

Chapter 6

The next morning, when the children stumbled sleepily from their bedroom into the kitchen, rather than a note from Count Olaf they found Count Olaf himself.

“Good morning, orphans,” he said. “I have your oatmeal all ready in bowls for you.”

The children took seats at the kitchen table and stared nervously into their oatmeal. If you knew Count Olaf, and he suddenly served you a meal, wouldn't you be afraid there was something terrible in it, like poison or ground glass? But instead, Violet, Klaus, and Sunny found that fresh raspberries had been sprinkled on top of each of their portions. The Baudelaire orphans hadn't had raspberries since their parents died, although they were extremely fond of them.

“Thank you,” Klaus said, carefully, picking up one of the raspberries and examining it. Perhaps these were poison berries that just looked like delicious ones. Count Olaf, seeing how suspiciously Klaus was looking at the berries, smiled and plucked a berry out of Sunny's bowl. Looking at each of the three youngsters, he popped it into his mouth and ate it.

“Aren't raspberries delicious?” he asked. “They were my favorite berries when I was your age.”

Violet tried to picture Count Olaf as a youngster, but couldn't. His shiny eyes, bony hands, and shadowy smile all seemed to be things only adults possess. Despite her fear of him, however, she took her spoon in her right hand and began to eat her oatmeal. Count Olaf had eaten some, so it probably wasn't poisonous, and anyway she was very hungry. Klaus began to eat, too, as did Sunny, who got oatmeal and raspberries all over her face.

“I received a phone call yesterday,” Count Olaf said, “from Mr. Poe. He told me you children had been to see him.”

The children exchanged glances. They had hoped their visit would be taken in confidence, a phrase which here means “kept a secret between Mr. Poe and themselves and not blabbed to Count Olaf.”

“Mr. Poe told me,” Count Olaf said, “that you appeared to be having some difficulty adjusting to the life I have so graciously provided for you. I'm very sorry to hear that.”

The children looked at Count Olaf. His face was very serious, as if he were very sorry to hear that, but his eyes were shiny and bright, the way they are when someone is telling a joke.

“Is that so?” Violet said. “I'm sorry Mr. Poe bothered you.”

“I'm glad he did,” Count Olaf said, “because I want the three of you to feel at home here, now that I am your father.”

The children shuddered a little at that, remembering their own kind father and gazing sadly at the poor substitute now sitting across the table from them.

“Lately,” Count Olaf said, “I have been very nervous about my performances with the theater troupe, and I’m afraid I may have acted a bit standoffish.”

The word “standoffish” is a wonderful one, but it does not describe Count Olaf’s behavior toward the children. It means “reluctant to associate with others,” and it might describe somebody who, during a party, would stand in a corner and not talk to anyone. It would not describe somebody who provides one bed for three people to sleep in, forces them to do horrible chores, and strikes them across the face. There are many words for people like that, but “standoffish” is not one of them. Klaus knew the word “standoffish” and almost laughed out loud at Olaf’s incorrect use of it. But his face still had a bruise on it, so Klaus remained silent.

“Therefore, to make you feel a little more at home here, I would like to have you participate in my next play. Perhaps if you took part in the work I do, you would be less likely to run off complaining to Mr. Poe.”

“In what way would we participate?” Violet asked. She was thinking of all the chores they already did for Count Olaf, and was not in the mood to do more.

“Well,” Count Olaf said, his eyes shining brightly, “the play is called *The Marvellous Marriage*, and it is written by the great playwright Al Funcoot. We will give only one performance, on this Friday night. It is about a man who is very brave and intelligent, played by me. In the finale, he marries the young, beautiful woman he loves, in front of a crowd of cheering people. You, Klaus, and you, Sunny, will play some of the cheering people in the crowd.”

“But we’re shorter than most adults,” Klaus said. “Won’t that look strange to the audience?”

“You will be playing two midgets who attend the wedding,” Olaf said patiently.

“And what will I do?” Violet asked. “I am very handy with tools, so perhaps I could help you build the set.”

“Build the set? Heavens, no,” Count Olaf said. “A pretty girl like you shouldn’t be working backstage.”

“But I’d like to,” Violet said.

Count Olaf’s one eyebrow raised slightly, and the Baudelaire orphans recognized this sign of his anger. But then the eyebrow went down again as he forced himself to remain calm. “But I have such an important role for you onstage,” he said. “You are going to play the young woman I marry.”

Violet felt her oatmeal and raspberries shift around in her stomach as if she had just caught the flu. It was bad enough having Count Olaf acting in loco parentis and announcing himself as their father, but to consider this man her husband, even for the purposes of a play, was even more dreadful.

“It’s a very important role,” he continued, his mouth curling up into an unconvincing smile, “although you have no lines other than ‘I do,’ which you will say when Justice Strauss asks you if you will have me.”

“Justice Strauss?” Violet said. “What does she have to do with it?”

“She has agreed to play the part of the judge,” Count Olaf said. Behind him, one of the eyes painted on the kitchen walls closely watched over each of the Baudelaire children. “I asked Justice Strauss to participate because I wanted to be neighbourly, as well as fatherly.”

“Count Olaf,” Violet said, and then stopped herself. She wanted to argue her way out of playing his bride, but she didn’t want to make him angry. “Father,” she said, “I’m not sure I’m talented enough to perform professionally. I would hate to disgrace your good name and the name of Al Funcoot. Plus I’ll be very busy in the next few weeks working on my inventions-and learning how to prepare roast beef,” she added quickly, remembering how he had behaved about dinner.

Count Olaf reached out one of his spidery hands and stroked Violet on the chin, looking deep into her eyes. “You will,” he said, “participate in this theatrical performance. I would prefer it if you would participate voluntarily, but as I believe Mr. Poe explained to you, I can order you to participate and you must obey.” Olaf’s sharp and dirty fingernails gently scratched on Violet’s chin, and she shivered. The room was very, very quiet as Olaf finally let go, and stood up and left without a word. The Baudelaire children listened to his heavy footsteps go up the stairs to the tower they were forbidden to enter.

“Well,” Klaus said hesitantly, “I guess it won’t hurt to be in the play. It seems to be very important to him, and we want to keep on his good side.”

“But he must be up to something,” Violet said.

“You don’t think those berries were poisoned, do you?” Klaus asked worriedly.

“No,” Violet said. “Olaf is after the fortune we will inherit. Killing us would do him no good.”

“But what good does it do him to have us be in his stupid play?”

“I don’t know,” Violet admitted miserably. She stood up and started washing out the oatmeal bowls.

“I wish we knew something more about inheritance law,” Klaus said. “I’ll bet Count Olaf has cooked up some plan to get our money, but I don’t know what it could be.”

“I guess we could ask Mr. Poe about it,” Violet said doubtfully, as Klaus stood beside her and dried the dishes. “He knows all those Latin legal phrases.”

“But Mr. Poe would probably call Count Olaf again, and then he’d know we were on to him,” Klaus pointed out. “Maybe we should try to talk to Justice Strauss. She’s a judge, so she must know all about the law.”

“But she’s also Olaf’s neighbour,” Violet replied, “and she might tell him that we had asked.”

Klaus took his glasses off, which he often did when he was thinking hard. “How could we find out about the law without Olaf’s knowledge?”

“Book!” Sunny shouted suddenly. She probably meant something like “Would somebody please wipe my face?” but it made Violet and Klaus look at each other. Book. They were both thinking the same thing: Surely Justice Strauss would have a book on inheritance law.

“Count Olaf didn’t leave us any chores to do,” Violet said, “so I suppose we are free to visit Justice Strauss and her library.”

Klaus smiled. “Yes indeed,” he said. “And you know, today I don’t think I’ll choose a book on wolves.”

“Nor I,” Violet said, “on mechanical engineering. I think I’d like to read about inheritance law”

“Well, let’s go,” Klaus said. “Justice Strauss said we could come over soon, and we don’t want to be standoffish.”

At the mention of the word that Count Olaf had used so ridiculously, the Baudelaire orphans all laughed, even Sunny, who of course did not have a very big vocabulary. Swiftly they put away the clean oatmeal bowls in the kitchen cupboards, which watched them with painted eyes. Then the three young people ran next door. Friday, the day of the performance, was only a few days off, and the children wanted to figure out Count Olaf’s plan as quickly as possible.