

Scarlett looked out of her dirty, smudged window at the castle that loomed high above her village on a hill not a day's walk from the one-room shack she shared with her mother. The castle carried heavy rumors around its tall turrets and crumbling brick. It was said to hold a family with secrets as dark as the night. For most of the village, the castle was a subject to be avoided in conversation. Everyone claimed to know someone who knew someone who knew someone who had once had a brush with death behind the castle walls. But for Scarlett, the castle was a mental escape from the monotony of her day-to-day life. She would sit at the dilapidated table where she worked everyday sewing detailed and intricate dresses for the wealthier women from the next town over, struggling to keep the blood from her needle-pricked fingers from dripping onto the expensive garments. As she worked, she dreamed of the lavish life the residents of the castle must live in comparison to her destitute existence. A life of wearing beautiful gowns instead of sewing them. A life of having enough money to support her mother. A life without worry of never finding a husband. Scarlett's life seemed to revolve around what she lacked in life as opposed to what she had.

Scarlett's mother finally returned from the village with her cousin, Anna, who was bursting with energy over a newfound rumor in the town while Scarlett's mother wore an exhausted and frustrated expression on her worn and wrinkled face.

"Scarlett, you'll never guess who we met in the village!" Anna exclaimed, nearly bursting with her news. Scarlett sat in silent expectancy waiting for her cousin's big reveal. "It was a young man claiming to be from the castle. He certainly looks the part as well. He wore expensive clothing. He claims to be looking for a wife," her cousin said with contagious excitement that immediately infected Scarlett.

“Why would he come to this village in search of a wife if he is from such a wealthy family? Any household with enough money to live in a castle should be able to find a suitable woman within his own social class.” Scarlett’s mother questioned, suddenly subduing the initial excitement Scarlett felt about the eligible bachelor.

“In less exciting news, I realize now that I forgot to pick up the thread you needed in town, Scarlett. I’m incredibly tired from the trip, dear, would you mind going to buy it? Unless it’s too dark now.” her mother said, causing Scarlett to nearly knock the recently finished dress onto the dirt floor as she jumped from her chair in a second wind of excitement.

“I’ll go! I’ll go now,” she eagerly offered. Scarlett thought of the possibility of meeting the mystery man. This was her one chance to escape from her dull, uninteresting life. Before her departure, Scarlett worked in her mother’s broken mirror, attempting to make her unkempt brown hair slightly more presentable in a last stitch effort to appear a suitable wife. Upon the realization that she had become as attractive as she could with what little resources she had, Scarlett left her small cabin with her head filled with more fantasies of a new life than ever before.

As she neared the village, Scarlett’s enthusiasm mounted. She wasn’t the most beautiful girl, but she had all of the qualities of a good spouse. She had been cooking, cleaning, and sewing since she was old enough to talk. But would this even matter if the man came from a rich family? Scarlett knew she was getting ahead of herself, but she couldn’t help it. Slowly the sound of loud conversations and cheerful laughter drifted from the tavern in the center of the village and interrupted her daydreaming. Ignoring her mission to buy the thread she needed, Scarlett

allowed her curiosity to take over, and she made her way to the tavern. Nothing in the village had been this lively since before she could remember.

Stepping inside, she was hit with the overwhelming smell of alcohol and vomit mixed with the sounds of drunken men and provocative women. The atmosphere was anything but romantic, yet, when Scarlett saw the man across the bar, her heart skipped a beat. She instantly knew that he was the man Anna told her about. He was everything she imagined he would be. The man's hair was flawlessly combed back with not a single strand out of place. His clothing was painstakingly clean and detailed. Scarlett lost her breath as the man met her gaze with a look of desire and curiosity. He took a swig of his drink and sauntered over to Scarlett.

“What is someone as pretty as yourself doing in a place such as this,” the man inquired with a smirk that made it seem as if he knew how charming he was, and he knew that Scarlett was entranced with him. This disposition made Scarlett's heart flutter more than she had ever thought possible.

“Well, I came to see what all the fuss was about with the new man in town. Nothing this exciting has happened here in years. Am I safe in assuming that this man could be you?” she responded shyly. Scarlett knew that this man could bring her to a life of happiness.

“Ah, so you have heard of me? I am Charles of the family Rede. And you are?”

“Oh I'm just Scarlett.”

“Well, Just Scarlett,” Charles said teasingly, “It's getting quite dark, should I walk you home” he offered.

Scarlett suddenly remembered that her mother was expecting her with the thread she had failed to buy. “I should be fine, but I do need to hurry home.”

As Scarlett turned to leave, Charles grabbed her by the arm. “When can I see you again? I will only be in town for a few days.”

“I’m sure I can see you tomorrow night after I finish my work.”

Charles paused before his response, “What if you came with me to my home? I know we’ve just met, but you are perfect. What do you have here? I can make your life beautiful.”

Scarlett was offset by this sudden proposal, but she allowed her imagination to carry her away. She pictured living with this marvelous stranger who promised her the world. Scarlett knew it would be irresponsible. Her mother would hate it, but that made the idea so much more tempting. Since birth, her mother had been overprotective and sheltering, chasing away any possible suitors. This was Scarlett’s chance to leave it all behind. To finally live the life she had dreamed of. In a moment of poor decisions and over-excitement. Scarlett blurted a passionate acceptance to the man’s offer.

“So we’ll meet here at seven? Come with nothing except yourself.” Charles declared. He knew he had Scarlett under his spell and that she would agree to anything he suggested. Scarlett quickly agreed to this arrangement and left for home.

As she walked the dark path back to her house, a sense of wonder and dread washed over her. What would her mother think? Should Scarlett care? What if the man backed out on her? What if this was a huge mistake? But she reassured herself with every step that this was the right thing to do. She was meant to go with Charles. He seemed like a wonderful man who would never harm her. True, she had only known him for an hour, but he evoked an incomparable emotion within her. When she finally reached her destination, she found her mother had already given into the pull of sleep. Scarlett, on the other hand, couldn’t lie her mind

to rest. Every thought was occupied with Charles and his charming smile. She hardly doubted that he must be feeling the same. Their conversation, no matter how awkward, was peppered with a certain undeniable chemistry. As Scarlett's eyes finally closed and her mind finally decided to settle down, she revisited the image of her living a luxurious life, and she succumbed to her exhaustion with a faint smile on her face.

The sun was just beginning to peek through the hut's clouded windows when Scarlett arose. Her feet ached from the journey into town the night before, and her mind was flooded with the memories of her encounter with Mr. Rede. A newfound eagerness overcame her as she bolted upright in her bed. The day was spent restlessly sewing dresses and routinely checking the clock every few minutes. The waiting was unbearable. She wished for seven o'clock more than she had wished for anything in her life. It was a wonder she was able to stay in her seat throughout the day. Despite her mother's constant prodding of what had befallen Scarlett to cause this sort of behavior, Scarlett insisted that nothing was the matter, for she had no intention of revealing her plan to her mother in fear that she would reject the idea and force Scarlett to stay home.

Scarlett's mind became more and more carried away as the day dragged on. She believed that her entire life would change after tonight. Nothing could go wrong. She was hopelessly in love, and she had barely known the man for a day. There was nothing in her mind that doubted the fact that this would be the best thing to have ever happened to her. Finally, Scarlett looked at the clock and found that it was time for her to leave. She nearly knocked her chair over in her rush to stand up.

"Mother!" she exclaimed, frightening the poor woman.

“I need to get going if I expect to make it to the town for thread and back before night fall.”

“A-alright dear. Don’t get too excited; it’s just thread.” her mother giggled.

“Good bye, mother.” Scarlett said in a much more serious tone, and as she left the doorway, she called out, “I love you,” for the last time. Her heart grew heavy with the realization that this was the last time she may ever see her mother or this house. She tore herself away while maintaining a pleasant disposition as not to worry her mother. Scarlett began her walk away from everything she had known and towards a new chapter in her life for which she eagerly awaited.

Charles was already standing in front of the tavern when Scarlett arrived. He immediately firmly grasped her arm and began quickly walking towards the inn across town. His grip was strong and borderline painful, but Scarlett attempted to push the discomfort to the back of her mind and find a reason as to why she was being pulled around so forcefully.

“You were late!” Charles accused. “I stood there for ten minutes looking like an absolute fool. I have a reputation in these parts, and for you to leave me there alone was disrespectful. When you are with me, you will be on time to every event. Do you understand?” he demanded in such a voice that Scarlett began to question her decision to go with him.

“I’m-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

“Of course you didn’t mean to. That’s what the last one said as well.”

“The last one? What on earth are you talking about?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you. Just promise me you will obey my requests. Okay? I don’t have time for your nonsense.”

“Okay, I will.” Scarlett said submissively. “Where are we going?”

“Back to my home, the castle on the hill.” Charles answered through his teeth in a clearly frustrated tone. Scarlett took this as a clue not to ask anymore questions. He had silenced and frightened her which was exactly his goal when he met her. When they arrived at the inn, there was a single horse waiting for them. Scarlett had expected more. Maybe two horses. Or even a carriage. She was about to voice this, but she was interrupted by his throwing her upon the horse with such force that she knew she would be bruised in the morning. Scarlett held on the hope that he was simply in a bad mood, or that she had made a mistake of some sort. He couldn’t always be like this, for he wasn’t last night.

She dwelled on these thoughts during the long and bumpy ride to the castle. The two rode in angry and confused silence. Scarlett began regretting her decision. She wondered when her mother would realize that she wasn’t coming back, and what she would make of this. The ride lasted well into the night. They didn’t arrive to the castle before the sun began to peek through the clouds. Scarlett had begun to drift into sleep with her head resting upon Charles’s back just as the horse came to a sudden stop.

They had arrived at the castle that looked ever more daunting in person. The walls towered high above the couple. Scarlett had never seen anything so huge in her life. From a distance, the castle looked perfectly intact, but up close, it was evident that the walls were crumbling in some places. Chunks of stone were missing from the high turrets. In some spots, it appeared that the only thing holding the building together was the vines that crawled up the brick in swirling patterns, the leaves protruding out several inches. The stained glass windows were broken in some places, allowing the harsh breeze to flutter tapestries that hung within the castle.

The beautiful designs of which were faded and torn from exposure. The castle no longer looked like a place worthy of daydreams, but worthy of nightmares.

Scarlett was once again taken ahold of by Charles and yanked from the horse. She fell to the ground and felt her ankle roll. She struggled to stand up, informing Charles of her injury. He picked her up with no gentleness. His rude behavior continued to confuse Scarlett. She knew she had done nothing wrong since their departure. He gave her no answers, as she gave him no questions. He carried her up to her new chambers. She was more gently placed upon the bed, but he gave no hint of tending to her ankle. Instead he walked over to her wardrobe, and opened its huge doors. Inside were roughly a dozen dresses, all of which appeared to be Scarlett's size.

“Were these your sister's? Did you ever have a sister?” Scarlett asked in an attempt to further understand what was going on.

“No, my mother made them for the first girl I ever brought here. But they look to be your size as well. My mother loved to sew before the accident.”

“What accident?” Scarlett asked in a reserved voice.

“Well, she disagreed with the way I was living. We had many explosive arguments. Unfortunately, a few days later, she fell to her untimely death from her bedroom window. I hate that our last few weeks of interactions were filled with hatred. She really was such a lovely woman.” Charles recalled with a look of reminiscence mixed with a hint of disgust that Scarlett barely detected. She was made severely uncomfortable with this confession. It silenced her and Charles as he began to rifle through the garments with a certain newfound intensity. He pulled out a dress and flung it in Scarlett's direction.



“Wear this tonight for dinner. I will fetch you when it’s time. I expect you to look ravishingly delicious. There should be nothing out of place. I want tonight to be perfect, alright? There is makeup on the boudoir. It would be very much in your favor if you used it.” Charles demanded before leaving the room in a flash.

Scarlett opened her mouth to question him, but it was too late. She heard the door lock and Charles footsteps hurriedly walking away. She went to open the door, but again found that it was a struggle even to stand on her hurt ankle. She pulled herself back onto the bed and inspected the dress. It was a beautiful black crushed velvet. Its sleeves fell to her elbows, and the hem fell just to her ankles. It fit her better than any of the dresses she had at home. It accentuated her waist and hugged her hips. She looked elegantly dark and daring. Scarlett hobbled her way over to the vanity to take inventory of the various types of makeup on the counter. She hastily applied some of the products, but she had only ever worn makeup a handful of times. Scarlett disliked the way it made her look, but she did it for Charles.

As she finished applying the last of the makeup, Scarlett heard a faint but distressed scream coming from somewhere in the castle followed by an abrupt thud, then silence. Scarlett grew increasingly concerned as the silence continued. She limped as quickly as she could to the door, only to remember that it was locked. She searched on her hands and knees for a key, but instead found a small glass box under the bed. Scarlett put her eye up to the container and saw the warped form of a key inside. Scarlett got to work on opening it, however, the box seemed to have no way to open it. Growing ever more anxious and confused, Scarlett used all of her force to slam the box against the wall repeatedly until it finally broke open. With no regard to the broken glass that now punctured her hands, she hastily grabbed the key and crawled over to

the wood and iron door that towered far above Scarlett's already tall frame. She jammed the key into the lock and turned. She heard the lock click, but now she had to open the large and heavy door.

Scarlett, using the knob as a handle, pulled herself into the best standing position she could under her circumstances and threw herself against the door with all her force while turning the iron knob. The door opened with a strident groan. Scarlett knew that if Charles caught her leaving the room before dinner there would be hell to pay. But what kind of hell could be worse than what she'd already experienced with Charles? With these discouraging thoughts in mind, she slowly made her way down the hallway, trying her best not to look at the disturbingly detailed portraits of past family members that hung over the deep red wallpaper. Every wrinkle and crevice on their faces seemed painstakingly accurate. The eyes seemed to look down on Scarlett as she made her seemingly impossible journey. Using every table and railing in the hallway, she propelled herself forward.

A few feet ahead, the hallway split. One continued straight while another led to an incredibly steep set of spiral stairs that appeared to lead to the lower level. As she stopped to make a decision, she heard another, even louder scream that pierced Scarlett's skull with urgency. Again, the scream was followed by a thump, but this time, the thump was followed by a man, presumably Charles, yelling what sounded like a string of expletives and another, more determined thud. Unfortunately for Scarlett, the scream seemed to come from the lower level of the castle. She knew that descending the stairs on her inflicted ankle would be quite the undertaking, but she also knew that a scream of this volume could only be coming from someone whose life was fleeting, and could cease to exist at any moment. Scarlett no longer believed

Charles was the man of her dreams. She knew there was something much darker here than her village ever believed.

Using the railing as a crutch, Scarlett began to stumble down the stairs in what felt like a never ending spiral. She had lost track of time. Had it been minutes since she left her room? Hours? Scarlett had lost all concept of time. She felt as though she had been on these stairs for an eternity, but she also knew that she still had at least half of the stairs to go. Mustering up all of her strength, she attempted to quicken her pace at the expense of her ankle. The pain increased, but she knew she had to continue on.

With the end finally in site, Scarlett grew more afraid. She hadn't heard another scream in a while, nor had she heard another thud. What if the next scream came from her own throat? What if the next thud was inflicted upon her? Her worrisome thoughts were interrupted by a stench so foul that Scarlett gagged. She followed the horrendous scent further into the depths of the castle. The smell got stronger as Scarlett grew weaker. As her hand gripped at the wall for support, she felt a warm and sticky substance grace her fingers. She quickly pulled her hand away, suppressing a scream, but nearly falling to the ground. She gazed down at her hands. The tips of her fingers were stained with the blood of an unknown person. She peered deeper into the hallway; the stark white wallpaper was now stained with the dripping red liquid. The assaulting smell continued to grow. She limped forward through the hall, careful not to touch the crimson gore that painted the walls.

The long and narrow hallway finally gave way to an elegantly decorated dining room, in which there was significantly less blood, as though the perpetrator took great care to keep the room in pristine condition. There was a dark oak table with clawed feet in the center of the vast

room. On the table, a bright red table runner ran down the center of the lengthy table, in the middle of which sat a vase filled with half-wilted white roses. There were two place settings on either end of the table. Each with a black plate and freshly polished silverware. Scarlett's mind was pulled from the almost peaceful scene by the sound of a knife against countertop. She slowly turned her head to the source of the sound and the direction of the blood trail. Both led into what appeared to be a kitchen.

Unsure of what the room held, Scarlett sat in terrified silence, tears streaming down her face. She dared not to breathe too loudly out of fear that the walls would soon be splashed with her blood. But her nonstop curiosity outweighed her instinct to flee. Scarlett slowly pulled herself off of the floor and staggered in the direction of the kitchen. Reaching the large double-doors, she pushed them open with a gentle force. As she stumbled into the room, she saw a body lain upon the counter. It was mutilated to a degree of unrecognition. The body was a female, this much was certain. On the floor, there was a dress, much like the one Scarlett wore. No longer able to contain it, Scarlett let out a horrified scream, causing Charles, who stood at the fire, cooking pieces of the woman, to whip his head in her direction.

He raised his knife and rushed at Scarlett, who had begun to run away. Charles's strides were much longer, and he was much faster. Scarlett's ankle screamed in pain, but adrenaline and shock washed over her. She fell to the ground but continued to pull herself forward. She was no match for Charles who grabbed her by the ankles and pulled her back into the kitchen, through the woman's blood. Scarlett continued to sob, both from pain and horror. He finally slammed her against a wall and allowed her powerless body to slide down and slump onto the floor.

“What have you done?” Charles roared. “You’ve ruined your makeup and the surprise of our first meal together!”

“Why?” Scarlett whimpered. “Why are you doing this to me? To her?”

“My dear Scarlett, I’m doing this because I love you. I’ve done this with every girl I love. The girl upon the table. I love her. And I loved the one before her. But most importantly, I love you. After our first meal, I will leave you in your room for a few days before going and finding another girl I love. Then you will become our first meal, much like the girl before you. It’s all a cycle, don’t you see?”

“No. No, I won’t do it. I won’t be your plaything.” Scarlett weakly protested.

“Oh that’s a shame. I will simply have to kill you now, and the first meal with my next love will have two courses instead of one. But I’m flexible. This isn’t a problem.” he said before swinging the knife down onto Scarlett’s arm. Too tired to fight, Scarlett let the pain run through her and succumbed to the ever increasing darkness and relief of death.

A few days passed after Scarlett became another victim in Charles’s book. The sound of a horse’s gallop was heard outside of the crumbling castle walls. Charles thrust open the front door, pulling along a girl, roughly Scarlett’s age and stature.

“My dear, I will lead you to your room where you are to remain until I fetch you for dinner. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Charles, of course.”