

Chapter 9

“Yes,” Count Olaf continued, “it certainly is strange to find a child missing. And one so small, and helpless.”

“Where’s Sunny?” Violet cried. “What have you done with her?”

Count Olaf continued to speak as if he had not heard Violet. “But then again, one sees strange things every day. In fact, if you two orphans follow me out to the backyard, I think we will all see something rather unusual.”

The Baudelaire children didn’t say anything, but followed Count Olaf through the house and out the back door. Violet looked around the small, scraggly yard, in which she had not been since she and Klaus had been forced to chop wood. The pile of logs they had made was still lying there untouched, as if Count Olaf had merely made them chop logs for his own amusement, rather than for any purpose. Violet shivered, still in her nightgown, but as she gazed here and there she saw nothing unusual.

“You’re not looking in the right place,” Count Olaf said. “For children who read so much, you two are remarkably unintelligent.”

Violet looked over in the direction of Count Olaf, but could not meet his eyes. The eyes on his face, that is. She was staring at his feet, and could see the tattooed eye that had been watching the Baudelaire orphans since their troubles had begun. Then her eyes traveled up Count Olaf’s lean, shabbily dressed body, and she saw that he was pointing up with one scrawny hand. She followed his gesture and found herself looking at the forbidden tower. It was made of dirty stone, with only one lone window, and just barely visible in the window was what looked like a birdcage.

“Oh no,” Klaus said in a small, scared voice, and Violet looked again. It was a birdcage, dangling from the tower window like a flag in the wind, but inside the birdcage she could see a small and frightened Sunny. When Violet looked closely, she could see there was a large piece of tape across her sister’s mouth, and ropes around her body. She was utterly trapped.

“Let her go!” Violet said to Count Olaf. “She has done nothing to you! She is an infant!”

“Well, now,” Count Olaf said, sitting on a stump. “If you really want me to let her go, I will. But surely even a stupid brat like you might realize that if I let her go-or, more accurately, if I ask my comrade to let her go-poor little Sunny might not survive the fall down to the ground. That’s a thirty-foot tower, which is a very long way for a very little person to fall, even when she’s inside a cage. But if you insist-”

“No!” Klaus cried. “Don’t!”

Violet looked into Count Olaf’s eyes, and then at the small parcel that was her sister, hanging from the top of the tower and moving slowly in the breeze. She pictured Sunny toppling from the tower and onto the ground, pictured her sister’s last thoughts being ones of sheer terror. “Please,” she said to Olaf, feeling tears in her eyes. “She’s just a baby. We’ll do anything, anything, just don’t harm her.”

“Anything?” Count Olaf asked, his eyebrow rising. He leaned in toward Violet and gazed into her eyes. “Anything? Would you, for instance, consider marrying me during tomorrow night’s performance?”

Violet stared at him. She had an odd feeling in her stomach, as if she were the one being thrown from a great height. The really frightening thing about Olaf, she realized, was that he was very smart after all. He wasn’t merely an unsavory drunken brute, but an unsavory, clever drunken brute.

“While you were busy reading books and making accusations,” Count Olaf said, “I had one of my quietest, sneakiest assistants skulk into your bedroom and steal little Sunny away. She is perfectly safe, for now. But I consider her to be a stick behind a stubborn mule.”

“Our sister is not a stick,” Klaus said.

“A stubborn mule,” Count Olaf explained, “does not move in the direction its owner wants it to. In that way, it is like you children, who insist on mucking up my plans. Any animal owner will tell you that a stubborn mule will move in the proper direction if there is a carrot in front of it, and a stick behind it. It will move toward the carrot, because it wants the reward of food, and away from the stick, because it does not want the punishment of pain. Likewise, you will do what I say, to avoid the punishment of the loss of your sister, and because you want the reward of surviving this experience. Now, Violet, let me ask you again: will you marry me?”

Violet swallowed, and looked down at Count Olaf’s tattoo. She could not bring herself to answer.

“Come now,” Count Olaf said, his voice faking-a word which here means “feigning”-kindness. He reached out a hand and stroked Violet’s hair. “Would it be so terrible to be my bride, to live in my house for the rest of your life? You’re such a lovely girl, after the marriage I wouldn’t dispose of you like your brother and sister.”

Violet imagined sleeping beside Count Olaf, and waking up each morning to look at this terrible man. She pictured wandering around the house, trying to avoid him all day, and cooking for his terrible friends at night, perhaps every night, for the rest of her life. But then she looked up at her helpless sister and knew what her answer must be. “If you let Sunny go,” she said finally, “I will marry you.”

“I will let Sunny go,” Count Olaf answered, “after tomorrow night’s performance. In the meantime, she will remain in the tower for safekeeping. And, as a warning, I will tell you that my assistants will stand guard at the door to the tower staircase, in case you were getting any ideas.”

“You’re a terrible man,” Klaus spat out, but Count Olaf merely smiled again.

“I may be a terrible man,” Count Olaf said, “but I have been able to concoct a fool proof way of getting your fortune, which is more than you’ve been able to do.” With that, he began to stride toward the house. “Remember that, orphans,” he said. “You may have read more books than I have, but it didn’t help you gain the upper hand in this situation. Now, give me that book which gave you such grand ideas, and do the chores assigned to you.”

Klaus sighed, and relinquished-a word which here means “gave to Count Olaf even though he didn’t want to”-the book on nuptial law. He began to follow Count Olaf into the house, but Violet stayed still as a statue. She hadn’t been listening to that last speech of Count Olaf’s, knowing it would be full of the usual self-congratulatory nonsense and despicable insults. She was staring at the tower, not at the top, where her sister was dangling, but the whole length of it. Klaus looked back at her and saw something he hadn’t seen in quite some time. To those who hadn’t been around Violet long, nothing would have seemed unusual, but those who knew her well knew that when she tied her hair up in a ribbon to keep it out of her eyes, it meant that the gears and levers of her inventing brain were whirring at top speed.