

September 2009

## STAINED FREEDOM

I looked at my mottled skin in the mirror, tenderly prodding the dark spots on my arms, stomach, and legs. There was a knock on the door. I quickly tied my robe.

“Yes?”

Leah came in, her delicate features tight with concern. “How are you doing?” she asked. I folded my arms over my chest. “I’m fine.”

“Oh,” she sighed sympathetically, her blue eyes sparkling with tears. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”

I barely managed to stop myself from flinching away as she put her arm around my shoulders.

“Let’s get you something to eat,” she suggested. “You look so skinny!”

“It’s the stress,” I managed to whisper. It was, in fact, the stress. But it had been going on for longer than the five days since my husband had “disappeared.” It had been going on for three years.

Leah guided me to a chair at the dining room table. “What would you like, Aunt Alina?” she asked.

I looked at the heavy spread before me. The thought of drinking water made bile rise in my throat, let alone eating the heavy jams, breads, and porridges on the table. “Anything is fine,” I answered softly.

She smiled at me then set a slice of toast on my plate. I took my time buttering it. I nibbled at the edges when Leah was watching, tore off chunks and tucked them in my napkin when she wasn’t.

The doorbell rang. I nearly jumped out of my chair in fright, dropping my knife as I did so. Leah placed her hand gently on my shoulder to calm me.

“The police aren’t here to question me again?” I asked, unable to stop my voice from shaking.

“No, no,” Leah answered, soothingly. “It’s Sophie and Arnold. They phoned yesterday to say they were coming, remember?”

I nodded silently as Leah answered the door. My sister Sophie and her husband Arnold, Leah’s parents, would almost certainly fuss over me constantly. As much as I loved them, I wished they hadn’t decided I needed company for a week. Leah was trouble enough; presiding over all my meals, cleaning the house, insisting I do nothing but sit around all day.

“Alina!” Sophie exclaimed as she entered the dining room.

I rose to greet her. She kissed my cheeks and hugged me tightly. I gasped in pain as she pressed against a rib I believed to be cracked. Arnold gave me the same greeting, though thankfully less vigorously.

“How are you doing?” Sophie asked, then turned to her daughter without waiting for an answer. “How is she doing?”

“Aunt Alina is being very brave.” Leah nodded sadly. “But she hardly eats. Look! Isn’t she thin? And I would bet she hasn’t been sleeping well. I can’t imagine being able to in your position, Auntie.”

“You poor thing!” Sophie cried. “I know what it is. You need to work your way into a normal routine. Light foods first, tea instead of coffee. I’ll put the kettle on now.” Sophie bustled away into the kitchen. Leah helped Arnold carry their luggage into the second guest room.

I clutched my robe around myself tightly. I looked around at the ornately decorated house: six bedrooms, a dining room, two sitting rooms, a kitchen, five bathrooms, and a beautifully manicured garden in the backyard. The thick rugs underfoot and the papered walls seemed to absorb the sounds of the house. The sudden silence pressed against me heavily. I darted into the nearest sitting room.

Pushing down the rising panic, I hastily lit a fire in the hearth. The warm crackling sound quickly drove away the silence and the chance I would hear his voice again. I shuddered just remembering the first time it had happened.

It was the morning after he had “disappeared.” I was sitting by the pond in the garden, trying to wash the blood from my hands; I didn’t know if it was mine or his. The morning was still dark, no birds were awake yet: it was quiet. Then I heard him, as if he had whispered in my ear, “Alina.” I had jumped up from the pond. No one else was in the garden. “Alina,” his voice had repeated. “Alina, I’m sorry.” I had run back through the garden, into the house, my hands still wet with blood.

I felt cold, remembering it, now. I inched closer to the flames. He had apologized. He had always apologized the morning after.

“Alina?” Sophie came into the room. “Oh! I didn’t know where you went.”

“Sorry,” I said softly. “I was getting cold.”

“I should think so! It’s a cooler in here!” Sophie handed me the cup of tea she was carrying. “Drink this and sit down here.” She gestured to the sofa across from the fire. I did as I was told. She laid two heavy blankets over my lap.

“What you need,” Sophie continued, “is something to warm up your blood! All this sitting around is doing you absolutely no good! Today I’m taking you into town. You need some new dresses to brighten your wardrobe, don’t you think?”

“That would be nice,” I replied, knowing that’s what she wanted to hear.

Sophie walked behind the sofa. She untied the ribbon that held my hair in its messy bun and began brushing through the tangles with her fingers. I closed my eyes at her touch. My head was the one thing on my body that didn’t hurt. Ethan had never touched my face; he said it was too pretty to ruin.

Sophie began to twist my long hair into a braid. “Don’t worry,” she said soothingly. “They’ll find your husband. They’ll find Ethan.”

“I’m sure they will,” I lied. In fact, I was sure they wouldn’t find him. After all, I was very good at keeping secrets.

That evening, I returned to the house wearing a brand new dress. Sophie had laced the back tightly, insisting that good posture was wonderfully becoming. Now, every step was marred by pain. I took it passively though, knowing that once these bruises and cuts healed, I would be rid of them forever.

“That was lovely!” Leah sighed contentedly.

“I agree. I haven’t had such a fun shopping trip with my sister in awhile!” Sophie smiled and rubbed my arm. I disguised my wince as a smile.

“Yes. Thank you so much for the dress and dinner,” I said.

“Don’t think twice about it,” Arnold replied, waving the matter away with his hand. “Well, I’m off to bed. A full stomach makes me tired!”

Leah giggled and followed suit after she bid everyone goodnight.

“I think I’m going to turn in, too,” Sophie said. Her eyebrows pinched together slightly. “You’ll be alright?” she asked me.

“Of course.” I gave her my most delusive smile.

She smiled back and kissed me goodnight. The stairs being a painful obstacle, I walked slowly to my room. I shut the door and unlaced the dress, letting it fall to the floor. I sighed with relief as my body was freed of its restrictions. I slid into a hot bath and savored the almost nonexistent pain I felt while in the water.

An hour later, my body was relaxed, but I was still too afraid to go to sleep yet. Every night was the same: full of nightmares. I wasn’t ready to relive that night once more. Instead, I slipped on my white cotton nightgown and headed downstairs to the garden.

The grass was cool and soothing against my bare feet. I ran my fingers along the soft petals of the flowers, the rough bark of the trees. I circled the pond several times before I stopped at the edge. The black water was perfectly still, mirroring the dark sky above.

Carefully, I dipped my toes into the cool water. Ripples spread along the surface, distorting the reflection. As the water settled, a man’s face appeared over my shoulder. My head whipped around. I breathed a shaky sigh of relief as I saw it was just a statue. I had forgotten it was there. I clenched my hands together to still their shaking.

I tiptoed around the pond to study the statue more closely. It was of a man wearing only a cloth wrapped around his waist. It fell to his feet in perfectly smooth folds. The man held his arms open in a sad, pleading way.

I leaned between his chest and arm and rested my cheek against the stone shoulder. The cold stone enlivened my flushed face and aching body. My finger traced the cords of his neck, along his jaw and lips. His face was very beautiful, even in its sadness. I stroked his eyebrow. Every hair was visible. The artist had been extraordinarily talented. The man was so realistic. I inspected the palm of the hand on the arm I was leaning against. Every crease blended smoothly into another.

Yes, this man was very realistic.

I stepped out of the stone man’s arms and looked at him again. His pleading eyes were suddenly deep, trying to communicate with me. I felt my heart skip a beat. I knew who this statue reminded me of.

“Alina,” his voice whispered.

I stifled my scream as I fled back into the house.

The next morning my room was flooded with the light of dawn. I stretched my stiff limbs carefully and sat up. I was in the middle of the bed. I allowed myself a small smile. Without Ethan, I was no longer restricted to one side of the bed. I had more room, more comfort. Without Ethan, I was free.

I walked down the stairs, my legs searing in protest. I could hear the sounds of my family making breakfast in the kitchen. As I passed through the entrance hall, something caught my eye. A large blue vase stood unobtrusively by the front door.

I picked it up. It wasn’t as heavy as it looked. My eyes traced the intricate patterns that decorated its surface as I remembered its origin.

Ethan had given it to me as a present one year. I had loved it so much. It looked perfect by the fireplace in the dinning room. But Ethan had moved it to the front hall. He said it worked better there because every time he walked in he could put his umbrella in it. I hated how he dropped his umbrella into the vase every night. Vases were not meant to serve as umbrella holders. My hands shook at the memory, but not with fright, with rage.

Yes, he had always apologized. And I had always forgiven him. But secretly, I hated him. I hated him for everything he did to me. Of course, he never knew I hated him. Until the night he disappeared, that is.

But the umbrella was gone now. I carried the beautiful vase back to its rightful place: by the hearth. Perhaps I would pick some sunflowers from the garden for it to hold.

“Hello, Auntie,” Leah greeted me from the doorway.

“Good morning,” I replied.

“Alina!” Sophie said breathlessly from behind her daughter. “Good...you’re up.”

I looked away from the vase. Something wasn’t right.

“Did you sleep well?” Sophie asked casually, her voice betraying her distress.

I folded my arms across my chest. “What’s wrong?”

She hesitated. Mother and daughter exchanged looks. Leah smiled sadly at me, then turned back into the kitchen.

“Alina,” Sophie said gently.

My stomach tightened. Something had happened.

“Alina,” Sophie repeated. “The police phoned this morning. You were still asleep.”

My heart rate accelerated. “Do they want to talk to me again?” I fought to keep the panic down.

“No, no,” Sophie replied, soundly just like Leah. “They phoned because...because they found Ethan.”

My mouth went dry.

Tears formed in my sister’s eyes. “He’s...oh, honey, he’s dead.” She buried her face in my shoulder as she cried. I patted her back numbly. “They said he must have been attacked,” she sobbed.

I looked back at the vase. I was free.

But something marred my freedom. Something still felt wrong. Something still haunted my memory.

I could still feel the blood on my hands.

THE END