

The White Lily

Chapter One

“How can you know he’s telling the truth?” Brennalyn crossed her arms, frowning at the discovery her friend’s lover wasn’t the wealth of information she’d hoped for.

Sylvia unclipped a clothespin from the line and peered from behind the white linen, a blush painting her cheeks as she whispered, “Because when he kicks his knickers off and crawls into me bed, he tells me *everything* he’s thinking.”

“*Sylvia*,” Brennalyn yell-whispered, glancing around the servants’ yard where her friend hung the laundry each day.

Sylvia laughed, folding the sheet and dropping it in her basket. “You should see your face, Brenna. Never seen your cheeks so pink.”

Brenna rolled her eyes and glanced toward the sky. Night came quickly in wintertime and the sun already hung on the horizon like a ripe apple about to drop. She pulled her shawl tight around her shoulders, a dowdy but thick swathe of blue wool the children had given her on her last birthday.

“Well, I wish you had some new information about the duke.”

“Nay. No more to tell, I’m afraid.”

“If there’s nothing else, I must go. They’ll be worried for me soon.”

“Aye.” She unclipped another linen, dropping the clothespin in the pocket of her apron.

“Let me walk you back through the servants’ quarters.”

“Oh, no. I can make my way back. You’d best get your chore finished before night settles in. I kept you too long.”

Sylvia frowned. “Are you sure? You remember the way?”

“Yes, of course. Take a left at the end of the first corridor, then the next right and the next left.”

Sylvia planted her hands on her hips. “Nay, Brenna. The opposite. Take a right, then a left then a right.”

“Right,” said Brenna with a confirming nod. “I’ll see you at Terrington Hall on Saturday.”

“Aye. On Saturday.”

Brenna strode back across the yard and into the castle, her mind buzzing with the information she’d gleaned from Sylvia. It wasn’t much, but it was perplexing to say the least. Sylvia’s lover, who happened to be the duke’s closest servant, had told her that his master despised the crown. And that he despised his uncle, King Dominik of Izeling, ruler of the north, most of all. He’d also claimed that as his human servant, the duke treated him with great respect.

This news was completely unexpected and went against everything she believed about the royals and the aristocratic class. It had been her firm belief that they were united in oppressing the peasantry, in keeping them under their boot heels and under their control. But the more she learned about the vampire duke, the more confused she became about her theories of the class system.

Since she’d arrived here three years ago and settled in as schoolteacher of Terrington, the quaint village below Winter Hill, she’d learned that the ruling duke over this region wasn’t at all what she’d expected. Well, excepting the fact he had a reputation with the ladies—both the noble and the working class. She couldn’t mention his name without one of them swooning. Especially if they’d had the pleasure of a night with him as his bleeder.

*Revolt*ing. She took a left at the end of the corridor.

Though she had to admit, on the two occasions she’d met him, her knees had weakened at his sultry gaze. He had a way of charming a woman while also making her incapable of normal speech. She’d blamed it on too much time in the classroom with children and not enough out on the town enjoying herself with adult company, which was why she was determined to

attend this weekend's winter harvest ball at Terrington Hall. And perhaps even dance a little and enjoy herself.

Turning right, she walked through an unfamiliar foyer. Glancing left then right, she chose the wider passage on the left, which ended at an outer door. She smiled. She must've gotten turned about, but this would lead out the front of the castle anyway. She opened the door and stepped out into a closed courtyard, her smile dying on her lips.

Six young women turned to face her, one of them she recognized as the pretty maid who worked at the haberdashery. The others looked familiar as well, though she wasn't exactly a socialite and couldn't place them.

"Miss Snow," said the sweet blonde whose name escaped her. "What are you doing here?"

Heavens, she couldn't tell any of them what she was truly doing there. Spying on the duke would earn her a swift jaunt in the town jail. Or worse. Into his dungeon.

"Hello. What a surprise to see you here."

"A surprise to see me?" she stepped closer with a kind smile. "After our last meeting, I'm quite surprised to see *you* here."

The other women eyed Brenna in her plain gray frock and sad little shawl as if she were an insect that had just landed on their favorite meat pie. She ignored them and tried to figure out what was going on and what her last conversation had been about at the haberdashery.

Oh. She had tsked about two noble ladies discussing the virility of the Duke of Winter Hill, wondering how good his stamina was compared to mortal men. Brenna had made a snarky comment at their exit about noble breeding not being all that noble.

"Miss Margaret, is it?"

"Marianne," she corrected.

Brenna scanned the courtyard, searching for an outer gate. "You don't happen to know the way out, do you?"

The young woman was about to speak when the door wrenched open behind them. Every lady spun and stared at the man in the doorframe. Brenna knew him to be Sylvia's lover, Grant.

A tall man with a fine physique and an assessing green gaze, which swept the lot of them and landed on her.

“Miss Snow.” He said her name with such finality she thought she heard the death knell on the wind. “If you will follow me, please.”

“I—”

“Right this way.” He stepped aside and commanded her to follow with a gesture of his hand.

She swallowed hard, finding the other ladies had wilted when he called her name. What were they all doing there anyway? Was there a new position to be had among the servants? But one of the ladies was an aristocrat’s daughter. Strange.

“Now. Miss Snow.”

She jumped and launched quickly through the door. He motioned to another house servant, a young man waiting in the foyer. “Send the others away.”

“Yes, sir.”

“If you will follow me, Miss Snow.” His dark eyes pierced her with a challenge, as if he knew she wanted to bolt for the door, whichever direction that might be. But there was nothing she could do now other than face the reality that she’d been caught poking around looking for information about the duke. He was indeed Sylvia’s lover. Had he overheard them talking? Had he forced her to confess why Brenna came so often to visit Sylvia at the castle?

Her plan to discover all she could and finally make contact with the Black Lily in the south had come to a sudden halt. Reggie had tried himself, but by the time he’d made his way to the village of Sylus, the locals told him that the Black Lily was gone. Their leader, Arabelle, had fled with the prince and her band of revolutionaries. He left quickly when Legionnaires of the Glass Tower suspected him as a stranger in their region.

Reggie was a postman’s boy she’d tutored back in Korinth. Now a young man, he was hell-bent on joining the revolution and fighting to break the caste system, for a cause she’d lectured to him about so many times during their lessons. Without direct contact with the resistance,

Brenna had decided to finally put her inheritance sitting in the basement and her inborn talent to good use. Thus far, she was proud of what little she could do. Until the day she could leave and seek out the Black Lily herself. This was a difficult task with so many children to care for.

Clasping her hands together at the front, her chin up, she followed him out of the foyer into an open hall where the walls rocketed high, the ornate vaulted ceilings bracing the sculpted columns. She'd never seen this part of the castle, which made her realize she'd gotten herself quite lost on the way out. She'd only ever been in the servants' quarters.

Following Grant up a wide staircase lined with a crimson carpet, she marveled at the tall, thin pointed windows on one wall, the fading light shining through the stained glass. The myriad hues of color would be beautiful on a sunny day, but winter allowed few of those. And she'd never come back here again anyway. If she got out of here alive.

Likely, the man who strode ahead of her had found Sylvia right after Brenna had left and interrogated the truth out of her. Though her friend, Sylvia might be persuaded to confess that Brenna had been asking too many questions about the duke, his place in the royal family, and his opinions on the underground resistance called the Black Lily. The question was, what would he do with her now?

Grant led her down a long corridor on the second floor, also lined with beautiful stained-glass windows depicting lovely scenes: a deer splashing across a brook, a maid walking in a rose garden, a man on horseback standing in the shade of an oak tree. Distracted by the scenery, she nearly walked right into her escort's chest as he stood in front of an open door, gesturing for her to enter.

"Oh. Might I ask—"

"Enter, Miss Snow."

She frowned. How in the world did Sylvia find him amorous? He was the most stern, unfriendly man she'd ever met. Despite his good looks.

“Very well.” She steeled her spine for whatever consequences came. Everything she did was for the good of the Black Lily and the people. And her children. She calmed herself and tried not to look guilty. Then her breath whooshed right out of her lungs.

Standing before a fire near a small, square dining table, in a fine black suit, was the tall figure of the Duke of Winter Hill. He swirled a glass of amber liquor in one hand, his other tucked casually in his pocket as if he had not just welcomed a spy into his parlor. His brown hair brushed his shoulders, burnished chestnut by the firelight. His perfectly formed lips tilted in a devilish smile, and his sapphire-blue eyes were fixed directly on her.

“Please, have a seat, Miss Snow.”

The door clicked behind her and she flinched. They were alone.

“Oh, well, I can see that you’re expecting company for dinner. I don’t want to keep you, Your Grace. I’ll stand.”

He glanced at the table, then back at her, and chuckled, the dark sound winding her belly into a tight knot. She didn’t know what that look meant as he regarded her in silence, but it made her want to melt into the carpet and disappear.

“Come.” A command. “Sit with me.” Not a request.

So, here it was. Interrogation by firelight in his pretty parlor. Perhaps he planned to use his charms to get the truth out of her. Fine. She was ready. She was her father’s daughter and could outwit any vampire if she held herself together.

Smoothing her skirts, she took a seat on the blue velvet chaise, clasping her hands demurely in her lap. Then His High and Mighty sat next to her, leaned back, and spread his arm along the sofa, his fingers ghosting the locks of her hair. Planting his feet apart, his body angled toward her, he set his tumbler on the farthest knee, and the other brushed her skirt.

No. She was *not* ready. The man swallowed up her personal space, demanding her attention like a thunderclap reminding one it was about to storm. Just in case one hadn’t noticed when the earth shook.

She inched to the side, but there was nowhere left to go. And since she didn't know how much Sylvia had revealed, she kept her peace, waiting for him to start. She stared at her lap, pretending to be enamored with a wrinkle in her skirt, smoothing it repeatedly.

"Miss Snow. *You* are my guest for dinner."

She nearly choked on her own tongue, her gaze snapping to his. "*What?*"

"I have to admit," he added casually. "After our few meetings in the schoolhouse, I never expected to find you in Winter Hill's Rose Courtyard. Not someone like you."

He raised his glass, the ice tinkling, and let the rim rest against his bottom lip. Brenna was riveted, watching his sensuous mouth as it slid into a broad smile, two sharp canines protruding, then he took a swallow. He put the glass atop his knee again, tapping his forefinger with his silver signet ring bearing a lion emblazoned in onyx. A lion indeed. Dragging away her inappropriate ogling gaze, she pried the question lingering in her half-stupefied brain to the forefront.

"The Rose Courtyard?"

"I have a few questions first before we...move on. It's customary."

Move on? Move on to what? Her mind reeled, trying to make sense of what was happening, then his question dropped her jaw to the floor.

"Afterward, would you care to have sex and stay the night?"

A flood of heat rushed up her chest and neck into her cheeks. She tried to process what he'd just asked her. His gaze roamed over her face and farther down, hovering at her neckline. He took another swallow of his drink, slowly and deliberately, as he studied her throat, the simple act so erotic she couldn't breathe.

"P-pardon?" Her voice squeaked on a high note.

"Sex. Tonight. After we *both* have dinner." He wasn't at all flustered. Quite the opposite. He might as well have asked her if she wanted a cup of tea.

The Rose Courtyard. Realization slapped her in the face with frightening clarity. She'd just stumbled onto the duke's weekly selection for a bleeder. Of all the clumsy moments in her

life—of which there were many—she had to choose tonight of all nights to get lost in the vampire duke’s castle.

“I can see you are undecided,” he continued. “Perhaps I’m moving ahead too quickly.”

He touched her hair again. On purpose. She didn’t pull away and began reciting in her head from the great poet Kalphus in order to remain calm.

He shifted, his leg grazing her knee. “Are you married?”

“No.” The lie spilled easily.

“Good. Any lovers?”

Brenna’s palms were sweating where she curled them tightly together in her lap. This was certainly an interrogation, but not the kind she’d expected. And now here she was, trying to figure out how to get out of this without giving away the real reason she’d been here, snooping around his castle.

He tapped his signet ring with a soft *tink...tink* against the glass. “It’s important you answer the question, though I understand it’s quite personal.”

“Why is it important?” she asked in a tiny voice.

He’d taken a lock of her hair and was twining it loosely around one finger. Brenna’s spine was so stiff she thought it might crack if she moved an inch.

“Because sharing your blood with me is an intimate act. I only take bleeders who are completely and utterly free. In order to avoid messy complications with jealous lovers, of course.”

Brenna clenched her hands in her skirt, her heart pounding like that of a hunted doe. There was no possible way to conceal her chest rising and falling too quickly.

“So I ask again, Miss Snow. Do you have any lovers?”