Do you not enjoy dancing, Count?"

Chuckling, Konrad stopped and faced her and with a gallant bow, he replied, "Honestly, Princess, I find it to be a foolish waste of one's time, however if it were to make you happy, I would gladly make a fool of myself."

Valaree giggled softly and dropped her blushing face to study her hands clutched nervously before her.

"Assuredly," Konrad continued, "I would do anything to please you, Princess, and I do hope you will allow me every opportunity to prove it during our courtship."

With a gasp, Valaree met his eyes, her face aglow with pleasure as she waited for him to continue.

"This past eve I spoke with your father and only moments ago he gave his blessing that we may court. However, I must know, Valaree, would you welcome me as your suitor?"

Valaree's heart leapt in her chest and without hesitation, she reached out and grasped his coat lapels. "I would. Most assuredly, I would, Konrad," she whispered as she tilted her head back in anticipation.

With twinkling eyes and a wide smile, Konrad encircled her waist and pulled her against him. He lowered his lips to hers and Valaree giggled as the soft hairs of his mustache tickled her upper lip.

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Bartia, Prussia  
Castle Von Wahran  
November 10, 1793

Valaree was certain the sickness she felt for the last four mornings meant she was with child. Pulling the black sable fur blanket over her head, she squealed with sheer giddiness.

After five months of marriage, she had conceived at last! Oh, how pleased Konrad was going to be! She thought. He had been so desperate for a child that once she tells him the good news, he would surely lift her in his arms and whirl about happily. Just like he had done on the day of their wedding. And how fortunate her father and sister were visiting at this time! She couldn't wait to share the good news with her family.

Although Ivannia had, at first, been upset over Konrad's preference to her, she had seemed genuinely happy for them on their wedding day and had been nothing but an absolute pleasure since her arrival the week before. Valaree indeed felt blessed to have a sister such as her.

A sound knocking at her chamber door interrupted her happy thoughts.

Flinging the covers from her face, she sat upright, fighting against the dizziness the action had caused. Hastily combing her hair from her face, she tugged the white lace cuffs of her cotton night gown over her wrists before bidding whoever waited, to enter.

Ivannia, looking particularly pretty in her gown of ivy green velvet, entered the room. Her strawberry blonde hair was pinned up with soft curls arranged around her rectangular face. Her pale red eyebrows rose and her pale green eyes widened in empathy as she crossed the room. "Poor dear. Are you still not feeling well?" she asked with motherly concern as she leaned down and kissed her sister's cheek.

The nausea was subsiding and the joy of her wonderful secret was overtaking Valaree, but she kept her emotions well reined in and she smiled. "Not at all. I am feeling rather well at the moment."

Ivannia's thin lips pursed as her eyes studied her. "Oh good," she said straightening fully. "I had Cook prepare some morning biscuits and tea for you. Do you think you might be able to eat?"

Valaree groaned inwardly at the thought of eating anything at that moment, and she declined, but she agreed to the tea since her sister was so kind to have it prepared for her.

Ivannia called for the servant to enter, and as the young girl did, she directed her to leave the tray on the table near the fireplace and leave.

Humming happily, Ivannia poured the tea into two fine white china cups and secretly emptied a small vial of arsenic into one. Handing Valaree her cup, she sat down on the edge of the bed next to her, and with a smile, watched as her sister drank what she had prepared especially for her that day.

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Stallwick, Prussia  
Stallwick Asylum  
April 13, 1794

Konrad sat motionless atop his horse, mindless of the freezing rain that poured from the sky and trickled down his neck and under the fox fur collar of his long black cloak.

From beneath a furrowed brow, he glowered at the old moss-covered stone walls of the estate before him.

How, in God's name, had it all come to this?! His mind cried for the thousandth time. How could his happy life turn so quickly into a living hell and his wife, once a lively and beautiful woman, be reduced to a hideous creature that could only be found lurking in the very depths of it.

Valaree's sudden illness had baffled her family and him, but any relief they felt over her recovery quickly turned to repulsion and fear as her behavior changed dramatically and her body deteriorated right before their eyes.

Over the past months most members of his household staff had fled the castle and those who were loyal, remained, but were terrified by the Countess' disturbing appearance and demeanor.

Konrad had tried to accept the unfortunate circumstances that they all had become victims of, but the final blow that shattered his fragile peace of mind and evidence that Valaree had lost hers, came the night he discovered her feasting on the internal organs of one his beloved hounds.

As he recalled seeing her, kneeling over the dog's gutted carcass, her face and hands smeared with dark blood and the front of her white gown soaked with it, bile rose dangerously in his throat.

It had been Valaree's father, Count Stanovich, who had informed him of Doctor Grueber and his unconventional approach to treating those while at the Asylum de Bece'tre in Paris. After corresponding with Doctor Grueber, Konrad knew he and this place, Stallwick Asylum, was the only hope for Valaree.

"Are you coming inside, Count Von Wahran?" a voice called out from the portico to his right.

"No!" Konrad called back.

"Count, you have traveled all this way, surely you– "

"I said no," he grated coldly.

"Very well, then. If you will not come in and see for yourself, then let me assure you, your wife is being very well cared for here."

Turning his attention to the Doctor at last, Konrad glared through the rain at the frail little man with pale blonde hair who was dressed in tan stockings and breeches and a long white coat. "Her family and I expect nothing less," he uttered coldly. "And as long as you provide my wife with *all* that she requires, you will be well compensated, Doctor. However, deny her once and you will die."

Doctor Grueber wanted to assure the Count that since her arrival six weeks prior, the Countess had been receiving swine livers and blood on a daily basis. And while her appearance remained frightfully the same, the regimen seemed to have improved her overall demeanor remarkably.

However, considering the Count refused to enter the institution to see his wife and was currently scowling murderously at him indicated that perhaps now was not the best time to discuss her treatment. In fact, it could wait until the Count's next visit, he reasoned. Swallowing with difficulty, Doctor Grueber nodded that he understood completely.

Konrad reined his horse around and heeled it viciously. As he galloped away from the asylum, he prayed to God he would die in battle in the war against the Polish. That way he would never again have to see his beloved's horrifying visage or live long with the knowledge that he had abandoned the woman he loved.

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Devon County, England  
Blackwell Cottage  
July 28, 1881

David looked up from the book he was reading aloud and caught Develyn miming hanging himself from an imaginary rope. His eyes rolled upward in their sockets and he stuck his tongue out so that it hung limply from the side of his slacked mouth.

How could his brother not be riveted by the adventures of Edmond Dantes as the Count of Monte Cristo? David thought with a shake of his head.

"That is quite enough, Develyn," Evelyn Blackwell chastised gently, startling them both.

Snapping out of his grotesque death pose, Develyn muttered a guilty apology to their mother.

"Quite all right, dear. You may begin reading where David has left off right after our tea. Please go and help your sister," she ordered quietly.

Thankful for a momentary reprieve from his boredom, Develyn sprung from his chair, sending it toppling over in his haste, and ran into the house.

"David, please come here, son."

Closing the book and placing it upon the table, David stood up from his chair. As he crossed the flagstones to where she was reclining on a wicker chaise in the shade of a Japanese Maple, he thought how out-of-place her black mourning gown, several sizes too large now, seemed amongst the gaily colored pink, yellow and white roses of the garden surrounding them.

Although she had assured them that she was feeling much better than she had in weeks, her skin was the

color of their fishing pond when frozen over in the winter, her cheeks were sunken and hollowed and there were alarming dark circles around her dull brown eyes.

With a tremulous smile, Evelyn patted the seat next to her and when David sat down, she encircled her arms around him from behind. Blinking back tears, she hugged him as tightly as she could and whispered at his ear. "David, my dear, dear boy you must listen to me closely and not interrupt, for I have not the strength to repeat what I am about to say. Do you understand?"

Although afraid, his heart thudding frantically in his chest, he nodded his dark head and resolutely replied, "Yes, mummy."

"Because you are so wonderfully brilliant, I believe you already know that mummy is very, very ill and will not be getting better. You know this, don't you?"

Although tears welled in his eyes, he replied as resolutely as before, "Yes, mummy."

Choking back a sob, Evelyn nodded and nuzzled his hair, breathing in the scent of her child. "I knew you did, my brilliant boy. Now, listen carefully for I must extract a promise from you. I know it is not fair of me to ask for you and Develyn are the same in age, but you and he are so very different in nature. You see and feel things differently than he does." Her breath caught momentarily and when she spoke again, her voice was weak. "And so I must know that when the time comes, when I, when I join your father in heaven, that you, my dear sweet boy, will always watch over your brother. That you will remind him what is right and urge him to act so. That you protect him from all danger, even if that danger comes from within himself. Will you promise mummy that?"

Although now sobbing, David resolutely replied, "Yes, mummy. I will watch over Develyn. Always. I promise."

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