

## CHAPTER 1



Wren nibbled her pen as she eyed her latest play for the orphanage. How could the talking cat and her bumbling master escape from the evil queen's slave pens? Not magic, since only magical creatures could generate magic, and the talking cat was no magical creature—they rarely ventured into human kingdoms since the catastrophic Stone Wars over a millennium ago. No, the talking cat was merely a house cat who'd tumbled into an enchanted pool and gained the ability to speak.

Wren shivered, her skin tightening. Besides, using magic might only worsen matters. Except for small spells with circumscribed influence, magic could be chancy to use. She'd learned that when she'd almost become addicted to a charmed pen eight years ago. After writing with it once, she'd burned to use the pen again and again, even after knowing it made her words true but twisted them. Why, she'd nearly killed that hapless troll the pen's magic had brought south in the middle of summer.

She sighed and returned to her play. Frowning, she tapped her pen against her lip as she reread the queen's abused handmaiden tending the new slaves' wounds. Instead of magic, perhaps the handmaiden could help them escape. But how?

Maybe by distracting everyone so the talking cat could concoct a plan...

Wren started at a knock on her door. Hawke, the best friend she'd loved forever, had probably come to visit. Since she rarely attended court events, few others bothered visiting when her parents were out. She grinned and swiveled from her desk. "Yes?"

Abby bustled inside Wren's chambers. "Lady Blaine is downstairs, Miss Wren."

Wren wilted with a grimace. Unlike Hawke, Kit wasn't a welcome visitor—the fashionable countess's calls were never pleasant. But she couldn't pretend she was out in order to avoid Kit. She trudged downstairs to the drawing room then paused at the threshold to brace herself before gliding inside. "Good morning, Kit. What brings you by?"

Her sable hair, smoky eyes, and porcelain skin as gorgeous as ever, Kit smirked at Wren from her seat. "We haven't seen each other often during my year of mourning for my dear husband, so I thought we should talk."

Wren forced a polite smile as she sat on the sofa across from Kit. She and Kit had never been close, even though they and Hawke were the same age and had grown up together on nearby country estates, along with Hawke's older brothers, Aragon and Mel. Plus, Kit loved needling her, whether by drawling sardonic innuendos, gifting her that wretched charmed pen, or stealing Hawke's first kiss. So Kit's visit today couldn't simply be to *talk*.

Kit's gaze flicked up and down Wren. "You appear as... well as ever."

Wren stiffened at the disdain shading Kit's drawl. Since they were girls, Kit had hinted Wren's ordinary beauty was lackluster. Yet being gorgeous wasn't enough to inspire love. Wren allowed her tone to sharpen as she replied, "And you appear dashing for a lady fresh from mourning."

Kit smoothed her sleek, burgundy gown. "Thank you. I purchased a new wardrobe from Celeste's yesterday. I was so

weary of black." She gave Wren a sly glance. "While I was there, I saw your mother and the duchess."

Wren inclined her head. Mother had asked her to join them as she always did, but she'd refused so she could work on the orphanage play. Why did Kit appear so smug about Mother and her best friend dress shopping? "Celeste's *is* their favorite dress shop."

Kit's eyes glinted. "You should join them sometime. Celeste could do marvels with you—you might gain a suitor or two."

Except Wren despised dress shopping and cared nothing about gaining suitors. She was only interested in Hawke, but he'd never returned her interest, apart from a Longnight kiss when they were fifteen. A kiss he'd only attempted *after* kissing Kit the day before. So when he'd kissed Wren, she'd shoved him away and ordered him to stop. Despite loving him, she'd never be a dalliance to hone his rakish prowess. But that kiss was just the start; in the years since, he'd become a rakehell who found a new lover every few nights. And he told his best friend—her—all about them.

Her heart twisting, Wren thrust that aside and smiled at Kit. She mustn't show weakness. Kit would only use it as fodder to needle her. "I'll visit Celeste's one day."

Kit purred a chuckle. "Take care not to wait too long. You'll be a spinster soon, and not even being your elderly parents' only child and heir can atone for that."

Wren's lips tightened. Securing a husband wasn't the only aspiration in life, but she'd never convince Kit of that. Wealth and status had always preoccupied Kit, even when they were children, so she must end this pointless discussion. "If we're finished talking, I must return to writing my play for the orphanage."

Kit arched her brows and leaned forward. "But I haven't told you what I overheard at Celeste's yet. I promise you'll be interested."

Wren stilled at Kit's gloating tone. Kit was about to reveal her weapon at last. Finally. "Tell me then."

Kit nodded with a feline smile. "While waiting in the ante-room, I overheard the duchess tell your mother that she meant to see Hawke settled this season."

Wren's chest constricted. Settled? Settled with whom? Not Wren, or Kit wouldn't be here to gloat. She forced herself to nod. "I see."

Kit tossed her head. "The duchess didn't mention any ladies by name, but 'tis most interesting she spoke where I could overhear. And for her to wait until I came out of mourning..."

Wren paled. Surely the duchess wouldn't want *Kit* as a daughter-in-law. When just seventeen, Kit had beguiled the duchess's cousin into marrying her, even though his children were their age. She gulped a steadying breath. "The duchess has meant to see Hawke settled since Aragon asked Selena to marry him two years ago. Nothing has come of it so far."

Kit smirked at Wren. "I doubt the duchess devoted her full attention to settling Hawke before."

True. But Wren snorted and said, "Hawke is more intractable than a kelpie when he chooses." And the horse-like magical creatures were renowned for taking those attempting to capture them on wild rides in the depths of their watery homes. Such rides were often deadly to riders, although they were mere larks to kelpies.

Kit shrugged. "Perhaps, but even a kelpie must yield to an iron bridle eventually." In folk tales, iron was poisonous to magical creatures like the kelpie and could control them. "And the king's summer masquerade tomorrow shall be the perfect event to bridle him."

Wren's stomach knotted while she struggled to reply. Like Lord Blaine six years ago, Kit considered Hawke nothing more than a creature to capture, regardless of his or anyone else's feelings. If an iron bridle worked on humans, she'd have one on Hawke within moments of entering the masquerade.

Kit arched a brow then rose. "Now that I've shared my news, I'll let you return to your little play." She sashayed from the drawing room.

Wren retreated to her chambers but couldn't focus on the imaginary troubles in the orphanage play. Though she'd pretended to dismiss Kit's news, the duchess publicly discussing Hawke's betrothal was worrying. The duchess was a master meddler, and for her to discuss a private matter where she could be overheard meant she was determined this time. Hawke might end up betrothed before he realized what his mother was about.

She leapt to her feet. She must find Hawke and share his mother's plans. Abandoning her play, she rushed to his townhouse several streets over. Hopefully, he was at home and not attending a court event or dallying with yet another lover.

Her chest lightened when Hobb, Hawke's butler, told her Hawke was home and alone. She strode down the hall and burst into Hawke's study after a quick knock.

His inky-brown hair mussed as if he'd been teasing it like he did when upset, Hawke glanced up from his cluttered desk then grinned and leapt to his feet. "Afternoon, Wren."

She flung herself onto his sofa. He appeared pleased to see her, but 'twould change once she shared her news. "Afternoon. Kit just shared some worrying news."

Hawke's brows flew upward as he joined her on the sofa. "Oh?"

Her fingers itching to smooth his tousled hair, she nibbled her lip and studied his face. Speaking direct was best, even though her news would upset him. "She overheard your mother say she meant to see you settled this season."

Despite her warning, Hawke merely snorted. An impish glint flickered in his pale-blue eyes as he replied, "Mother has been saying that for years. Why such worry?"

Wren frowned at him. Hawke had yet to realize the implications of his mother's public disclosure. "Because the duchess

spoke in public where Kit could overhear. I fear she's serious this time."

Hawke shrugged and shook his head. "So? No matter how serious, Mother's maneuverings shall accomplish nothing."

She pursed her lips. How could Hawke remain so nonchalant? Did he wish the duchess to see him settled? "Don't make light of your mother's maneuverings. She's the best meddler in all of Calatini. Look how she arranged Aragon's marriage."

Hawke snickered. "Aragon had rescued Selena from a black witch and a brothel. Anyone could see he was smitten and meant to marry her. Mother simply facilitated matters."

Wren slanted him a flat glance. How could she get him to see the danger? "I suspect she means to *facilitate* again."

Hawke waved a hand. "I shan't bring any ladies home from a brothel then."

Although she loved him, she ached to hit Hawke for being obtuse. But he'd heed her next words. "Kit assumes she'll be your chosen bride."

Hawke jerked back. "What?"

Wren nodded, her mouth crimping. "Why else would your mother wait until Kit was out of mourning? Summerday last month would have been ideal to see you settled." The summer festival of the Goddess celebrated fertility and courtship, so many couples married or handfasted then.

Hawke shuddered. "Mother can't want *Kit* as a daughter-in-law, and even if she did, I'd never marry Kit."

Wren tensed and narrowed her eyes at him. Hawke might not care to marry Kit, but he'd enjoyed kissing the sultry beauty before her marriage to Lord Blaine. If Kit pursued him, he'd kiss her again, and the duchess would see them betrothed within a week. She drawled, "Perhaps after years of rakehell behavior, your mother despairs of you ever marrying and shall settle for Kit."

Hawke snorted. "I doubt it. And why would Mother assume I'd be interested in Kit?" He shook his head. "Kit must be on the

prowl for another husband and imagines marital plans where none exist."

A thrill darted through Wren when Hawke grasped her hands with a warm smile. Although they'd been best friends forever, Hawke rarely touched her unless escorting her somewhere. When he did, she yearned to lean in and kiss him.

Hawke squeezed her hands. "But to foil any plan Mother might have, I'll behave more scandalously than usual at the king's summer masquerade tomorrow."

Still struggling not to kiss him, Wren swallowed and licked her lips. "What could be more scandalous than your usual behavior? An orgy in the middle of the ballroom?"

## CHAPTER 2



Hawke suppressed a grimace. Wren was right. He'd have to be drastic to outdo his ordinary behavior and dissuade Mother. Perhaps Wren had a better idea. He squeezed her hands again. "What would you suggest instead?"

Wren's auburn hair shimmered as she tilted her head. "Perhaps if you pretended to pursue a suitable lady, your mother would relent."

He snorted. Mother was relentless once she decided to meddle. The only person who could get her to reconsider was Father, and he didn't always succeed. "Pursuing a marriageable miss would only encourage Mother."

Wren leaned forward. "I said you should *pretend* to pursue one."

Hawke snorted again and arched a brow. "Pretending would appear the same to Mother. Besides, I shan't trifle with any marriageable misses." "Twould be cruel to raise their expectations when he'd no intention of marrying them."

Wren swallowed, her hazel eyes darting away. "You could pretend to pursue me. 'Twouldn't be trifling since I'd know 'twas counterfeit."



Hawke gaped at her, almost dropping her hands. Wren had been his best friend forever, and until eight years ago, he'd planned to marry her. He'd spent months plotting their first kiss on Longnight when they were fifteen. But she'd shoved him away then ordered him to *never* kiss her again. Her fury had shattered his childish dreams, and he'd never dared consider her in a romantic light after that. Instead, he'd begun pursuing various lovers since their come out, but none had captured his interest longer than a few weeks. Considering their lack of attraction and his many lovers, Mother would never believe he was pursuing Wren in truth.

Weight compressing his chest, he shook his head. "No one would believe that, but if Mother did for some reason, she'd see us married within a fortnight. You'd not want that."

Wren stilled as if turned to stone by a gorgon's gaze. "No, I suppose not." She gripped his hands. "But you can't allow your mother to marry you off. Don't you recall all those dreadful ladies she forced Aragon to meet before he found Selena?"

Hawke shuddered. His eldest brother had endured Mother's matchmaking with remarkable grace. He could never manage the same. Although he and his brothers all resembled Father except for Hawke's pale eyes, their temperaments were nothing alike. Hawke was far less patient than Father, Aragon, or Mel.

He grimaced. Fortunately, he'd managed to evade the worst of Mother's matchmaking by purchasing his own townhouse while Aragon was courting Selena. However, if Mother was serious about marrying him off, avoiding her would no longer be enough. Yet he'd find a way—marriage was a lifelong sentence. And he'd not marry unless he loved his bride, which seemed improbable given how swiftly he tired of his lovers.

He smiled at Wren. "Don't fret; I'll think of some way to foil Mother, starting at tomorrow's masquerade. Come and watch me."

Wren wrenched her hands free from his grasp. "Unlike *some*

people, I've better plans than a masquerade. I must finish my latest play for the orphanage."

He swallowed a sigh as memories of Wren's plays, rowdy larks, and childish giggles darted through him. He'd once been a frequent visitor at Waterstreet Orphanage, but tiresome court events had occupied his time for the past few years. "How are the orphans?"

Wren tilted her head. "Much the same. Some of the older boys ask after you every few months."

Hawke tensed and shifted in his seat. "I'll try to visit once the social season slows." Mother would notice otherwise and redouble her matchmaking. He couldn't risk that if she already meant to see him settled.

Wren nodded. "The orphans would like that. Especially if you bring your violin."

His fingers tingled as fiddle tunes echoed in his mind. The orphans so loved those, and playing for them was never dull. Unlike attending court events. "What's your latest play about?"

"A clever cat who rescues her bumbling master from an evil queen." Wren shrugged. "As usual, nothing deep, just something to amuse the children."

Hawke tsked. Wren never believed her clever plays were much, but the orphans adored them more than his fiddle tunes. "I'm certain they'll love it. As always."

A blush darkened Wren's cheeks. "Thank you, Hawke."

To distract her, he wagged his brows. "So you think I should start an orgy at the summer masquerade?"

Her blush fading, Wren blinked at him. "No..."

Hawke smiled. His distraction had worked—but he'd never actually start an orgy. Though his interest was fleeting, his affairs were exclusive while they lasted. Not that he'd bothered since last season. Pursuing lovers had become too tiresome. Yet he'd not admitted that to anyone, not even Wren. Shoving that aside, he flashed a crooked grin. "Too much perhaps?"

Wren's eyes narrowed. "Definitely."

He chuckled at her stern reply. "Well, how about a fast widow? But not one hunting a husband like Kit." The fashionable countess might be a sultry beauty, but she was even more manipulative than Mother. He'd witnessed her lure his cousins' father Lord Blaine into marriage, and he'd not become her next hapless victim.

Wren snorted. "You've been chasing them for the past five years. That shan't dissuade your mother."

Hawke sighed and shook his head. "True." Nothing so ordinary would dissuade Mother. But perhaps something magical could. "How about a spell repelling ladies who approach me?"

Wren wrinkled her nose. "You'd risk a potentially dangerous spell? Don't you remember my incident with the charmed pen? Magic is best avoided."

He arched his brows. Ever since using the charmed pen, Wren had been skittish about magic. "Surely a small charm wouldn't be dangerous." Such spells often had minimal magical costs, so most used them without hesitation. "Perhaps one making me reek like fish guts and sour milk left rotting in the summer sun."

Wren jerked back with a shudder. "That's vile." Then she shook her head. "But 'twouldn't succeed. You're the unwed son of a wealthy duke, so ladies would either ignore your stench or purchase a charm to destroy their sense of smell."

Hawke grimaced. She was right. So he must persist with dissuading Mother, but 'twould be wrong to use magic on *her*. He must make himself unsuitable for marriage instead. But how? He set his jaw. "Then my only option to foil Mother's meddling is to devise some scandal at tomorrow's masquerade."

Wren's lips tightened. "Do as you like. You always do." She rose. "I must return to the orphanage play. See you later."

He stared after Wren as she swept from his study. What else had Kit told her? Mother meaning to see him settled couldn't be all. Wren had been too perturbed for that. But Wren and Kit had never gotten along, even as children. Probably because Kit, the

daughter of a gambling sot, had envied Wren's loving parents and comfortable fortune.

Hawke sighed and eyed the invitations he'd not bothered to sort for the past week. Unlike tangled female relationships, those he could handle. He grimaced at the heap on his desk without rising. Except he didn't want to handle them. Like pursuing lovers, court events had begun to pall during his first season years ago and had become unpalatable this summer. He'd only continued attending so Mother wouldn't notice his boredom and meddle. Yet she'd already decided to do so according to Wren.

He'd almost opened the first invitation when Hobb coughed and said, "The Duchess of Childes, my lord."

Hawke hid a wince when Mother entered. Goddess, what was she doing here just before luncheon? She was usually visiting Wren's mother Lady Keyes or attending court events. As Wren had said, Mother must be plotting his betrothal. He made himself to rise with a polite smile. "Good morning, Mother. What brings you by?"

Mother swept toward him as triumphant as the reborn Winter Queen in a Longnight play. "I'm here to invite you to luncheon. We've some news to share."

He tensed and narrowed his eyes. Their news had better not be about his betrothal. But he smiled and inclined his head. "How intriguing. I'd be delighted to come."

Mother's grin became even more blinding. "Excellent. Ride with me in my carriage."

Hawke sighed as he escorted Mother outside. She was definitely plotting something, and she adored nothing more than matchmaking. He must be vigilant to evade her. As he settled across from her on the backward seat, he asked, "So what's your news?"

"You'll hear soon enough." Mother's eyes gleamed as the carriage rumbled down the street. "Shall you attend Devon's masquerade tomorrow?"

He shrugged. "Most likely." After all, creating a scandal to foil her matchmaking should be simple at a masquerade.

Mother arched a brow. "What's your costume this year?"

Why did she wish to know? Hawke forced another shrug. "I've not decided yet." Or rather, he didn't have one. Until Wren had mentioned Mother's plans, he'd intended to miss the masquerade. Since everyone wore masks, no one would note his absence. "What are you and Father dressing as?"

Mother chuckled as the carriage slowed to a stop. "Your father and I aren't attending this year. Masquerades are for the young. The Keyes are coming over for a quiet evening instead."

He nodded and helped Mother alight. Although Wren's parents were a decade older, his parents had been their best friends long before he and Wren had been born. Their parents spent most of their time together; they had adjoining country estates, and only one neighbor separated their Ormas townhouses.

Hawke eyed Mother as he escorted her inside. But if his parents were spending a quiet evening with their best friends rather than attending the masquerade, why did Mother care what his costume was? What matchmaking scheme was she plotting?

Mother cocked her head. "Perhaps a horned man costume would suit."

He tensed. He'd not wear any costume she suggested while plotting his betrothal. "Perhaps."

His tension eased when they entered the family dining room. Not only was Father at the head of the table, but his brothers and Selena were seated as well. Joining them should distract Mother from tomorrow's masquerade. 'Twas rare for everyone to eat luncheon together. Although Aragon and Selena usually joined his parents, Mel often ate at the Great Temple where he lived and served, while Hawke preferred to eat luncheon at home or with Wren.

Hawke nodded at Father while escorting Mother to her seat.

Plus, Father would probably temper her meddling. Although he adored his wife, he always nurtured his sons' independence.

Father chuckled with a crooked grin. "From her prompt return, Caro must have found you at home. How unexpected. I thought she might miss luncheon entirely. But she was determined to fetch you."

Hawke shrugged as he sat between Father and Mel. Since lovers and court events bored him, he'd remained home most mornings this summer. But admitting that would shatter his rakish facade. To distract everyone, he winked at Selena across the table. Flirting with her never failed to rile Aragon.

As expected, Aragon's eyes narrowed. "I'm surprised Mother could drag you from your latest lover."

Hawke gritted a crooked grin as the servants brought the first course. "Mother insisted, and my lover shall wait." Indefinitely, considering she didn't exist. "I tied her to the bed to make sure."

Selena giggled while Aragon served her cucumber soup, then she said, "You did no such thing."

To sell his pretense, Hawke smirked then winked at her again over his wine glass. "Didn't I?"

As Aragon tensed and Selena touched his hand, Mel shook his head and said, "I hope you intend to bring back some food for the poor lady." Unsurprising his priest brother worried about a nameless woman.

"I had my servants feed her." Hawke waggled his brows over his roast lamb. "She'll require sustenance for what I have planned."

Father guffawed. "I imagine so if you tied her to the bed."

Mother pursed her lips at her husband. "Eldridge, don't encourage Hawke. He'll never secure a suitable wife if he continues acting the rakehell."

Hawke shuddered and quaffed his wine. No doubt Mother already had candidates in mind. He'd flee if 'twasn't the middle of luncheon. Plus, Mother hadn't revealed her news yet. "A suitable wife wouldn't suit me at all."

A smile curved the edges of Mother's lips. "Wouldn't she?"

Father arched his brows at her as the servants brought the second course. "I'll stop encouraging Hawke if you stop teasing him."

Mother chuckled as Mel served her grilled scallops. "Very well. Perhaps we should tell Mel and Hawke our news instead."