

It wasn't stealing if the world already owed it to her.

That was the logic Juliette Fallow clung to as she skirted along the corners of London's most prestigious music conservatory. Close to three strokes past midnight, the streets were devoid of any sound save for her worn leather boots against the pavement. The shadows were free of leering men looking for another warm body, and the nearest bar, which she had taken measures to avoid passing by, was two blocks away. Drunkards and hard liquor were too unholy to be near the street that housed the conservatory and other Divine-blessed structures. Juliette would have appreciated a glass of brandy to warm her aching bones, but the absence of eyes to see her was ultimately more beneficial. Besides, Juliette decided, as she pressed close to the gilded gate wrapping around the conservatory, she couldn't sacrifice her keenest senses. Not when she was finally executing the plan that she had spent months constructing.

Get in, forge an invitation, get out. Quickly. Like a fox raiding a chicken barn, all sly feet and fast instincts.

She reached the gated entrance to the staff wing. The guards were making their rounds, one on the north side and the other on the south. Juliette had two minutes, maybe three, before the northern guard rounded the corner. Just past the bars of the gate lay a shadowed alcove that promised an entrance to the east corridors. Unluckily, she didn't have a proper key to either the gate or the staff entrance. Luckily, she had lifted one off a guard two weeks ago, pressed the shape into a small block of wax, and returned the key around his beefy neck before he even noticed it was missing. She had painstakingly carved a copy out of wood, bearing nick after nick on her hands.

Juliette pulled the wooden key from her pocket and slipped it into the lock. It slid in easily, and when she turned it, Juliette was rewarded with a very faint *snick*. Gently, she pushed against the gate. A half smile curled her lips when it swung open, the hinges oiled to utter silence.

Sliding the key out of the lock and closing the gate behind her to look perfectly undisturbed, Juliette made her way to the staff entrance. However, when she fit the wooden key in place once more, it didn't turn.

She sighed softly. "Not a skeleton then," Juliette murmured, almost surprised it hadn't worked. In her experience, the easiest places to break into were the most high-profile. The name alone was usually enough to ward off people from trying, especially if the rumors of traps and maximum security were threatened. Rumors had never stopped Juliette.

She placed the key back in her pocket and steadied her breathing. Juliette reached up to her hair, slipping a long hairpin out, and bent it to fit in the keyhole. She glanced behind her, trying to gauge when the guard would make his way to the eastern side of the building. The shadows offered no answer, and she turned back to the pin.

Juliette didn't like picking locks, finding it too time consuming and irritating to configure, but that didn't mean she didn't know how. It took her a few tries to finesse the lock, yet finally it gave way beneath her fingers. A faint line of sweat beaded under her hair. Stuffing the crooked pin alongside the wooden key, Juliette ducked inside the conservatory. Just before she closed the door, she heard the sound of footsteps along the cobbled pathways surrounding the conservatory. The guard. Her breath caught in her throat. A beam of light swung in the cracks of the door, then passed. The door closed the rest of the way, and Juliette exhaled slowly into the heavy darkness coating the eastern corridor.

She refastened the latch, then began to pick her way down the polished tiles of the hallway, pressing close to the shadows. Tiny sconces lit her path.

The conservatory was silent. Juliette kept her heart paced, her steps steady. She hadn't come this far to get jittery now.

She passed countless rooms, each door firmly closed. Golden name plates hung on the walls beside the doors, but the lighting was too dim for her to make out what they said. Ahead, a bank of pigeonholes stretched along the wall, each crammed with letters, due notices, and the

thick cream letters that glittered with gilded embossing. The Patron's Ball invitations, just as she had planned to find them.

Juliette slipped closer until she was but a finger's brush away from the edges of the invitations. Each was sealed with the conservatory's imprint. She thumbed through the envelopes, filing away each name into the back of her mind: *Hathaway, Finnegan. Montclair, Yekaterina. Darling, Lucille.* Juliette studied the handwriting on the invitations. Tight letters, clipped short by brief swoops. Practiced penmanship created after years of slaving away as someone's secretary. Her ears traced the loops of the L and the lean of the M. Easy enough to mimic.

At the very bottom of the stack were four blank envelopes, unsealed and holding invitations waiting to be signed with the receiver's name. She slipped the invitation free from the envelope and, after a quick search, found a shining, newly-cartridged fountain pen hidden within the depths of the cabinet. Balancing the invitation against the pigeonhole frame, she carefully added her name, being sure to add the elegant swoops of the J and quick brush across her double Ts.

*Fallow, Juliette* took place on the invitation, like it had always been meant to be there. Once finished, Juliette fanned the ink to dry then began to slip the thick cream paper into her pocket.

"Bold."

The voice struck like a low chord behind her.

Juliette spun on her heel, her nerves shocking at the end. She fought to keep her face impassive as she met the eyes of the boy leaning on the wall across from her. His arms were crossed, his posture lazy in that practiced way of people who didn't have to try. Shadows lined half his face, but the gleam of his silver cufflinks caught the lighting.

"Sorry," he said, not a hint of regret in his voice. "I didn't mean to startle you."

Juliette's eyes narrowed.

He pushed off from the wall with a slow, easy motion. The light caught the strands of his hair, painting them a dark gold, close to bronze. She watched as his eyes flicked to the envelope still in her hand and then back to her face. If he recognized her surname, he didn't show it. The boy hummed. "Wouldn't have guessed you for the type."

Juliette smiled, all sharp edges and charm, even as her heart drummed a staccato beat in her chest. "Then you're not very good at guessing."

A beat passed. The silence drew thick between them. He arched a brow, something like amusement flickering across his face, before he gave a mock bow and turned away. The boy disappeared into a cross corridor without another word, the soft click of boots against marble tiles following his departure.

She didn't allow herself to breathe until the invitation was safely in her pocket and she was a block away from the conservatory, her pulse slowly returning to normal. But even her quiet exhale fogging the night air was not enough to spirit away the nervous thrum echoing in her ears.

The boy had caught her. Juliette hadn't planned, *hadn't thought*, that anyone would be up at such an ungodly hour save for her and the guards. So what was he doing?

The thought danced in the back of her mind, akin to a whisper in a hall of mirrors.

But by the time she passed through the gaslit edge of the city's sleeping district and climbed the narrow, rickety steps to her attic flat—breathless, fingertips numb, triumph caged within her ribs with building pressure—Juliette decided it didn't matter. He hadn't stopped her from leaving or placing the forged invitation into the pigeonhole once more. His presence, curious as it was, was nothing more than a blip in the long game she had been subjected to playing. Tonight was a victory, cleanly won.

The days splintered across the week, London bustling in preparation for one of its most decadent and rich events. The Patron's Ball, held annually by the Lebedev Conservatoire of Music and the Sacred Arts, boasted an attendance of the United Kingdom's wealthiest citizens

and most promising musicians, most of whom were seeking patronage to attend the conservatory. Unless a musician came from a legacy family, was born into leagues of wealth, or received a rare offer of scholarship from the institution itself, getting a patron to sponsor was the only way to cover the costs of attending the conservatory. The Patron's Ball was used to showcase prospective talent and to lure more patrons into paying the steep price of furthering the education of the next Vivaldi or Rimsky-Korsakov. Like cattle at auction, the musicians were bid on, after playing a piece on their respective instruments in front of the patrons.

Brutal rejections, both by the patrons and the conservatory administration, were not uncommon and were whispered like cautionary tales among beginning musicians. Juliette had heard her fair share growing up and knew that the Patron's Ball was the equivalent of a velvet-coated knife. Dazzling on the surface, but enough to sever futures before they'd ever begun.

So when the night of the ball finally drew, Juliette hid her slick palms inside long white gloves that extended to just below her elbows. The borrowed corset she wore was three sizes too small, the hem of her dress slightly uneven from where she had had to let it down. The dress lacked the ruffles and silk ribbons that were fashionable among the higher-class women, but Juliette thought it blended in fair enough, especially once she had patched the small, moth-eaten spots.

She tugged her fur hood tight around her shoulders and stepped up to the conservatory's door. Behind her, the Patron's carriages lined the street, a dozen or so women being helped out by their footmen while their husbands barked orders to the boys left to tend the horses.

"Your invitation, madam?" At the door stood a boy at least two heads shorter than she. He was pale, with eyes too big for his face, and a mop of ginger hair. When she glanced at his hands, she could see the callous lying in the middle of his thumb. A junior musician, then, either by family or scholarship.

Good. He was too young to recognize her name. Most of the younger musicians only knew her mother's name, maybe her father's if they were old enough. Never hers nor her sister's.

Juliette handed the cream paper to him, confidence surging in her bones at the sight of her impeccable forgery.

However, the boy hesitated. Voice wavering, he said, "Madam? Your invitation...it is missing the gold seal necessary for entry. I'm afraid I can not allow you in without it."

Damn. If the boy with silver cufflinks hadn't caught her, maybe she would have had the hindsight to check the other invitations.

Juliette feigned confusion. "My invitation didn't come with one. I thought—well, actually, my teacher said—that I didn't have to have one to enter...this is my first year seeking patronage, and I didn't know any better."

The boy's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. His eyes shifted to glance behind her. "Is your teacher not with you, madam?"

Juliette shook her head. "No, *he* is not accompanying me. He took ill last night, unfortunately."

The lie slipped out easily. A male teacher implied she came from a place of more wealth, pedigree. It provoked the idea of status. Someone who was trying to sneak into the Patron's ball wouldn't have a male teacher. She could see the moment the boy began to stop doubting her, and when he looked back at her invitation with an unfurrowed brow, Juliette knew she had succeeded.

The boy looked at the list, then back at her. He gestured to the door. "Good luck with your performance, madam."

Juliette gave him a faint smile and slipped inside. After handing her coat to the doorman, Juliette stepped into the ballroom, melting into the sea of silken gowns and sharp waistcoats easily. Her gaze swept over the room, cataloging and memorizing every detail like a hunter

finding the perfect target. The gilt chandeliers hung low, bathing the gallery in a soft, almost syrupy warmth. Rich fabrics swayed with the movements of the guests, their jewel-toned outfits brushing against the gleaming parquet floor as they moved idly. The heat from the crowd felt stifling, thick with the scent of perfume, leather, and wine. It was everything like she remembered.

A waiter drifted by listlessly, and Juliette reached out to pluck a champagne flute for her own. The bubbles popped quietly inside, the glass cold against her fingers. Juliette sipped her champagne as she moved through the ballroom. Her gaze flicked from one conversation to the next. Everywhere, men with curling mustaches and ruddy cheeks puffed out their chests like the bellows of an organ. They loudly talked about how much money they had to sponsor the next shining star, the conservatory was going to turn out. They boasted about who they already had under their patronage, who they had acquired at the previous year's Patron's Ball. Women lacquered in diamonds and more wealth than they knew what to do with complained about their husbands taking more care in nurturing their relationships with the musicians they sponsored rather than with the children they had at home. The music conservatory's great gallery was full of them—patrons and politicians, debutantes and musical heirs, all orbiting the future of orchestral music like it was a country on the brink of being conquered.

"Scholarship girl, I think," someone whispered as Juliette passed. "From Nottingham. Her father sells books."

"No," another voice disagreed. "She's one of Frederick's."

"Really? I thought his girl had red hair."

A man guffawed loudly. "The one with red hair who's young enough to be his daughter is Frederick's mistress."

Juliette passed a cluster of conservatory girls, gathered around the grand piano adjacent to the stage. They were all clothed in shades of navy blue, the conservatory's staple color. Juliette had worn the same. The conservatory girls hummed with nervous laughter, their eyes

flickering across the crowd like pecking birds, as if trying to seed out competition. One of the girls stood slightly apart from the others. Her battered viola case was clutched tightly in one hand.

A woman brushed past Juliette, the feathers of her sleeves trailing along Juliette's arm salaciously. As she walked away, Juliette caught the tail end of the woman's conversation with the man by her side. Her husband, Juliette presumed.

"That viola girl," the woman said. "The Carlyle one. She *must* be our protégé, Alistor."

"She's nothing but bad news, dear," the man replied in a tired tone. Juliette drifted closer to them as the couple halted on the outskirts of the crowd, taking a sip of her champagne as she did.

"I'm sure the rumors about her—"

"A boy doesn't just vanish without a trace," the man cut in. He glanced behind him and Juliette quickly slid her gaze away. "We can not risk our reputation being patrons for a girl entangled with the Fallen, dear."

Juliette looked back at the black haired girl, outcast by the other conservatory musicians, recognition settling in. Ophelia's head was bowed, her cheeks flushed from the heat of the room. Even in stillness, there was a precision to her, like she was waiting for the downbeat of a piece. Juliette knew the rumors—Ophelia Carlyle had been second chair viola the previous year and was openly pushing for principal now that she was seeking patronage again. Her previous patron, a widowed elderly woman with no children, had passed unexpectedly.

The previous principal viola had vanished without explanation in the middle of the night, despite having another year at the conservatory. There had been talk of a curse, that he had been entrenched in a deal with the Fallen gods, that Ophelia had to do with his vanishing.

Juliette didn't believe in curses. She believed in power. And Ophelia Carlyle, despite the rumors that she had something to do with her senior's disappearance, would gain an abundance of it if she became the first female principal viola in the conservatory's history.



A figurehead for the conservatory announced that the musicians seeking patronage would begin performing soon. The man and woman she had been eavesdropping on began to walk toward the front of the ballroom. Juliette watched Ophelia for a moment longer before returning to circling the room. Her path led her to the string quartet, who were finishing their performance with little recognition from the crowd of Patrons milling about, anticipation for the individual performances already thrumming in the air. She saw her opening when one of the violinists—a girl with pin-straight blonde hair and sharp features—began to chastise the double bass player. Juliette edged closer to the string quartet, who were watching the argument between the violinist and double bass players with hungry rapture.

Juliette took a step forward, then another, closing the gap between them. And with practiced ease, Juliette turned sharply, spilling the champagne onto the violinist's dress with a flick of her wrist. The liquid soaked into the velvet of the dress almost immediately, turning the blue fabric dark.

The violinist froze. Swiveled on her heel to pin her harsh gaze on Juliette, murder gleaming in her cold blue eyes. Her face contorted with barely contained anger.

Juliette stood still for the briefest moment, eyes wide with mock innocence, the empty glass still in her hand.

“Oh dear,” Juliette said, her voice pitched high with concern. “I’m so sorry, I wasn’t looking. It’s all my fault. Please, let me help.”

Before the violinist could respond, Juliette touched her arm, drawing her attention to the ruined fabric. The perfect distraction.

As the violinist scowled down at the stain, her eyes narrowed with fury, Juliette’s fingers brushed the handle of the violin case. It had already been forgotten in the heat of the argument with the double bass, but now Juliette was easily able to slide it into her grip.

Juliette took a step back. The violinist's head snapped up, her lips parting in disbelief. She didn't even glance at the violin case clutched in Juliette's hand. Her voice was edged with venom when she asked, "What do you think you're doing?"

Juliette was already backing away, her expression a mask of innocence. "Really, I'm so sorry." She added a soft, reassuring smile to the tail end of her words. "I'll make sure someone gets that cleaned for you, just give me a moment."

The violinist looked too stunned to move, and Juliette took the opportunity to melt into the crowd like a shadow, stolen violin in hand. *Bold*. The word echoed in her mind, and Juliette felt her lips tug into a smile.

She found the conservatory girls, a huddle of dark blue, leaving the ballroom together, instruments in hand. Juliette trailed behind them, just a few steps away from Ophelia Carlyle. They made their way into an adjoining corridor where the rest of the students seeking patronage had been funneled. The tension in the air was palpable, voices low and tense as the musicians set to work quietly tuning their instruments.

Juliette didn't fear the violinist she had stolen the instrument from—it was clear enough that she wasn't under patronage—and brought the violin up to rest beneath her chin, stroking out a series of quick notes that disappeared beneath the hum of other noise. The violin was in better shape than Juliette's own, and warmed beneath her touch, becoming pliable to her music easily. Juliette tested out a few more notes before falling silent along with the rest of the musicians when the first player, a flautist, was escorted out to perform.

Anticipation wound tight in her stomach like the strings along the bridge of the instrument as the line steadily moved forward. It wasn't long before Ophelia filed out before Juliette, viola steadily in hand, and Juliette was at the very front of the line. She listened to Ophelia's performance—a recently composed piece by Holst—feeling the movements of the piece deep within her blood. Ophelia Carlyle would be a hard act to follow, Juliette knew, but the challenge lit something in her veins. The climb to the top would never be an easy one.

“Madam, your name?” An attendee dressed in deep navy asked her. He looked at her expectantly.

Juliette just smiled at him, waiting for the final notes of Ophelia's performance to run out. Applause erupted and drifted into the corridor. Heat struck warm over her body in anticipation. “You won't find my name on there.”

“Madam, I-”

The attendee tried to stop her, but she side-stepped him, walked through the door separating the corridor and ballroom, and closed it behind her. Juliette swiftly wedged the door shut, then stepped out into the ballroom, fingers already itching to begin.