

Chapter One

Victory

Once upon a time . . . that's how my mom used to start her stories when she told me about her past. Of a place that used to be called the land of the free and the home of the brave. Way back when she was growing up, we still had choices and options. That was before they turned everything on its head and nothing was ever the same. In those days, one person chose to marry another, instead of what we have now.

But that was before the war killed half the population.

This is all I've ever known. The stories she tells seem like fantasy instead of history. That's partly because we aren't supposed to talk about it. The history books were burned a long time ago. All we have now are the oral traditions passed on through hushed, forbidden whispers.

Now, the week of my twenty-first birthday, I wince as my mom jerks my hair too hard on accident as she places the veil on my head. I've had mixed feelings about this for years. As soon as I was old enough to understand marriage and sex, I've felt sick about the whole thing.

"Mom, this dress is too tight." I mumble, trying to shift as she turns me to face her. I look up into her sweet, yet sad face and she sighs.

"It was yesterday too, what do you expect?"

"I don't know. God, I hope Liam isn't like William was last night."

Mom pulls me into a hug and then leans back to study my face. "Did he hurt you, Victory?"

"Yes, some. I know you said it might be painful but . . ." I've always been able to tell her anything, but today, I don't want to go into further detail. She told me about sex, about my wedding night—both of them—but William's rough touch left me a bloody, weeping mess in our marriage bed last night. I know she said it would hurt at first, but I didn't expect that. She told me things that she shouldn't have. Things that are supposed to be shameful to speak of. The marriage bed is a secret place, not to be spoken of. But here we are. I'm grateful for what she told me, not knowing what to expect—I can't even imagine how frightened I would have been.

"Tell me . . ." My beautiful mother pushed.

I know she wanted more for me, she told me as much when I was a child. I could tell by the glow on her face when she talked about my father, the man she chose to marry, that she wished I could have the same option.

I shake my head. "I can't. You know I can't." I sigh, glancing at the clock. "I'll be fine." It's almost time. We aren't supposed to talk about such things.

"Did he . . .?" The word rape lingers, even though legally there is no such thing. Women whisper about it, but we aren't allowed to say no. Not anymore. Sexual acts— even forced ones, are all done in the name of re-population. Women's bodies are no longer our own. They belong

to the brotherhood, because it's us alone that can rebuild through bearing children. It's been this way for so long, that I can't even fathom a time when women had rights.

"No, not that. I consented just as I am supposed to. He's just . . . he's not a kind man." I whisper the last, in case someone is listening. "He was not gentle or loving with me."

She nods, turning me. "Liam is a kind man, I'm told. He will be a good husband."

Tears choke me, but I swallow them back. It won't do to have the little make-up I'm allowed to wear today ruined. "One good one, and one bad one. I guess that's better than some."

"Of course, it is. Now, he's waiting. Everyone is waiting. You look lovely, my dear."

Breath in, breath out. Here we go, time to marry my second husband.

I married the first yesterday. It's more than just tradition, it's the law. To refuse could cost me my life. To demand one love with one man of my choosing is just not conceivable. I've heard the old stories, but I can't understand what it might have been like. Strange and old fashioned, I guess.

The weddings are community events. So, when I step into the church, the whole city is here. The music swells and carries me down the aisle with a fake smile on my face. I don't know him, my groom. I was told only his name. Liam Sullivan. Now, as I get closer to him with every step, I wonder if he will take me roughly the way William did, if he will hurt me. As I approach, I can finally see his face clearly.

Yesterday when I walked down this same aisle, in this same dress, in front of these same people, I didn't know what to think as I walked to William. The hopeful images of falling in love with him at first sight were quickly dashed.

With every step I take, relief and dread wash over me in a sick, twisted mangle of nauseating emotions. He's not old, as some are paired with. I've seen sixteen-year-old brides married to sixty-year-old men. At least I can thank The Brotherhood for pairing me with men close to my age.

I swallow, trying not to stare, trying to be subtle, as I struggle not to step on my skirt. Holding onto my father's elbow, I look at my new husband. He's tall, several inches more than I am, and I can see his body is thick with muscle even through his dark suit. I can't quite see the color of his eyes from here, but they are on me. They're cold and hard, watching me approach. His hands are clenched in front of him, feet shoulder width apart. He offers no smile, just a stare.

Liam. He's young, as young as I am. That's a relief. He's also handsome. Very handsome. I hold my breath as I set my foot on the floor. He turns and offers me his hand for the first time. I can't breathe. What will it feel like when he takes my hand? I am released by my father and I reach out, my hand is trembling visibly. Liam is gentle, his touch soft, calloused when he takes my hand. Looking up, I see his eyes for the first time. The color of a blue-gray sky just before a storm. Reflecting nothing, but I can't look away. His touch sends heat through my

body, brings a flush to my cheeks, and I intake a sharp breath when he winks at me before turning to the officiant.

The ceremony takes ages. I have sat through these things all my life but never paid much attention. Now, with nowhere to look but up at the man who seems so detached, I am forced to take in the officiant's speech with mock-awe. I suppose his words are meant to be inspiring. Some crap about the brotherhood bringing us together just like fate. How they provide us with a family home, and that it's our responsibility to bring forth children. How I was selected as this man's bride and some other bullshit I can't listen to again. He said the same thing yesterday when I stood here with William.

Of course, he leaves out the fact that the brotherhood takes any property a woman may have acquired prior to her betrothal and signs it over to her new husband chosen by two dozen old men. While the woman has no choice in her fate, the men are treated slightly better.

Once the choice is made, the men are called to the council chambers and they are allowed to view their potential bride and decline the offer. A woman that might have undesirable attributes will often times end up mated to some old fart. So we are taught young to be sweet, don't mouth off and don't argue. We follow Mommy and learn how to care for the family. Anything less . . . I don't want to think about it.

He also leaves out the fact that the "blessed brotherhood" are to blame for the war they started all those years ago, decimating the population and leaving more men than women, forcing us into this unnatural mating ritual.

I pull my thoughts back, away from things I'm not supposed to even know and look back at Liam. At least my husbands are both young. Liam is the younger, it seems. William is a little older, closer to thirty, I think. I swallow when Liam reaches for my left hand, his is warm and gentle as he slides the stackable wedding band onto my finger, on top of the first one. His touch lingers. I can't hear the words of the ceremony. Everything sounds strangely far away. He's still holding my hand, and a strange tingle is tickling my skin, heat traveling slowly up my arm and making my cheeks flush. I glance up and find him staring intently at me. His heavy gaze makes my stomach do a strange flip and I feel suddenly very aware of my body so close to his. How tall he is, how broad and strong. How he caresses my hand absently when he's asked if he'll take me as his wife.

His answer is yes. A deep, smooth voice that surprises me. I don't know what I expected, but the manly voice from the throat of this silent statue holding my hand stuns me.

My yes follows, and soon enough it's official. We are married. Man and wife, strangers. I suppose I should be grateful that my men are young and handsome, but somehow, I'm scared.

He's supposed to kiss me. I struggle to take a breath as I turn my body to face his, licking my lips. His are full, he's got a goatee and mustache framing what looks like a perfect mouth. He lets go of my hand and I'm taken aback when he takes my face in his hands, such an unexpected move for a man that doesn't know his bride. He holds my face and I feel his fingers teasing my hair and watch as he bends towards me, lips barely parted, eyes half closed.

At the last minute I close my eyes, and his mouth finds mine. Soft, he tastes vaguely sweet and smells of tobacco and cologne. My heart thunders when he takes my lip between his, tasting it with his tongue, a gentle tease, a soft caress. My eyes flutter open and I see his blue eyes watching me just as he pulls his mouth away. I have the sudden urge to say his name, to feel the weight of it on my tongue as I press it out of my mouth, but I don't.

Instead, I offer a smile and I turn, the crowd rising to their feet as he leads me down the aisle and out of the church.

There is no reception. Mom told me how weddings used to be. How you marry one man and there was this big party afterwards to celebrate your love. Love isn't a common thing now, so a reception isn't needed. Some manage to fall in love with their spouse over time, but it's not often.

Outside, the sun is bright. He turns on the steps and speaks directly to me for the first time. "You ready to leave?"

I swallow, not knowing where we are going, what he has prepared. "Of course." I try to stay calm. Not show that I'm afraid. He doesn't seem to notice.

He holds out his hand. I take it and lift my skirt to keep from tripping on my way down the stairs.