

Chapter 8

Klaus stayed up all night reading, which was normally something he loved to do. Back when his parents were alive, Klaus used to take a flashlight to bed with him and hide under the covers, reading until he couldn't keep his eyes open. Some mornings, his father would come into Klaus's room to wake him up and find him asleep, still clutching his flashlight in one hand and his book in the other. But on this particular night, of course, the circumstances were much different.

Klaus stood by the window, squinting as he read his smuggled book by the moonlight that trickled into the room. He occasionally glanced at his sisters. Violet was sleeping fitfully—a word which here means “with much tossing and turning”—on the lumpy bed, and Sunny had wormed her way into the pile of curtains so that she just looked like a small heap of cloth. Klaus had not told his siblings about the book, because he didn't want to give them false hope. He wasn't sure the book would help them out of their dilemma.

The book was long, and difficult to read, and Klaus became more and more tired as the night wore on. Occasionally his eyes would close. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over. He found himself reading the same sentence over and over. But then he would remember the way the hook-hands of Count Olaf's associate had glinted in the library, and would imagine them tearing into his flesh, and he would wake right up and continue reading. He found a small scrap of paper and tore it into strips, which he used to mark significant parts of the book.

By the time the light outside grew grey with the approaching dawn, Klaus had found out all he needed to know. His hopes rose along with the sun. Finally, when the first few birds began to sing, Klaus tiptoed to the door of the bedroom and eased it open quietly, careful not to wake the restless Violet or Sunny, who was still hidden in the pile of curtains. Then he went to the kitchen and sat and waited for Count Olaf.

He didn't have to wait long before he heard Olaf tromping down the tower stairs. When Count Olaf walked into the kitchen, he saw Klaus sitting at the table and smirked, a word which here means “smiled in an unfriendly, phony way.”

“Hello, orphan,” he said. “You're up early.”

Klaus's heart was beating fast, but he felt calm on the outside, as if he had on a layer of invisible armour. “I've been up all night,” he said, “reading this book.” He put the book out on the table so Olaf could see it. “It's called Nuptial Law,” Klaus said, “and I learned many interesting things while reading it.”

Count Olaf had taken out a bottle of wine to pour himself some breakfast, but when he saw the book he stopped, and sat down.

“The word ‘nuptial,’ ” Klaus said, “means ‘relating to marriage.’ ”

“I know what the word means,” Count Olaf growled. “Where did you get that book?”

“From Justice Strauss's library,” Klaus said. “But that's not important. What's important is that I have found out your plan.”

“Is that so?” Count Olaf said, his one eyebrow raising. “And what is my plan, you little runt?”

Klaus ignored the insult and opened the book to where one of the scraps of paper was marking his place. “ ‘The laws of marriage in this community are very simple,’ ” he read out loud.

“ ‘The requirements are as follows: the presence of a judge, a statement of “I do” by both the bride and the groom, and the signing of an explanatory document in the bride’s own hand.’ ” Klaus put down the book and pointed at Count Olaf. “If my sister says ‘I do’ and signs a piece of paper, while Justice Strauss is in the room, then she is legally married. This play you’re putting on shouldn’t be called The Marvellous Marriage. It should be called The Menacing Marriage. You’re not going to marry Violet figuratively you’re going to marry her literally! This play won’t be pretend; it will be real and legally binding.”

Count Olaf laughed a rough, hoarse laugh. “Your sister isn’t old enough to get married.”

“She can get married if she has the permission of her legal guardian, acting in loco parentis,” Klaus said. “I read that, too. You can’t fool me.”

“Why in the world would I want to actually marry your sister?” Count Olaf asked. “It is true she is very pretty, but a man like myself can acquire any number of beautiful women.”

Klaus turned to a different section of Nuptial Law, “ ‘A legal husband,’ ” he read out loud, “ ‘has the right to control any money in the possession of his legal wife.’ ” Klaus gazed at Count Olaf in triumph. “You’re going to marry my sister to gain control of the Baudelaire fortune! Or at least, that’s what you planned to do. But when I show this information to Mr. Poe, your play will not be performed, and you will go to jail!”

Count Olaf’s eyes grew very shiny, but he continued to smirk at Klaus. This was surprising. Klaus had guessed that once he announced what he knew, this dreadful man would have been very angry, even violent. After all, he’d had a furious outburst just because he’d wanted roast beef instead of puttanesca sauce. Surely he’d be even more enraged to have his plan discovered. But Count Olaf just sat there as calmly as if they were discussing the weather.

“I guess you’ve found me out,” Olaf said simply. “I suppose you’re right: I’ll go to prison, and you and the other orphans will go free. Now, why don’t you run up to your room and wake your sisters? I’m sure they’ll want to know all about your grand victory over my evil ways.”

Klaus looked closely at Count Olaf, who was continuing to smile as if he had just told a clever joke. Why wasn’t he threatening Klaus in anger, or tearing his hair out in frustration, or running to pack his clothes and escape? This wasn’t happening at all the way Klaus had pictured it.

“Well, I will go tell my sisters,” he said, and walked back into his bedroom. Violet was still dozing on the bed and Sunny was still hidden beneath the curtains. Klaus woke Violet up first.

“I stayed up all night reading,” Klaus said breathlessly, as his sister opened her eyes, “and I discovered what Count Olaf is up to. He plans to marry you for real, when you and Justice Strauss and everyone all think it’s just a play, and once he’s your husband he’ll have control of our parents’ money and he can dispose of us.”

“How can he marry me for real?” Violet asked. “It’s only a play.”

“The only legal requirements of marriage in this community,” Klaus explained, holding up Nuptial Law to show his sister where he’d learned the information, “are your saying ‘I do,’ and signing a document in your own hand in the presence of a judge-like Justice Strauss!”

“But surely I’m not old enough to get married,” Violet said. “I’m only fourteen.” “Girls under the age of eighteen,” Klaus said, flipping to another part of the book, “can marry if they have the permission of their legal guardian. That’s Count Olaf.”

“Oh no!” Violet cried. “What can we do?”

“We can show this to Mr. Poe,” Klaus said, pointing to the book, “and he will finally believe us that Count Olaf is up to no good. Quick, get dressed while I wake up Sunny, and we can be at the bank by the time it opens.”

Violet, who usually moved slowly in the mornings, nodded and immediately got out of bed and went to the cardboard box to find some proper clothing. Klaus walked over to the lump of curtains to wake up his younger sister.

“Sunny,” he called out kindly, putting his hand on where he thought his sister’s head was. “Sunny.”

There was no answer. Klaus called out “Sunny” again, and pulled away the top fold of the curtains to wake up the youngest Baudelaire child. “Sunny,” he said, but then he stopped. For underneath the curtain was nothing but another curtain. He moved aside all the layers, but his little sister was nowhere to be found. “Sunny!” he yelled, looking around the room. Violet dropped the dress she was holding and began to help him search. They looked in every corner, under the bed, and even inside the cardboard box. But Sunny was gone.

“Where can she be?” Violet asked worriedly. “She’s not the type to run off.”

“Where can she be indeed?” said a voice behind them, and the two children turned around. Count Olaf was standing in the doorway, watching Violet and Klaus as they searched the room. His eyes were shining brighter than they ever had, and he was still smiling like he’d just uttered a joke.