

A RUINED LANDS NOVEL

CITY
OF
RUIN

LINDSEY POGUE

City of Ruin
A Ruined Lands Novel

By Lindsey Pogue
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RUINED LANDS



NORTH SEA

MANUFACTURING DISTRICT

SCREAMING WOODS

EMBERBROOK

BRIARWOOD ESTATE

NORTHSHIRE ESTATE

CITY DISTRICT

NEW LONDON

FARMING DISTRICT

ISLE OF LOST W



SOUNDLESS
SEA



WINTERWOOD
KEEP



ONYX
MOUNTAINS

NORSELAND



NORTHELM



MOANING MARSH

THE
WINDS

TALON
BAY



OLD LANDS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my beta team and proofreaders... You are all amazing, and I cannot thank you enough for supporting me, book after book.

Story after story. Deadline after deadline.

You help my characters come to life and the pages shine!

And a very special thank you to my Patreon supporters for your contribution to this project. Selene wouldn't have such a striking cover without you.

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Melinda Leininger

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Mindi Travis

CENTURIES AGO...

In the wake of the ingenuity, commerce, and progression that swept the continents, the world began to wither. The skies blackened, water turned to poison, and the earth began to quake. Rich or poor, young or old—there was no escaping the great Shift. And in such darkness and discord, the dead soon outnumbered the living.

When the Black Country was no longer safe, its people fled. They sailed to distant shores, trying to flee the toxins that leached from the lands. Queen Victoria was the first royal to perish, followed by all thirteen of her children. Albert, Prince Consort, was left to rule a dying country plunged into chaos. A man of science and innovation, he led what remained of his people to the underground railways and aqueducts of London to escape the detriments above.

But amidst his heroism, Albert, devastated by the death of his entire family, withdrew into a deep depression. Conflict ensued, and unfit to rule, he relied upon his closest confidantes to govern his underground kingdom. Eventually, after great suffering and turmoil, the royal council found a way to not only sustain life below ground but to thrive, garnering a love among

the people far greater than that for the unfit king. And so, the day Albert died, the British monarchy perished with him. The Council of Four elevated men of skill, outranking those of nobility with little to offer the new order.

For nearly three hundred years, the Council of Four battled uprisings, bouts of illness, and starvation in the dank labyrinth of the tunnels. All hope of life above ground was nearly lost until one historic day, seventy-five years ago, when everything changed.

Men from faraway lands discovered the flailing underground city, and offered it knowledge of the reborn, breathable world above in exchange for men to work the lands the explorers claimed as their own. Accords were brokered, districts were formed, new laws were set in motion, and with the Council of Four at the helm, New London emerged from the ruins, greedy to rebuild what was left of their once great city.

PROLOGUE

SELENE

Peering through the cracked open door, I watch my father hovering over my parents' bed. His eyes are wide and his mouth is pursed as he stares down at my mother. Blood stains her lips, and sweat still dampens her brow, but her chest no longer heaves. And her lungs . . . they no longer wheeze.

While she is the one who is dead, my father looks much the same. He is disheveled, his tawny hair hanging messily in his face, and his gaunt cheeks are pallid from lack of sleep. Limbs hanging at his sides, he simply watches, like he's suspended in a moment that will never end.

"The world is changing, Selene, and you are meant for more than this place," my mother told me not two nights ago as she struggled for breath. *"I've seen it in my dreams. There will be darkness. There will be fear. But there is hope and goodness—you must trust in that. You must fight for it. You must fight for all of them."*

I've cried countless times, locked in the house during the weeks she's been sick, and now, with her fair hair turned to sweaty, gray clumps stuck to her face and chapped lips, I know

she will never open her eyes again. She will never explain the meaning of her dream, and tears cloud my vision once more. My mother is gone forever.

I wipe the dampness from my cheeks and straighten, just a little, as my chin begins to tremble. She would want me to be strong.

It's only then I realize my father isn't crying at all. He doesn't even look sad so much as he looks afraid.

My father's servant stands behind him just as emotionless, yet rests his hand on my father's shoulder. He blinks, staring at my father with concern. "He has come," James says gently, and my father's shoulders stiffen. I'm so taken by the tender moment between master and servant, I almost miss the look they exchange. As my father rests his hand on James's, a flare of anger envelops me.

My father forbade me from being in my parents' room, yet James is; my father would not think to console his own daughter, but he shows such gentleness to a servant?

"Selene," my brother whispers in my ear, making me jump. When I peer at him, his eyes are fixed on my father through the cracked door. It's only then I register the sound of someone pacing in the downstairs entry.

"Come," William says urgently. "Be silent." He takes my hand and tugs me along the landing to the servants' stairs in the back. Panic fills me as I register the tremulous edge in his voice, but I remain quiet.

Ammonia and mint from my mother's medicines fill my nostrils as we hurry past the kitchen, where I can hear the maid weeping. But William pulls me along without faltering, then stops at the back entrance and hands me a man's full-length coat from the coatrack. Hastily, he gathers my blonde hair atop my head and situates a cap over the tumbling heap.

"Tuck your hair into the hat," he demands in an anxious whisper. My brother's gaze flicks toward the entry of the town-

house, where my father speaks to someone, his voice muffled by a labyrinth of narrow hallways and sitting rooms. Though a stranger's angry baritone replies, I can barely make out what they are saying as William bustles about, tugging me this way and that.

“—and have come to collect what's mine.”

“You could not wait a single moment? My wife has only just died.”

“And there was no love lost between you, Sinclair. Don't trifle with me. I've waited long enough. You got what you wanted, and now I want what was promised to me.”

“Selene,” William rasps, and when I look at him, he nods toward the back door.

Though I want to be as strong as my mother, I can't help my ratcheting panic. “What's happening, Will?”

“We must go,” he says. “Now.”

“But—” I glance anxiously in the direction of my father's voice as William cracks the door open, peers outside, then pulls me from our townhome, toward the outskirts of the fallen city. “But Mother—Father—”

“She is gone now, so I must see to you.”

I blink the tears from my eyes and follow my brother blindly into the cold. The day is thick and dreary, seeping into my bones and making me shiver as we hurry away from the only home I've ever known.

William leads me through the alleyway, separating our home from another stretch of apartments. He surveys every shadow, ensuring it's safe, though from whom, I don't understand. As he pulls me into the street, I chance a look behind me, spotting the blur of my father through the sitting room window, speaking to a looming sort of man with dark hair.

I stumble, and my brother curses. “Be careful,” he gripes, and I'm forced to leave the visage of my father behind.

“I'm not allowed to leave the house,” I remind him, my

voice a petulant whine, but William ignores me as we wind through the streets.

Though the city has awakened from years of slumber underground, nearly three centuries of weather ravaging the world have left New London in ruins, and I stumble over a crack in the cobblestone.

“Apologies,” William mutters gruffly as he turns to help me straighten. But within seconds he continues pulling me along the fissured sidewalk toward the center of town. His steps are heavy and determined.

“Where are we going, Will?” It’s more of a command this time than a question. I stumble again in William’s haste. Though the Expansion Movement has rectified parts of the city, there is still much in dangerous disrepair.

“To Master Orson and his wife,” William says as he leads me onto the main street. I nearly run into a man on his horse coming around the corner of a collapsed saloon. My heart stills, and fear prickles over my skin as the horse sidesteps us. The man curses, eyeing me strangely when a strand of blonde hair falls in my face. I try to tuck it into my cap again before my brother herds me along.

“Will—” I yank against him. “Tell me what’s happening!” I demand. “I don’t want to go to the orphanage.”

“You must,” he says. “Just for now—”

“Will!”

He whirls on me. “It is the boom of reemergence, Selene,” he growls. “In a time when heirs and able bodies are more coveted than coin. What do you think that landowner was coming to collect?” William points toward home. “He’s come for *you*, Selene, to be his breeder. And Father is to blame. He can’t protect you, so it falls on me to do so now.”

Gaping, I search my older brother’s face, looking for a sign he’s lying or mistaken, that my father would protect me, but I only see fear in William’s eyes. “What has Father—”

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“He traded you the first chance he got in order to climb the ranks, because he only *pretends* to be a man of worth. You will be safer with the Orsons. Mother has seen to it.” His blue eyes mirror mine—wide and beseeching. “Selene, you must trust me in this.”

“But—” I whimper, my mind whirling as I peer down the bending, shadowed road with mounting apprehension. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“It’s only for a little while,” he promises, but I know my big brother, and I hear the uncertainty in his voice. “I’m waiting to hear from one of Mother’s contacts—someone who can help us get to the coast. So come, the Orsons are expecting you. And it’s what Mother wanted.” He glances toward our home and his nostrils flair. I can see the sadness behind his eyes, the sorrow and hesitation.

“William,” I whisper, reluctantly accepting my fate, even if it terrifies me. “What if you never hear from them?”

A man rolls a creaking cart of crumbled bricks down the street in our direction, and as my brother pulls me under the eaves of an abandoned building, I nearly trip on the hem of my skirt.

“Please, don’t argue with me about this.” My brother’s gaze shifts over me, full of regret. “You are growing up, Selene, and Father’s acquaintances in the Council are noticing. For now, the orphanage will keep you hidden.”

I understand my brother’s meaning perfectly. *We can breed armies and cities*, my mother once said. *Without us, men are nothing*. Having just celebrated my eleventh birthday, I am, by law, of a tradeable age to work until I am sixteen and old enough to produce children.

I straighten, feeling a passing man’s questioning gaze on me keenly.

William leans in, peering into my eyes pleadingly. “These men have no land—no wealth or power—without heirs. Only

young women like you can abate their greatest fears. If you don't stay with the Orsons—if Father finds you—he will sell you to a stranger, just like the slaves they purchase each season.” William licks his lips and his expression softens a little. “Mother has helped Master Orson in the past. He owes her. And you know I would never leave you—you know I will come for you when it's safe. For now, I need you to trust me. Trust Mother. She would not want you thrown to the wolves.”

I don't trust any of it, but I nod because William wants me to, and I don't have any other choice.

He must register my disbelief, because he squeezes my hand and pulls me into him. “We'll go to the Screaming Woods, if we have to, but I will not leave you in the orphanage.”

The thought should terrify me, since the woods are known to be haunted, but I would rather live among ghosts and vengeful spirits with William than be anywhere else without him. “You promise?” I rasp, sobbing into his chest.

“I promise.” He kisses my temple and I inhale him—sweat and clay from the brick factory.

My heart breaks all over again as a sinking sense of dread fills me. My mother is dead. My brother is sending me away, and my father . . . I don't even know what to think of my father.

William straightens, looking like the strong, work-honed seventeen-year-old that he is, and tucks another escaped tendril back into my cap. “Now,” he says, clearing his throat. “We've got to get you different clothes before I take you into the heart of the city.” He exhales, waiting for my acquiescence, and when my chin dips ever so slightly, we continue down the winding streets.

I glance down at my red velvet skirt swishing at my feet. It's only then that I realize how much I stand out among the men bustling through the city, their clothes soiled and torn and hanging from their sinewy limbs.

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As my brother gestures toward the seamstress, I can't help but ask, "Won't they come looking for me?"

"They will never think to look in a poorhouse."

I'm about to ask my brother what will happen when they realize he is the one who has hidden me, when he leads me through the door of The Depot. A rush of dank, moldy air accosts me, and our footsteps cease to echo on the cement floor, muffled by the clothing lines of nondescript work uniforms, some of them freshly laundered, others only partially sewn. Buttonholers and framework knitters all glance up from their machines, their faces drawn and lifeless.

"Isabel is Mother's friend," William whispers as he ushers me along.

Tearing my gaze away from the women, I quietly follow.

"She knew this day might come. She'll be expecting us."

An older woman, churning a vat of dyed clothes, pauses as we approach, her eyes widening. A brass-colored curl falls in her face, and sympathy, or maybe it's sorrow, immediately fills her blue eyes. "Oh, dear—"

"It's time," my brother says. "We need—" Before he can get another word out, the world roars. The ground rumbles, the clothes hanging around us tremble, and I hear the breaking of glass and the cracking of stone.

"Selene!" William wraps his arms around me, covering my body with his as the pitched roof I stare up at buckles, and darkness descends.

1

SELENE

NINE YEARS LATER

The sun sears relentlessly against my skin. It's the first day in nearly a month that the cloud cover has dispersed, much to my chagrin. Without the dense fog to hinder our duties outdoors, Mistress Orson has us excavating the graveyard, scouring what little unchurned earth is left for human remains. Because fogless days are so rare, there is much work to be done from dawn until dusk.

I should appreciate the reprieve manual labor provides from the monotonous tasks we've grown so used to in the bonehouse; the picking and cleaning of remains, and the stench of the kiln room that permeates my nose, even outside in the breeze. But I don't.

Wiping my arm over my sweaty brow, I glance quickly at the children, ensuring they aren't sickening in the heat. All of their faces are red with fatigue, their brows damp with perspiration, but though their chests are heaving, they don't look close to fainting. Yet.

Nell's hands leave bloody prints on the shovel as she scoops another spadeful of soil out of the hole she stands in. Roman works tirelessly, lost in his own world; his thirteen-year-old body

is already honed from so much toiling. Evie's eyes are red-rimmed from the crumbled headstone that fell on her foot. And while Beatrice and Jon dig absently, accustomed to their miserable lives, they work without complaint alongside me.

As my charges, the children are the closest I have to family in this dreadful place, and I fear the day they will be taken from me, like everyone else. A familiar spur of resentment burns hotter than the sun under my skin at the mere thought, and rolling my sore shoulders, I get back to work, biting through the sting of my blistered palms.

"If you want your supper, you'll work faster!" Mistress Orson calls in her shrill voice. Even as she paces near me with long strides, I can barely hear her over the three dozen huffing orphans, our shovels scraping through the rocks, and exhumed bones clattering into the wheelbarrow.

For two decades, the Bedlam Cemetery has been mined for human remains, and though it was once a mass graveyard full of Londoners who'd lost their lives to disease, it's now an empty boneyard riddled with holes. With such little sunlight in a fog-plighted land, fertilizer is even more important than the men who work endless days in the factories, and the women who work beside them when they aren't repopulating the great fallen city.

"Stay focused!" Mistress Orson thwacks a child on the back with her crop, and I grit my teeth. She adjusts the spectacles perched on the tip of her pointy nose and continues to pace. Everything about her is wraithlike, from her waspish voice and narrowed teeth to her lean frame and crooked fingers. Had I not seen her bleed before, I'd wonder if she weren't one of the ghosts haunting this land.

I heave another spadeful of upturned soil out of my way, flexing the blisters on my hand as I curse the Council for their power-hungry ambition.

Sometimes I curse my mother for dying and leaving me to

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this fate. Sometimes I curse my brother for dying in that earthquake. But mostly I curse myself for not dying beside him.

I wish the Shift had finished what it started centuries ago, and we'd all become bones consumed by the earth. There would be no one left to disentomb those lucky enough to have escaped a fate where both breathing bodies and the dead are traded like currency.

2

SELENE

I gaze through the window at the mist-cloaked cemetery. I should be working alongside the children, but my mind is too restless. A temporary reprieve from the unrelenting sun has turned into days of working indoors once again. The hissing steam, hammering, and grinding of bones have become an all too familiar melody that echoes in the hospital's kitchen.

On the days we're stuck inside the Bedlam Orphanage and Workhouse, processing fertilizer for the Farming District, I find it all too easy to lose myself to the fog shrouding the world. The windows steam with the heat of the kiln, and I wipe the condensation away. The blisters on my hands have healed, replaced with cracked skin from soaking and scrubbing laundry, and callouses have re-formed on my fingers from cranking the grinders ad nauseam with the children.

There's movement in the fog, and I shiver despite the heat permeating the room, then watch and wait to see what might appear.

The land is riddled with stories of ghosts and apparitions, of haunted woods and creatures left behind to survive in the toxic elements. I sometimes convince myself I see them—the

dead—walking in the thick gray; through the mist and shadows, between the trees and ruins. It's easy enough to believe because death still lingers here. It stalks the shadows of the ruined buildings, threatening to collapse, and rides in with the rumbles of the shaking earth. Death breathes down our necks as we work our fingers to the bone to rebuild the once thriving city, and creeps in with the fog that kills our crops without proper sunlight. Where millions of people once flourished, a few thousand of us pray to get through a single day in New London.

The lights flicker, submerging everything in darkness for a heartbeat as the coal-powered generators hiccup.

Having loitered at the window long enough, I'm about to turn away when three children emerge from the fog. Beatrice and Roman haul a handcart toward the sorting room where Henrietta's orphans discern what bones need to be cleaned before they can be processed to powder. All of their clothes hang too large or fit too small, and the hollows of their cheekbones protrude just enough to show they aren't starving, but they are never full either. Yet, despite the tasteless porridge they are forced to eat, and our unfeeling masters, Beatrice still smiles, and my heart warms a little.

Tucking a loose strand of hair back into my braid, I eye the animal carcasses collected in the cart. Rats. Cats. Foxes. Birds. Even a dog, whose corpse looks weeks old, has been laid out as an offering. Despite the gruesome task, Beatrice says something that makes her brown cheeks part with a wider grin, and Roman's curly hair flops into his face as he laughs, playfully shoving her shoulder.

The shawl hanging around my shoulders bunches in my grasp. This could not be what my mother, or my brother, intended, and yet, her words have never left me. *There will be darkness. There will be fear. But there is hope and goodness—you must trust in that. You must fight for it. You must fight for all*

of them. These children need me, perhaps as much as I need them.

“You’re not holding it right, stupid,” Jon chides behind me. “Do it like this—”

“Don’t be rude,” I reproach, my gaze never leaving Beatrice and Roman as they disappear into the *death room*, as the children have deemed it, the sorting house door swinging shut behind them. “And get back to work.” I glance back at the children playing at the table. They look sheepishly at me, and I hide my smile. “Hurry now, before you get into trouble.”

The truth is, the children’s bickering has become a strange sort of salve on my soul these past four years they’ve been in my care—a daily comfort and a reminder that I am no longer alone. For now.

For five years, I’d held my breath, waiting for whatever would come on my sixteenth birthday. Because William never took me away like he’d promised. He couldn’t. And my father never came for me. And while everything did change the day I turned sixteen, it was not as I’d expected. I was not sold to the highest bidder to work in the City District’s factories, like the other young women. No, to my mistress’s displeasure, I was kept and promised to be cared for by Master Orson himself, though it wasn’t without a cost of its own.

“What is this?” The brittle floorboards protest behind me. “Selene!”

I spin around as Mistress Orson shrieks my name. She grabs Evie by the arm, nearly pulling it from her socket, and drags the little girl from the table bench to her feet. Production at the fire wheel beyond them halts as everyone—children and caretakers alike—watch with unease.

Mistress Orson wrenches the nine-year-old in front of me, and Evie looks both shamefaced and frightened as her watery, blue gaze shifts from the headmistress to me.

“Is *this* you doing your duty, Selene?” Mistress Orson hisses at me.

Evie’s face blooms bright beneath the dust coating her cheeks, and narrowing my eyes on the headmistress, I have to bite back a reproach. Despite my empathy for Evie, I flash her a *you know better* look and refocus on the irate woman in front of me.

“While you’re over there daydreaming *again*,” Mistress Orson continues, “your charges are—look at this!” she practically shouts as she takes a scraping knife from the little girl’s hand. “*Playing on my time?*”

I press my mouth shut as I reach for Evie, guiding her protectively to my side. I can feel Mistress Orson’s glare blazing against my face before I meet her gaze again.

“Surely,” I start, keeping my tone in check as best I can. “You can’t begrudge the children a little distraction. They haven’t had a break all day.” But Mistress Orson doesn’t know the meaning of joy, and she hasn’t the slightest ounce of compassion.

“You don’t receive my generosity, food, and board for *playing*, Selene. Or for daydreaming. Unless someone else has taken it upon themselves to ready the bone powder for shipment tomorrow and I’m unaware?”

“No, of course not,” I say with little conviction. I know better than to leave the children to their tasks unsupervised; but if I cannot find focus after being cooped up for days, how can they?

“Perhaps going to bed without supper will help you *all* to remember how precious food is, and how lucky you are to have two square meals every day, when so many others go hungry.” The headmistress wags a gnarled finger at me. “I could’ve sent you to the laborers, Selene,” she reminds me. “I still can and they would offer me a pretty penny for you, bum leg and all. Perhaps I should, despite my husband’s protests.”

The children whimper at the thought, and I purse my lips again to keep my tongue from lashing out and worsening the situation. “I assure you, that won’t be necessary,” I grind out. Even if Master Orson would try to keep me, there is little he could do if the headmistress breathed a word about me—an able-bodied woman of good breeding—to the wrong ears. Because at the orphanage, I don’t serve the Council of Four’s purpose, I’m simply one man’s pet and plaything.

“We’ll get back to work immediately,” I assure her, and nod to the children, urging them to return to their tasks. At least here we work in a protective, steel-framed asylum with reinforced rooms to sleep in, safer than many of the buildings still needing to be retrofitted in New London. “I’ll make sure we fill the barrels to the brim today. We *will* finish the task.”

Mistress Orson eyes me up and down, her distaste at my mere presence as obvious now as the day I was placed under her and her husband’s care. A mangled, gimpy little girl they didn’t even know would survive after the accident. “See that it’s done, Selene, or I will ensure the children work on Sunday, dawn to dusk, while everyone else is resting.” There are a dozen threats in such words that come so easily to her.

“As I said, we’ll see that it’s done. Won’t we?” I glance at the children and they nod as one.

Mistress Orson doesn’t seem convinced as she turns with a stomp of her foot, her starched skirt swishing around her legs, and she heads toward the other orphans working at the far tables across the kitchen.

She calls her work in the poorhouse “charitable”, but I’ve read enough in my twenty years to know that charity is much different than servitude, and that the price we must pay for their meager *gifts* of porridge, hole-ridden clothes, and drafty beds, make them no gifts at all.

“I’m sorry,” Evie whimpers, her eyes welling with unshed tears.

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Heaving a sigh, I nod to the scraping table, where the children have assembled structures made of bones, and shake my head. “It’s done,” I tell her, but there is no ire in it, simply exhaustion. “Come, we have much work to do. I will help.”

Evie and Jon blink at me, twins in a world where having a single child is both a blessing and a curse; more mouths to feed, and yet more hands to put to work in order to survive this desolate landscape.

Nell, fourteen years old and the eldest of my charges, clears her throat. “Sorry, Selene—”

I wave their remorse away. “What’s done is done.” I walk over to the bench to sit beside them. Though my knee gives me fits, I move well enough. “Come,” I add more softly. “I know it’s difficult, but we must stay focused. If we don’t have to work Sunday, I will read to you.”

“But—Mistress Orson said no more—”

“Don’t worry about that now,” I tell them as I weave my hair back away from my face. “I will speak with Master O—”

The world bellows, the ground rumbles beneath our feet, and the workhouse fills with a cacophony of screams as everything creaks and shakes around us. Nightmarish memories threaten to swallow me, and it’s all I can do to reach for the children.

“Under the table!” I shout, and they move without a second thought.

Though I can gauge the magnitude easily enough after twenty years, and know that we are safer in this hospital than we would be in most places, it is Beatrice and Roman whom I pray for. But I know it’s likely for naught as I hear the echoing crack and crumble of the sorting house, and another part of my heart threatens to tear to pieces.

3

SELENE

My knee aches in the drafty water tunnel, running beneath the hospital. As always, the cold wreaks havoc on my battered joints, and the stifling memory of pain and claustrophobia from that day long ago sends a chill shimmying over my skin. I still feel the crunching of bone as ruins crumbled around me, and the earth's roar, reverberating in my ears. I can still feel the very moment William's hold on me became lifeless. Unable to breathe in all the dust, I was certain I was dead too.

"Selene?" Henrietta says, startling me.

I turn, the bare bulb flickering in the tunnel, making the wash pool glitter. I take the wet stockings she hands me to hang on the line. Even the stench of tallow, wafting through the tunnel from the boiled bones above, does little to take away from Henrietta's innocent beauty. Her dark lashes flutter around bright eyes. At only sixteen, I wonder how long before the light in her green gaze dims, and worry lines form instead. For even if she did not lose any of her charges in the quake two days ago, it might only be a matter of time before she does. Or perhaps she'll be sold first.

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Tears prick the backs of my eyes as I think of Roman's curly, ashy brown hair and how his big, mischievous blue eyes will never shine again. I've seen dozens of children cycled through the orphanage in my time, but lost only two charges—the first was Caroline, the hardest for me to soldier through. And now, Roman.

I swallow thickly as I think of the children in the church with Sister Sarah, granted a half day reprieve after processing their own friend for the kiln. But in spite of the heaviness thick in my heart, a part of me wonders if Roman and Caroline were given a mercy over the fifty-seven others I've watched be shipped off to God only knows what sort of merciless fate.

"Thankfully, there are only four aprons and two petticoats left," Henrietta says with a gratified lilt, and I blink my sadness away; there is no place for it here.

I snap the stockings onto the clothesline, along with a dozen pairs of others, drab gray petticoats, and stained aprons.

"If I have to wash one more load this week," she continues, "I might actually scream."

"The children needed a reprieve. I appreciate your helping me today."

"As if I had a choice," she mutters, but there's no annoyance in it, just the depressing truth.

"Wait—" I straighten a little. "Henrietta, where are your charges while you're down here?" It sounds like a complaint, though it's anything but.

Henrietta glances over her shoulder and hands me a wrung out petticoat. "They are picking through the rubble for useable brick and stone with one of the other crews. Or at least, four of them are." Her voice saddens, and clearing her throat, she turns back to the laundry basket. "Theodore and Jeffrey were sold to a landowner in the Manufacturing District this morning." She submerges an apron in the rushing water.

My breath hitches. "The Collector?"

She shakes her head. “No. I guess I should be grateful for that, at least.”

“Still, I’m sorry,” I whisper, understanding all too well. Although the children are put in our charge to keep in line, friendships and bonds are easily forged when all we have is each other.

“Don’t be,” she says brusquely. “It’s not a labor camp at the quarries or a steel factory, where they would surely die before their twenty-fifth birthdays.” She shakes her head. “Their fate could be far worse.”

Henrietta’s words are true, but I know that doesn’t lessen the sting; she will never see them again. And until she is sold away herself, she’s expected to take on new charges and act as if the previous children in her life never existed at all. I swallow thickly, wishing time would slow, because Nell’s time is coming far too soon.

“It’s not Sunday,” Henrietta muses. “So how did you manage to send your rascals to chapel?” She meets my gaze. “Mistress Orson has been working your charges longer days than the rest of us without reprieve.” She shrugs. “It’s surprising, is all.”

I sigh and take the dripping apron Henrietta hands me, unruly blonde hair falling from its braid and into my face. My hands feel like cracked leather as I wring out every drop I can manage before hanging the apron on the line. Once again, the lights flicker, leaving Henrietta and me in momentary darkness. With a distant clang and rumble, the lights flicker on again.

“It’s to punish me,” I finally say. Henrietta glances up at me, absently scrubbing another stained apron with what’s left of the soap. “The way Mistress Orson overworks the children,” I clarify. “She says it’s to keep us occupied from our *sadness*, but I know it’s because Beatrice is too injured to work, Roman is gone, and more than that, she hates me.”

Henrietta snorts and hands me the apron to hang. “Well, you

CITY OF RUIN

are her husband's favorite. That doesn't come without repercussions."

"Not by choice, and not without cost," I mutter, and my flesh crawls with unease.

I can feel Henrietta's gaze on me as she rises to her feet, drying her hands on her apron. "Nothing ever is," she mutters with a sigh. "*Nothing.*"

4

SELENE

Clacking silverware echoes in the spacious dining hall, and though we're used to eating in silence, tonight feels regrettably somber.

The children and I sit in a long line of many at one of the bench tables stretching the length of the room. Nell and Jon sit to my right, Beatrice and Evie to my left. While three of them at least make a show of eating, moving their porridge around in their bowls, Beatrice doesn't even try.

I take in the sight of her for the dozenth time. Absently, she picks at a loose thread in the makeshift sling I tied her arm in. Her eyes are swollen and red-rimmed, her dark cheeks streaked with tears.

"I know it's difficult, Bea," I whisper, so as not to bring too much attention to us in the room's silence. "But you *must* eat something." I don't need to seek Mistress Orson out to know she's glaring at us. It's her sole purpose to ensure we eat and sleep just enough to refuel our bodies so we can work hard for her at the dawn of each new day. And while I've bought us all the time I can to grieve for Roman, the children go back to work tomorrow, and I fear it will be more grueling than usual. "You

need your strength.” I am not the only one worried about Beatrice, nor the only one who is sad. The other children’s eyes are on us, and gently, I clasp the elbow of her arm that isn’t broken and squeeze. “Please, Bea,” I beg. “Eat. For me?”

Beatrice finally looks up from her untouched meal, her chin trembling. I know what it’s like to lose a friend; I know what it’s like to fear you are dying, only to find you are the one who lived. I know what it’s like to want to hate the world and grieve, but instead are forced to shove it all away.

A loud thwack reverberates down the wood-planked table and we all jump, heads snapping up to the sinister Mistress Orson, glaring at us over the rim of her spectacles. Her eyebrow rises in displeasure. “Why has no one touched their food?” she says coldly. Though her beady eyes scan over the children, they finally land and narrow on me. “Is your supper so unsuitable?”

“Of course not,” I tell her coolly. “The children are grieving—”

“The *children*,” Mistress Orson clips out, “are children, and they are supposed to be well-behaved and do as you say, Selene. Isn’t that why we keep you around?”

I clench my jaw tightly, biting back a seething retort.

“If you’re not good at your task, then perhaps a replacement is in order—”

“No—” Evie cries.

Mistress Orson slaps her correction stick on Evie’s hand, making her flinch with a swallowed whimper. “Silence!” Her cross expression levels on the little girl, whose eyes squeeze tightly shut as her nostrils flare. Ire burns hot inside me, and I nearly shout, but I know Mistress Orson will win if I do. She wants me to make a grievous error in judgement; I can feel her holding her breath in wait.

“You will eat every bite of your porridge,” she says callously, looking at each of the children as she pushes her glasses up the bridge of her beaklike nose. “Or you will only get

one meal a day for the rest of the week.” Hate blooms in my chest because I know she means it, and it won’t be a generous portion either. Her husband might own the orphanage in name, but it’s his hag of a wife who runs it.

I clench my hands under the table, school my features, and dipping my chin, I tell the children to do as their mistress says.

Eventually, even Beatrice finds her appetite, and they spoon their porridge into their mouths without another word.

“Good.” Mistress Orson’s gaze snaps to me. She needn’t say anything because I know it’s all a show—a reminder that despite her husband’s standing and his favoritism toward me, she is the one who wields power over all of us. “Your bowls *will* be empty when I return.” With that final unspoken threat, the horrible woman walks away from the table, leaving us in abysmal silence.

It’s all I can do to remind myself that as much as I hate the Orsons, there are people far worse out in the world, men like the Collector, whose reputation is more terrifying than my worst dreams.

Just as I take a bite of porridge, a throat clears behind me. I glance back to find young Charlie, Master Orson’s page boy, standing there. I know what he will say before he even opens his mouth, and nausea churns my stomach.

“Master Orson wishes to speak with you,” he says, and I wonder if Charlie, barely thirteen, knows what his master asks of me each time I am summoned. He averts his gaze in answer. Poor child. One more reminder of how we are all helpless pawns in this place.

An all too familiar mixture of dread and repulsion sloshes around in my stomach, but I ignore it and rise to my feet. “I’ll return soon,” I tell the children, but my gaze lingers on Nell’s. We exchange the unspoken understanding that she is in charge in my absence, and though I don’t require an escort, I follow Charlie toward Master Orson’s wing of the building.

CITY OF RUIN

I can feel the headmistress's glare burning a hole through me as I pass her. Instead of taking up her objections with her husband, I will bear the brunt of them later.

The clink of utensils dissipates from the dining hall as Charlie's and my footsteps echo in the stark corridor of white painted bricks and metal bolstering the walls and rafters. I've walked this path dozens of times over the years, up the stairs to the master's quarters. I could find my way in darkness, if I had to. We pass Master Orson's beloved library and the diverging hallway leading to the oldest rooms of the asylum, now our sleeping accommodations. It doesn't escape me that after centuries, Bedlam is still a prison in all the ways that matter.

When we arrive at Master Orson's study, Charlie stops at his closed door. It's white like the hallway, metal and cold, and I can't suppress the shiver that wiggles up my spine.

"Master," Charlie says, rapping his knuckles on the door. "Selene has come."

"Enter," comes his gruff voice. Charlie looks briefly at me before he turns the knob and gestures for me to go inside. The scent of stale tobacco smoke fills my nose, and I can practically feel Orson's sour breath on my skin already, but I hold my head high, clasp my hands in front of me, and step inside without ceremony. There is no prolonging what's to come.

Master Orson, broad-shouldered and looming, sits at the desk as if it's just another day. His pipe is pursed between his lips, smoke billowing from his mouth. The sheen of sweat on his bulbous nose is illuminated by the overhead lightbulbs, and behind him, on the chaise beneath the window, is his wiry-haired mutt, Locklin, named after our *gracious* savior himself.

For years, Master Orson has kept to his own chambers in the observation room, overlooking the courtyard where the sorting house is now only a pile of rubble. I assume anything is better than sharing quarters with his wife. Not for the first time, I

wonder if he has *ever* loved her, or if their marriage has always been one strictly of necessity.

As I step farther in, he glances up at me, his lips parting in a wolfish smile. “Ah, my lovely Selene.”

I stand at his desk, watching his bushy eyebrows pinch together as he does a final scan of a sheet of paper with the Council’s seal on the top. “I think your charges are rested well enough,” he says, as if he actually cares. “We don’t want them getting too soft.”

Unable to resist, I huff at his words, and he sets the paper aside, looking up at me. Orson’s pupils dilate, and my spine stiffens.

“Nothing is easy, my dear,” he says, his mustache twitching as he sucks on the end of his pipe. For as important as the man deems himself, he only smokes stale tobacco that smells like a hamper from the laundry room. “It’s good that children learn these things at a young age, like you have.” Smoke billows around him as he exhales.

“The children are well aware,” I counter, my tone clipped. Though I know Master Orson holds power over me, I feel strangely powerful in his presence as well, because I know what he wants and how to wield it to my advantage.

He stands to his full height, a foot taller than me, and rests his palms on his desk as he leans in. “There are some perks, though, are there not?” The unspoken agreement between us glimmers in his beady brown eyes—the agreement he lords over me the same way his wife lords the children’s fates.

“Perks?” I repeat, lifting a defiant brow. My gaze locks on his as he stalks around the desk like a hyena ready to play with its kill.

“Come now,” he says, setting his pipe on the desktop as he stops in front of me. He waves Charlie away, who I’d forgotten was standing in the doorway. Once we’re alone, Orson’s eyes dart to me, more fiendish this time as they rake over my face,

down the loose strands of my hair to my shawl-covered chest. “There are worse places to be, and far crueler masters,” he taunts. Orson is close enough I can smell days-old tobacco clinging to his vest and trousers. The sheen of sweat on his brow glistens, making my stomach churn, and even the mole on his nose seems to laugh at me. “Don’t you think?” He runs the back of his finger down my arm, and though the younger, innocent girl buried inside me wants to cringe, it’s easy enough to ignore her.

I don’t answer him, because Orson’s right. If he was a crueler man—or perhaps more intelligent—he’d have his way with me and give me nothing in return. At least here, in this awful place, I know the demons I face. It’s when the children are finally old enough to be sent away that I worry what will become of me. Master Orson will keep me, yes, but without the children who have become my family, I won’t *want* to survive this.

“So,” he starts again, crossing his arms over his chest. His shirt is dingy and ink-stained. You would never know he is of the wealthy working class. “Since you and I are in the business of favors, your charges got their respite, and now I would like to collect on mine.” I hate the lust in his eyes, glazed over as he takes a lock of my hair between his fingers. He doesn’t scare me like he did when I was sixteen, but my skin still crawls every time I see that look.

“My reward for such generosity,” he prompts, and leans closer until his stomach brushes against my smock.

“Yes, you’ve been very generous,” I agree, more bored and resentful than compliant. Generous is not a word I would use to describe him. “But I wonder—”

Orson’s eyebrow rises, and the infatuated sheen in his gaze clears a little as he braces himself for my next request.

“Would you extend your kindness once more?” I stare into his eyes with a lifted brow of my own.

“More favors?” he grumbles.

“More favors mean more rewards,” I remind him. “And I would like to read to the children.”

Orson watches the way my mouth moves as I speak, as if he’s barely listening—too distracted by what he might do with it later. “My little wren and her love of books,” he says to himself, and his smirk reveals yellowed, smoke-stained teeth. “You are quite something, Selene. But then,” he says, brushing the pad of his thumb over my bottom lip. “You already know that, don’t you?” His tone is deliberate, and I ignore the flash of panic that sparks through me, my expression giving nothing away. “You think me a fool, and perhaps I am, because I like our little game. It’s the only thing that brings me joy in this ghastly existence.” He scrutinizes my face.

My breaths quicken, and I wonder if this is the day he will stop playing the game and become the devil I know lurks just beneath the surface.

“I will grant you your request,” he finally concedes, and I exhale through my nose. “But first—” He walks over to the door of his study and swings it shut. “You must repay your current debt.”

5 SELENE

The cold seeps in through the old windows, a draft whistling in with it, and the lights flicker in reply. Loose parchment pages rustle, along with a stirring of musty old books.

“And so,” I say, flipping the page of the ancient, leather-bound tome. I take my time, absorbing every word I read after paying such a lofty price for this time with the children. “The good man drank his chocolate and then went to look for his horse. But passing through an arbor of roses, he remembered Beauty’s request to him, and gathered a branch on which were several.”

Nell sighs, settled against the moth-eaten divan so contentedly it’s as if she might even fall asleep. Nell’s long red hair is braided back, but unkempt around her cherub face, and her soft brown eyes crinkle as she absently pulls little Evie closer to stave off the ever-present chill of the orphanage. I imagine this old library before it was used for storage, when the fireplace flickered and roared, instead of being stuffed with dust-covered crates.

“Immediately,” I say, continuing the story, “the man heard a

great noise and saw such a frightful beast coming towards him that he was ready to faint away. *You are very ungrateful*, said the beast in a terrible voice. *I have saved your life by receiving you into my castle, and, in return, you steal my roses, which I value beyond anything in the universe—but you shall die for it.* The merchant fell on his knees and lifted both his hands. *My Lord*, said he, *I beseech you to forgive me, indeed I had no intention to offend in gathering a rose for one of my daughters.*”

Jon stirs in the corner of my eye, Beatrice’s bruised face contorting as he jostles against her bad arm. When she looks at me, waiting for me to continue, I clear my throat.

“*My name is not My Lord*, replied the monster, *but Beast. You say you have got daughters—and I will forgive you, on condition that one of them comes willingly and suffers for you.*”

“What if none of the daughters will come?” Evie whispers, and peers up at me, her frightened blue eyes shimmering in the dim light. I can’t help my smile.

“Beauty will go, stupid,” Jon mutters. “You already know that.”

Evie frowns at her twin before snuggling closer to Nell again.

“There’s no need to be cruel,” I scold Jon, glowering at him. I want to remind him that his sister could be taken away from him at any moment and he will regret being so mean to her, but I know he’s exhausted, impatient, frightened—all of us are every day—and after the week they’ve had, I can’t bring myself to say more about it.

“Not to worry,” I murmur, leaning closer to Evie’s ear. “Beauty will take her father’s place. It is a love story, after all. She will fall madly in love with the Beast. Now,” I say, situating the book back in my lap. The springs in the old divan are sharp against my bottom and back, but it’s easy enough to lose myself in the story once more. “Where were we—”

My words falter at the sound of familiar, heavy footsteps in the corridor.

“Predictable,” Master Orson says gruffly as he steps through the doorway. He doesn’t even look at the children as he snaps his fingers. “I have need of you, come.” He nods from me to the hallway.

“But, we agreed—”

“This is not a game,” he growls, and stomps toward me, face flushed and anger raging in his eyes. Whatever fondness or playfulness was in his demeanor earlier is gone.

I’ve seen this look on his face, but only once before. His wife has upset him. “If I have to deal with that shrew’s wrath because of you, you’re going to make it worth it.” He yanks me to my feet and the book in my lap tumbles to the floor with a thud. Orson is an ogre in many ways, but he’s never been a brute with me, even if the promise of it edges his voice if I push him too far, so this . . . this is not like him.

I recoil at the thought of what comes next, and panic. “Perhaps later—” I glance frantically back at four pairs of wild, fear-filled eyes. “After the children—”

“Fuck the children,” he growls, his grip tightening on my arm as he hauls me toward the door.

“Master Orson,” I grit out, pulling away from him without thinking. Whatever the consequences, I can’t go with him; it feels as if I’m being led to slaughter. I don’t want to be his for the taking, not like this. Not with so much anger in his eyes. But as his impatience flashes to fury, I worry I’ve only made it worse.

“Master Orson!” an anxious voice calls from down the hall, and we both glance at the doorway. “Master Orson—” Henrietta sputters to a stop in the hall when she sees us, taking the sight of me in before she registers the children huddled on the divan.

I close my eyes, breathing a sigh of relief. Whether

purposely played or simply lucky timing, she might've just saved me.

"What is it?" he growls.

"It's—uh—Master Blackburn has just arrived, or rather, he's on his way. His steward is in office with the mistress. She's asked that all the children be lined up in the dining hall, immediately. Master Blackburn needs able bodies for his estate."

Bile rises up my throat. "The Collector has come?" I barely eke out the words, regretting them the instant they're uttered. The children all but stiffen, and the air is sucked out of the room. They know the Collector comes to the City District for laborers often. They've heard the tales of his monstrous treatment—that many of his workers have died from being overworked, that they haunt the land and manor in which he lives, hundreds of souls in unrest. And even worse, he killed his two wives . . . If he can do such a thing, what *wouldn't* he do?

Forgetting Master Orson's wrath, I tear my arm away from him and blink back at the children. *Please God, don't let the Collector take them.*

A peel of whines and whimpers fills the room as Nell tries to calm them.

"Enough!" Master Orson snaps his fingers and gestures for the children to jump to their feet. "Now, go." When the children look at me, helpless, Master Orson barks, "Don't look at her! Do as I say!"

They startle, and Nell urges them out of the room, her eyes shifting to mine with a plea that makes my palms sweat and my heart race. *No, not yet. Not now, after everything they've endured this week.*

"But—" I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to think what might be done. "You're already shorthanded. Surely it's in your best interest to keep everyone you have."

Master Orson's eyes narrow on me as he steps closer, and I swallow thickly, taking a step back. But I'm met with the wall

and I have nowhere left to go. “My best *interest*, Selene, is no concern of yours.”

I brace myself with one hand, my fingertips numbing on the cold brick as Orson looms in front of me with his menacing frame. He eyes me up and down, assessing me from frayed skirt hem to heaving chest as his hands twitch at his sides.

Orson snatches my jaw in one hand, making me flinch, and with the other, he trails the crook of his finger slowly down my arm. Even in long sleeves, it feels as if I’m bared and all too seen by him. “I know well enough what my interests are. And might I remind you, you have no place here among the children, you haven’t for years now. If it weren’t for me, you would be at the mercy of men like Blackburn.” In the moment, alone with Orson and the punishing glint in his eyes, I’m not sure my future here will be much different. He misreads my disgust. “Don’t worry yourself, you aren’t going anywhere.”

His gaze slithers over me again as he licks his lips, and leaning in, Master Orson inhales the scent of my hair. His eyes flutter closed with a groan as he tilts my jaw with bruising force, and I hold my breath.

But I can’t do this. Not right now.

Heart racing, I reach beside me for the closest volume in the bookcase. White-knuckling the binding, I pull it out and clock Master Orson with it upside his head. I know I shouldn’t have, but I am dead anyway, if the children are purchased and taken from me.

Master Orson curses, grabbing the side of his face, and I hurry out of the room, my limp not slowing me in the slightest as I race for the children.

6

SELENE

Master Orson shouts my name, his anger bellowing down the hallway as I run faster. All I can think is *don't take Nell*. She is too beautiful, and I worry about what the Collector might do to her once he has her. But to hope he takes Beatrice or Evie and Jon instead—that he might separate the twins—only makes my eyes burn and my urgency a living, clawing thing inside me.

“—hearty stock enough for whatever you deem necessary. They may give you fits here and there, but nothing a good whap won't cure, I assure you—”

I practically stumble into the dining hall to find all thirty-nine children falling into a line along the front dining tables. Mistress Orson's voice tapers off as everyone's eyes focus on me, and a communal sigh fills the space as my charges register my presence. My heart bleats for them, sensing their fear.

I barely register the two men standing with the headmistress, all of their gazes shifting to Master Orson as he stumbles in after me, rage contorting his features.

Muttering fills the room, though I'm not sure who it comes from.

“Quiet!” Mistress Orson shouts as her gaze rakes over me and then her heaving husband.

He ignores his wife’s glower and walks over to the man with a stubbled jaw and a wild black mane, windswept around his face.

The Collector.

There is a shadow to his dark eyes I do not trust, a broadness and stiffness to his shoulders that makes me think he is poised but ready to unleash hell at any moment. *To murder someone.* I remember his dead wives, and despite how young his appearance, the horrible deeds in which he’s capable of precede him. Even his clothes seem ominous and otherworldly, with leathers and fur embellishments adorning his pants, vest, and cloak. He looks more brute than man, and he’s utterly terrifying.

Wrapping an arm around each of the twins, trembling beside me, I hold them closer.

The Collector’s eyes meet mine in the flickering light of the room, and a sudden chill rakes over my skin as the air turns impossibly sinister.

As Mistress Orson and her husband prattle on, the Collector stares down his nose at them, not the slightest bit pleased.

“These children—” the mistress continues, pointing to my charges with an all too delighted gleam in her eyes. “They would work hard for you. They are the best workers we have. And this one,” she says, pointing to Nell. “She’s a pretty, fair-faced one. Or Selene, there. She is beautiful, if you ask me. She would be a perfect—”

“Wilma,” Master Orson warns as the Collector growls, “Yes, well, I *didn’t* ask.” The lines etched in his furrowed brow seem to deepen as he looks at me again. Then he points at Beatrice. “I will take that one—”

“But she’s injured,” I say without thinking. “What use can she be to you?”

The Collector’s attention cuts to me, affronted by my imper-

tinence. Somehow, his eyes narrow sharper on me than I thought possible, and he juts his chin at me. “How is it that the Bedlam Orphanage is housing a woman?”

My stomach sinks as I try to determine whether his question is filled with intrigue or incredulity. He eyes me up and down, careful and calculating. Though I tell myself I don’t *want* him to notice me at all, I can’t help but bristle as he addresses me as if I am not standing in the room, able to hear him.

“We don’t,” Mistress Orson stammers. “Well, not as a rule, Master Blackburn.” She gestures to me. “Selene is the eldest at twenty. The rest of the children leave when they are sixteen to go to the laborers and other estates, just like the other establishments.” She nods to Henrietta, whose time is quickly approaching. “But Selene is, uh, a favorite, you could say.” Her eyes flick to Master Orson, shining with displeasure. “Her family were acquaintances and died in the tremors nine years ago. Of course, we graciously took her into our charge. She helps us tend to the children now that she’s grown.”

Master Orson steps protectively closer to me, so much so I can smell the stale smoke on his jacket again, reminding me of my fate in this place. I ignore his gaze on me, slippery as it feels against the side of my face, and watch the Collector, unable to look away from him.

There’s a drawn-out moment as he eyes me far too closely, his demeanor as frigid and unrelenting as snow blanketing this dead, already barren place in winter.

As if he can sense the changing tide, Master Orson grips my arm, asserting his claim on me. “We would gladly release any of the children to your charge, sir. But Selene is not available for purchase.” I have never wanted Orson’s protection before, but I find myself strangely grateful for it, despite what wrath awaits me. “She is needed here. All the other children, however—”

The Collector holds up his hand, the pistol I hadn’t noticed at his hip glinting in the light as his cloak rustles. “She will be of

use to me,” he says, as if they have no choice in the matter, and his gaze shifts to me again.

“But—” Orson starts, and a single glare from the Collector silences him. I’ve never seen anyone wield such power over the Orsons before, but I don’t have time to revel in it.

I knew this day would come, but now that it’s here, I can barely stomach it. And that it would be *him* that claims me next only spurs my desperation. “Sir,” I bite out, the weight of what I will say next sour on my tongue. “I will not suit you.”

“Selene!” Mistress Orson hisses as Henrietta gasps, and Master Orson stiffens beside me.

The Collector’s hand clenches at his side, his rage barely contained, and I swallow thickly. “You presume to know my intent,” he grits out. The stretch of silence as he deliberates my fate makes my palms itch and perspiration dapples my brow. My heart thuds as if I’m digging myself a hole, deeper and deeper.

Though the Collector does not scold me, his jaw twitches and his eyes narrow so slightly I almost don’t notice.

“I have to agree, sir,” Master Orson says, the first to break the quiet. “It would be unwise to take Selene. As you can see, she doesn’t know her place and—”

“She is mine,” the Collector says coolly, his words clipped and ringing in the air.

“You can’t,” Master Orson reproaches, his chest heaving.

“I can, and I will. I have the Council’s notary to purchase anyone I wish—”

“No,” I plead. “Please.” I pray there is the slightest decency in him I’ve found in no one else since my mother and brother. “Don’t take me. The children—”

“Collins,” the Collector says over his shoulder, as if he doesn’t even hear me. The man standing near him in similar, less decorative attire steps closer. His hair is sandy brown and his face, despite his master, looks almost kind as he takes the sight of me in.

The Collector doesn't spare Collins a glance as he adjusts his cloak around him. "Pay them," he says, flicking his hand toward the Orsons, as if he isn't purchasing a human being. And as I realize that it's me—that this is what it feels like to be worth whatever coins are in his purse—my throat burns and I'm near tears.

Collins frowns slightly as he processes his master's words, though I can barely tell as my eyes blur. "Of course, sir." He pulls out his coin purse, prepared to negotiate my worth. Collins loosens the drawstrings, the gold threads glimmering in the flickering lights. "Just the woman?"

The Collector's eyes meet mine, black and soulless. "All five of them."

"Now, look here—" Master Orson protests.

Mistress Orson looks a mixture of befuddled and elated.

The children whisper with both relief and fear.

And I blink, my mouth agape. No words escape in my shock.

All of us?

The Collector's eyes don't waver, and I fear what I see shining in them as he stares at me. Something fearsome and unfamiliar.

While I may have evaded the monster in the library, I've replaced him with another far more distressing and unknown, and I don't know if I've just saved us, or doomed us all instead.

END OF SAMPLE

You can keep reading Selene and Greyson's story in *City of Ruin*, available at all retailers and on my website (Available June 14)

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ABOUT LINDSEY POGUE

Lindsey Pogue has always been a sucker for a good love story. She completed her first new adult manuscript in high school and has been writing tales of love and friendship, history and adventure ever since. When she's not chatting with readers, plotting her next storyline, or dreaming up new, brooding characters, Lindsey's generally wrapped in blankets watching her favorite action flicks with her own leading man. They live in Northern California with their rescue cats, Beast and little Blue.



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