

Chapter 13

“And now, ladies and gentlemen,” Count Olaf said, stepping forward to address the audience, “I have an announcement. There is no reason to continue tonight’s performance, for its purpose has been served. This has not been a scene of fiction. My marriage to Violet Baudelaire is perfectly legal, and now I am in control of her entire fortune.”

There were gasps from the audience, and some of the actors looked at one another in shock. Not everyone, apparently, had known about Olaf’s plan. “That can’t be!” Justice Strauss cried.

“The marriage laws in this community are quite simple,” Count Olaf said. “The bride must say ‘I do’ in the presence of a judge like yourself, and sign an explanatory document. And all of you”—here Count Olaf gestured out to the audience—“are witnesses.”

“But Violet is only a child!” one of the actors said. “She’s not old enough to marry.”

“She is if her legal guardian agrees,” Count Olaf said, “and in addition to being her husband, I am her legal guardian.”

“But that piece of paper is not an official document!” Justice Strauss said. “That’s just a stage prop!”

Count Olaf took the paper from Violet’s hand and gave it to Justice Strauss. “I think if you look at it closely you will see it is an official document from City Hall.”

Justice Strauss took the document in her hand and read it quickly. Then, closing her eyes, she sighed deeply and furrowed her brow, thinking hard. Klaus watched her and wondered if this were the expression Justice Strauss had on her face whenever she was serving on the High Court. “You’re right,” she said finally, to Count Olaf, “this marriage, unfortunately, is completely legal. Violet said ‘I do,’ and signed her name here on this paper. Count Olaf, you are Violet’s husband, and therefore in complete control of her estate.”

“That can’t be!” said a voice from the audience, and Klaus recognized it as the voice of Mr. Poe. He ran up the stairs to the stage and took the document from Justice Strauss. “This is dreadful nonsense.”

“I’m afraid this dreadful nonsense is the law,” Justice Strauss said. Her eyes were filling up with tears. “I can’t believe how easily I was tricked,” she said. “I would never do anything to harm you children. Never.”

“You were easily tricked,” Count Olaf said, grinning, and the judge began to cry. “It was child’s play, winning this fortune. Now, if all of you will excuse me, my bride and I need to go home for our wedding night.”

“First let Sunny go!” Klaus burst out. “You promised to let her go!”

“Where is Sunny?” Mr. Poe asked.

“She’s all tied up at the moment,” Count Olaf said, “if you will pardon a little joke.” His eyes shone as he pressed buttons on the walkie-talkie, and waited while the hook-handed man answered. “Hello? Yes, of course it’s me, you idiot. Everything has gone according to plan. Please remove Sunny from her cage and bring her directly to the theatre. Klaus and Sunny have some chores to do before they go to bed.” Count Olaf gave Klaus a sharp look. “Are you satisfied now?” he asked.

“Yes,” Klaus said quietly. He wasn’t satisfied at all, of course, but at least his baby sister was no longer dangling from a tower.

“Don’t think you’re so safe,” the bald man whispered to Klaus. “Count Olaf will take care of you and your sisters later. He doesn’t want to do it in front of all these people.” He did not have to explain to Klaus what he meant by the phrase “take care of.”

“Well, I’m not satisfied at all,” Mr. Poe said. “This is absolutely horrendous. This is completely monstrous. This is financially dreadful.”

“I’m afraid, however,” Count Olaf said, “that it is legally binding. Tomorrow, Mr. Poe, I shall come down to the bank and withdraw the complete Baudelaire fortune.”

Mr. Poe opened his mouth as if to say something, but began to cough instead. For several seconds he coughed into a handkerchief while everyone waited for him to speak. “I won’t allow it,” Mr. Poe finally gasped, wiping his mouth. “I absolutely will not allow it.”

“I’m afraid you have to,” Count Olaf replied.

“I’m-I’m afraid Olaf is right,” Justice Strauss said, through her tears. “This marriage is legally binding.”

“Begging your pardon,” Violet said suddenly, “but I think you may be wrong.”

Everyone turned to look at the eldest Baudelaire orphan.

“What did you say, Countess?” Olaf said.

“I’m not your countess,” Violet said testily, a word which here means “in an extremely annoyed tone.”

“At least, I don’t think I am.”

“And why is that?” Count Olaf said.

“I did not sign the document in my own hand, as the law states,” Violet said.

“What do you mean? We all saw you!” Count Olaf’s eyebrow was beginning to rise in anger.

“I’m afraid your husband is right, dear,” Justice Strauss said sadly. “There’s no use denying it. There are too many witnesses.”

“Like most people,” Violet said, “I am right-handed. But I signed the document with my left hand.”

“What?” Count Olaf cried. He snatched the paper from Justice Strauss and looked down at it. His eyes were shining very bright. “You are a liar!” he hissed at Violet.

“No she’s not,” Klaus said excitedly. “I remember, because I watched her left hand trembling as she signed her name.”

“It is impossible to prove,” Count Olaf said. “If you like,” Violet said, “I shall be happy to sign my name again, on a separate sheet of paper, with my right hand and then with my left. Then we can see which signature the one on the document most resembles.”

“A small detail, like which hand you used to sign,” Count Olaf said, “doesn’t matter in the least”.

“If you don’t mind, sir,” Mr. Poe said, “I’d like Justice Strauss to make that decision.”

Everyone looked at Justice Strauss, who was wiping away the last of her tears. “Let me see,” she said quietly, and closed her eyes again. She sighed deeply, and the Baudelaire orphans, and all who liked them, held their breath as Justice Strauss furrowed her brow, thinking hard on the situation. Finally, she smiled. “If Violet is indeed right-handed,” she said carefully, “and she signed the document with her left hand, then it follows that the signature does not fulfil the requirements of the nuptial laws. The law clearly states the document must be signed in the bride’s own hand. Therefore, we can conclude that this marriage is invalid. Violet, you are not a countess, and Count Olaf, you are not in control of the Baudelaire fortune.”

“Hooray!” cried a voice from the audience, and several people applauded. Unless you are a lawyer, it will probably strike you as odd that Count Olaf’s plan was defeated by Violet signing with her left hand instead of her right. But the law is an odd thing. For instance, one country in Europe has a law that requires all its bakers to sell bread at the exact same price. A certain island has a law that forbids anyone from removing its fruit. And a town not too far from where you live has a law that bars me from coming within five miles of its borders. Had Violet signed the marriage contract with her right hand, the law would have made her a miserable countess, but because she signed it with her left, she remained, to her relief, a miserable orphan.

What was good news to Violet and her siblings, of course, was bad news to Count Olaf. Nevertheless, he gave everyone a grim smile. “In that case,” he said to Violet, pushing a button on the walkie-talkie, “you will either marry me again, and correctly this time, or I will-”

“Neepo!” Sunny’s unmistakable voice rang out over Count Olaf’s as she tottered onstage toward her siblings. The hook-handed man followed behind her, his walkie-talkie buzzing and crackling. Count Olaf was too late.

“Sunny! You’re safe!” Klaus cried, and embraced her. Violet rushed over and the two older Baudelaires fussed over the youngest one.

“Somebody bring her something to eat,” Violet said. “She must be very hungry after hanging in a tower window all that time.”

“Cake!” Sunny shrieked.

“Argh!” Count Olaf roared. He began to pace back and forth like an animal in a cage, pausing only to point a finger at Violet. “You may not be my wife,” he said, “but you are still my daughter, and-”

“Do you honestly think,” Mr. Poe said in an exasperated voice, “that I will allow you to continue to care for these three children, after the treachery I have seen here tonight?”

“The orphans are mine,” Count Olaf insisted, “and with me they shall stay. There is nothing illegal about trying to marry someone.”

“But there is something illegal about dangling an infant out of a tower window,” Justice Strauss said indignantly. “You, Count Olaf, will go to jail, and the three children will live with me.”

“Arrest him!” a voice said from the audience, and other people took up the cry.

“Send him to jail!”

“He’s an evil man!”

“And give us our money back! It was a lousy play!”

Mr. Poe took Count Olaf’s arm and, after a brief eruption of coughs, announced in a harsh voice, “I hereby arrest you in the name of the law.”

“Oh, Justice Strauss!” Violet said. “Did you really mean what you said? Can we really live with you?”

“Of course I mean it,” Justice Strauss said. “I am very fond of you children, and I feel responsible for your welfare.”

“Can we use your library every day?” Klaus asked.

“Can we work in the garden?” Violet asked.

“Cake!” Sunny shrieked again, and everyone laughed.

At this point in the story, I feel obliged to interrupt and give you one last warning. As I said at the very beginning, the book you are holding in your hands does not have a happy ending. It may appear now that Count Olaf will go to jail and that the three Baudelaire youngsters will live happily ever after with Justice Strauss, but it is not so. If you like, you may shut the book this instant and not read the unhappy ending that is to follow. You may spend the rest of your life believing that the Baudelaires triumphed over Count Olaf and lived the rest of their lives in the house and library of Justice Strauss, but that is not how the story goes. For as

everyone was laughing at Sunny's cry for cake, the important-looking man with all the warts on his face was sneaking toward the controls for the lighting of the theatre.

Quick as a wink, the man flicked the main switch so that all the lights went off and everyone was standing in darkness. Instantly, pandemonium ensued as everyone ran this way and that, shouting at one another. Actors tripped over members of the audience. Members of the audience tripped over theatrical props. Mr. Poe grabbed his wife, thinking it was Count Olaf. Klaus grabbed Sunny and held her up as high as he could, so she wouldn't get hurt. But Violet knew at once what had happened, and made her way carefully to where she remembered the lights had been. When the play was being performed, Violet had watched the light controls carefully, taking mental notes in case these devices came in handy for an invention. She was certain if she could find the switch she could turn it back on. Her arms stretched in front of her as if she were blind, Violet made her way across the stage, stepping carefully around pieces of furniture and startled actors. In the darkness, Violet looked like a ghost, her white wedding gown moving slowly across the stage. Then, just as she had reached the switch, Violet felt a hand on her shoulder. A figure leaned in to whisper into her ear.

"I'll get my hands on your fortune if it's the last thing I do," the voice hissed. "And when I have it, I'll kill you and your siblings with my own two hands."

Violet gave a little cry of terror, but flicked the switch on. The entire theatre was flooded with light. Everyone blinked and looked around. Mr. Poe let go of his wife. Klaus put Sunny down. But nobody was touching Violet's shoulder. Count Olaf was gone.

"Where did he go?" Mr. Poe shouted. "Where did they all go?"

The Baudelaire youngsters looked around and saw that not only had Count Olaf vanished, but his accomplices-the wart-faced man, the hook-handed man, the bald man with the long nose, the enormous person who looked like neither a man nor a woman, and the two white-faced women-had vanished along with him.

"They must have run outside," Klaus said, "while it was still dark."

Mr. Poe led the way outside, and Justice Strauss and the children followed. Way, way down the block, they could see a long black car driving away into the night. Maybe it contained Count Olaf and his associates. Maybe it didn't. But in any case, it turned a corner and disappeared into the dark city as the children watched without a word.

"Blast it," Mr. Poe said. "They're gone. But don't worry, children, we'll catch them. I'm going to go call the police immediately."

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny looked at one another and knew that it wasn't as simple as Mr. Poe said. Count Olaf would take care to stay out of sight as he planned his next move. He was far too clever to be captured by the likes of Mr. Poe.

"Well, let's go home, children," Justice Strauss said. "We can worry about this in the morning, when I've fixed you a good breakfast."

Mr. Poe coughed. "Wait a minute," he said, looking down at the floor. "I'm sorry to tell you this, children, but I cannot allow you to be raised by someone who is not a relative."

“What?” Violet cried. “After all Justice Strauss has done for us?”

“We never would have figured out Count Olaf’s plan without her and her library,” Klaus said. “Without Justice Strauss, we would have lost our lives.”

“That may be so,” Mr. Poe said, “and I thank Justice Strauss for her generosity, but your parents’ will is very specific. You must be adopted by a relative. Tonight you will stay with me in my home, and tomorrow I shall go to the bank and figure out what to do with you. I’m sorry, but that is the way it is.”

The children looked at Justice Strauss, who sighed heavily and hugged each of the Baudelaire youngsters in turn. “Mr. Poe is right,” she said sadly. “He must respect your parents’ wishes. Don’t you want to do what your parents wanted, children?”

Violet, Klaus, and Sunny pictured their loving parents, and wished more than ever that the fire had not occurred. Never, never had they felt so alone. They wanted very badly to live with this kind and generous woman, but they knew that it simply could not be done. “I guess you’re right, Justice Strauss,” Violet said finally. “We will miss you very much.”

“I will miss you, too,” she said, and her eyes filled with tears once more. Then they each gave Justice Strauss one last embrace, and followed Mr. and Mrs. Poe to their car. The Baudelaire orphans piled into the backseat, and peered out the back window at Justice Strauss, who was crying and waving to them. Ahead of them were the darkened streets, where Count Olaf had escaped to plan more treachery. Behind them was the kind judge, who had taken such an interest in the three children. To Violet, Klaus, and Sunny, it seemed that Mr. Poe and the law had made the incorrect decision to take them away from the possibility of a happy life with Justice Strauss and toward an unknown fate with some unknown relative. They didn’t understand it, but like so many unfortunate events in life, just because you don’t understand it doesn’t mean it isn’t so. The Baudelaires bunched up together against the cold night air, and kept waving out the back window. The car drove farther and farther away, until Justice Strauss was merely a speck in the darkness, and it seemed to the children that they were moving in an aberrant-the word “aberrant” here means “very, very wrong, and causing much grief”-direction.