

CHAPTER FIVE

February 1869

The French Ball. Anyone who had ever wintered in New York knew of the annual hedonistic tradition that dated back before the Civil War. For one night, daring members of high society mingled with brothel owners and workers, along with anyone given to carousing, drink or open sexuality. Vice was on display for anyone who wished to take part.

Now Victoria was about to enter its very heart, the Academy of Music. Her stomach fluttered in anticipation. She had been hearing rumors of the Ball for months, but to be participating was a wholly different matter. Soon she would finally know if the stories were true, or grossly exaggerated.

“Are you sure this is the right way to be celebrating?” she asked Josie as they stepped inside, leaving behind a rowdy crowd of hooting, whistling men for the police to handle. “It seems a bit...” She took in the crowds of milling, laughing people, all dressed like characters from a child’s fantasy book for the masqued ball, searching for the right word.

“Excessive?” Josie supplied. “It should. That’s exactly what you need. You haven’t been out on the town since getting back from Washington, my dear. You’re a wealthy woman now, one with a clear purpose, and this is how the *crème de la crème* of New York Society celebrates.” She linked her arm in Victoria’s. “Besides, you and James have an open relationship, so you should have no prudish fear. No one will recognize you, if that’s what you’re worried about. And even if they do, no one spills the secrets of what goes on at the French Ball. It simply isn’t done.”

Victoria adjusted the green satin and lace mask over her eyes, hoping Josie was right. She had never been one to condemn a good time – she had even seen her fair share – but already at ten o'clock in the evening, this party was at the level of revelry most didn't pass until well beyond midnight. All around them, scandalously clad women with bared ankles and barely concealed breasts danced, drank and exchanged partners with Bacchanalian abandon. Some of the men wore wigs and masques to hide their identities, but there were quite a few faces Victoria recognized, either from the brothels or from her dealings with Wall Street. In fact, some of the most prominent men took pleasure in going around unmasked, displaying their excesses to one and all from highly visible seats in boxes set into the perimeter of the room.

Josie led their party – Victoria, James and Tennie – around the main ballroom like a noblewoman followed by her retinue. She was frequently stopped by admirers who recognized her through her veil of gauzy white crowned by a wreath of silk flowers. Even more whispered at her daring ensemble, pointing to the tightly cinched waist and clinging fabric or drooling over her bare shoulders, which were decorated in layers of dazzling emerald ropes, a gift from the besotted Mr. Fisk.

She may have claimed that finding a partner tonight was a lovers' game, but judging from the appraising eye Miss Wood kept on her from her second floor box, Josie was also there to attract customers. The farther on they pressed, the more madams Victoria recognized, each elevated to queenly status in her box as admirers fawned at their feet, while her girls openly plied their trade on the floor or up against the walls around her.

As they passed a table laden with sugared flowers, fruit shaped confections, petite cakes and countless bottles of wines and spirits, Victoria spied a friend of Mr. Vanderbilt's licking champagne from the décolleté of a young woman dressed in the scandalous tutu of a ballerina.

She was leaning on him for support, while another woman, this one disguised as a bayadere, offered her shoe for a senator to use as a glass.

Josie caught the eye of her madam and paused. "I'm afraid I have to leave you now. Join me in our box later, won't you?"

James took the bottle of wine that was offered to them and popped the cork. "We may as well join in," he whispered into Victoria's ear. "I know you're more game for this than you're willing to let on." He snaked an arm around her waist, tilted her back and poured a rill of fizzing wine into her mouth like a fountain.

She swallowed, coughing in surprise and playfully hit her husband. "James, I never!"

"Oh yes, you have." He pulled her into the center of the dance floor and clasped her improperly close, swaying against her to the rhythm of the pulsing crowd. "I think I like you as an innocent shepherdess." His eyes roamed from one end of her costume to the other.

Victoria grinned. "I think, good sir, what you like is my exposed ankles and bosom."

James ran his lips across her collarbone. "What I like is seeing all the jealous stares when these fools realize you are mine." He took a heavy pull from the bottle.

Victoria raised her eyebrows. "Is that so? Well, if jealousy is what you want, jealousy you shall have." Using James' arms for support, she bent backwards until her fingertips brushed the ground, giving both her husband and every man nearby a clear view of her chest. Blood rushing to her head, she smiled as Tennie accepted a drink from Johnny, the piano playing journalist at Madame de Ford's. *Good, at least she will be well tended tonight.*

When Victoria straightened again, the colonel's pupils were dilated with lust. She grinned salaciously and took him by the hand, leading him to one of the many alcoves shaded by potted palms and tall vases of flowers. Once inside, she pushed him up against the wall, unpinning his

suspenders as she kissed him hard and hungry, feasting on the lips she knew would be hers from the moment she first laid eyes on him. She reached down and stroked him, while his hand searched between her legs, finding her more than ready to accept him. She guided him into her and he picked her up and turned so she was pinned between his thrusting hips and the wall.

Victoria groaned as she wrapped her legs around him, clinging to his shoulders for support as the pleasure within her grew. James had managed to free one of her breasts from the confines of her gown and was sucking softly on her nipple. His hand supporting her dug into her bare buttocks and she arched her back in a heady mix of pleasure and pain that sent him over the edge not long after her.

For a few moments, they stayed still, panting as their hearts slowly returned to a normal rhythm. Victoria was the first to move, unhooking her legs from around him and standing on unsteady limbs.

She leaned her forehead against her husband's and whispered, "I love you, Colonel James Harvey Blood, you horny bastard."

He kissed her gently on the mouth. "And I you, Victoria Claflin Woodhull, my little minx."

She bit his lower lip before he could pull away.

"Now, now, any more of that and we won't be leaving this niche tonight."

"Who says that's a problem?" But even as she said it, she was smoothing down her skirts and returning her exposed breast to the safety of her bodice.

Once they were properly attired again, James led her back through the writhing crowd, their flushed faces matching those of the inebriated around them. They stopped at Madame de Ford's box to say hello, but she was engaged in an intense discussion with the police

commissioner – no doubt about the cut of her business she paid him to turn a blind eye – so she waved them away with a fleeting smile.

Two boxes down, stately Annie Wood presided from an elevated gilt chair, the feathers in her hair matching the red velvet of the couches clients leaned on and the curtains no one bothered to close.

“Darlings,” she called, crossing her bare ankles so they attracted attention first, followed by her shape-hugging dress and ample bosom. There was no doubt what this woman was about. She held out her hand to James to kiss. “Finally I meet the reclusive husband.” Her rich brown eyes took him in, beginning with his thick brown hair and luxurious mutton chops to the shine of his leather shoes and back again. “I can see why you keep him hidden.” She winked at Victoria. “My girls would devour a handsome man like this.”

James grinned back at her and gave an exaggerated bow. “You are too kind, my lady.”

“Victoria, come here.” Tennie shouted from the balcony rail, gesturing wildly for her sister.

“What is it?” Victoria leaned over the railing, straining to see in the direction Tennie was pointing.

“Isn’t that Luther Challis in the top hat and red scarf, the one that Cornelius dislikes so much?”

The splash of crimson moved toward them through the crowd. “It’s hard to tell from this distance, but I think so. Who is that with him in the gaudy gold coattails?”

Johnny stuck his head between Tennie and Victoria. “That is the dishonorable Charles Maxwell, playboy and all around ass.” He said. When he saw Victoria’s look of surprise at his

language, he hastened to explain, “He’s a frequent patron of Madame de Ford. Treats the girls real bad and doesn’t ever tip me. He’s the one who busted up Minnie that day.”

Victoria made a sound of disgust. “I ought to give him back what he gave her.”

James appeared then, the ghost of Madame de Ford’s lips on his cheek and yet another bottle of wine in his hand, but he didn’t have a chance to offer it, for Challis meandered in, plucking it out of James’ hand as though he had ordered it himself.

“Thanks, my good man.”

James shot him a black look.

Victoria rubbed his shoulders soothingly. “He’s not worth it.”

Behind Challis, Charles Maxwell trailed in, followed by two stumbling, giggling girls who were already well and truly drunk. One was fresh faced and wide-eyed, clearly unaware of exactly what sort of trap she had walked into. The other –Victoria’s heart gave a protective flutter – was Minnie.

“I don’t think I can watch this,” she whispered to James, as Challis and Maxwell held a bottle out to each girl, daring them to see who could finish it first.

“I notice they drink little but have no problem intoxicating mere children,” Tennie grumbled. “The ballerina is what, maybe fifteen?”

Victoria nodded. “And Minnie is even younger.”

She turned her back on them, preferring instead to watch the people in the adjoining boxes, where men smoked cigars, watching the crowd like hawks.

“Twenty dollars on the little drummer girl,” a balding man in a midnight blue suit called out as though he was at a swine auction.

The girl in the patriotic costume set down her drum and climbed on the shoulders of the man nearest to her, who tossed her up into the box like a circus performer, where she was caught by her owner for the night.

Delighting in this daring feat, other men began shouting for their choices to be tossed up to them.

On the other side of them, a hue had gone up for a heavy woman sitting on the rail. Seeing the others tossed up, she must have thought to jump down, but her heel caught on the banister and she lost her shoe, toppling over the edge. Instead of trying to catch her, the crowd parted to avoid being crushed and she fell hard and heavy to the tiles below. She lay senseless a few moments before being carried out by the police.

Victoria turned back to the box. Off to the side, Tennie was kneeling next to the unknown ballerina, who had collapsed onto one of the couches and was regarding Tennie with glassy eyes.

Not far away, Challis was standing behind Minnie, whose drooping eyelids and lolling postured marked her as likely to pass out on her feet, his hands down the front of her gown as she leaned heavily against him.

Victoria was on him in heartbeat, putting her face right up into his. "Can't you see neither of them are in any state to say yea or nay to you?"

"What makes you think their permission is sought?" Challis spat. "Let them alone, both of you. This is none of your concern."

Maxwell pulled his girl roughly to her feet. "I tire of these Mrs. Grundys. Let's go somewhere we won't be disturbed." His face lit with devilish inspiration. "Let's take them to Molly's." He leaned over the rail and called to Madame de Ford, "Is that alright by you, Molly?"

She waved at them with a bland expression, clearly not hearing what they said.

Tennie attempted to shield the ballerina with her body. "Please, do not do this. Take Minnie if you must, but this girl is no prostitute, merely an innocent in over her head."

"She won't be innocent much longer, you can be certain of that." Challis shoved Tennie away.

Johnny caught Tennie and steadied her, while James surged forward.

"How dare you assault this woman," he cried, throwing a punch that hit Challis square in the jaw.

Challis was shocked for a moment, but recovered quickly enough to grab James' shoulders before he could land another blow, sending them both to the ground, grappling like mice.

"Enough! Mr. Mercer," Annie called from her throne, "remove these nuisances."

A lanky young man perhaps all of sixteen came running. "My father is indisposed, Miss Wood." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder to where a portly gray-haired man had his face buried in Josie's breasts. "What can I do for you?"

"Never you mind, sport," Maxwell said, putting a glass of champagne in the startled man's hand and yanking his top hat down over his eyes. He pulled Challis up from the floor and bowed to the women in one fluid motion. "Ladies, thank you for your hospitality."

In the blink of an eye, they were gone, girls in tow.

"Oh, no. They aren't getting away that easily." Tennie stormed after them, skirts swirling around her as she broke into a run through the winding halls clogged with couples in various states of undress.

Following closely on her heels, Victoria elbowed her way through the rowdy crowd on the dance floor, narrowly missing being kicked when she was shoved into a line of women doing a wild can-can.

She lost sight of Tennie in the whirl of silk, crinoline, powdered wigs and glistening skin, not daring to turn back to find James, afraid if she did, she might bump into someone or tumble over a discarded shoe.

Not until she reached the front entrance did she pause to breathe. Tennie was already outside, shouting in vain for a carriage to stop. James brushed past her, hurrying to Tennie's side. Victoria followed.

"You have to let them go," James said, drawing his coat around a shivering Tennie, who shook her head, refusing to give up.

"No, we can't let them get away with this. We know where they are headed. We can meet them there." Tennie's silent tears turned into sobs.

Victoria's heart went out to her sister. Ten to one, she was reliving her own undesired loss of innocence at the hands of Buck's paying clientele, but she had to see reason. "And do what, pet? Demand they hand over the girls? It is a house of prostitution and one of them is employed there. We would be laughed at and lose Madame de Ford as a client."

Johnny had found his way outside and wrapped his arms around Tennie. "Victoria is right. They could even arrest us for impeding their business. The best we can do is see that the papers get the details – which I will make sure they do – and hope justice takes its course."

But it wouldn't. They had all seen enough coverage of past French Balls to know nothing would come of it. Debauchery was part and parcel with the annual tradition. People loved to read

about it to be scandalized, not to enact change. Unfortunately, these two girls were not the first to suffer for their night of rebellion against society's mores.

Tennie had stopped crying, but was now trembling with rage, her hands clenched into fists at her side. "I will be on Madame de Ford's doorstep first thing in the morning, inquiring about their welfare. Mark my words, even if it takes me years, I will see Challis and Maxwell pay for what they've done to these girls. They will be revenged."

