

UNDER THE VEIL

BY

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*To the women who continue to respect, encourage, support, and love others even when
society has devalued you.*

*To the men who continue to respect, encourage, support, and love others even when
society has demoralized you.*

Light the way.

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CHAPTER 1

The Viper

“Oh no! Lazy Linda is working your table!” Louis teased. “Keep moving Sacs, it's going to be a long night for you!” He smirked, then dashed out the swinging door with a large tray of plated desserts in the palm of his hand.

“Let's move it people. We're on schedule and I plan on keeping it that way. Go! Go! Go!” Maria said.

I grabbed my tray and glided into the huge ballroom. The room was filled with designer dresses, expensive scotch, and underhanded conversation. This event wasn't your average affair, way beyond wedding caliber anyway. It was a birthday bash thrown for a dignitary, or diplomat, or some political figure from a country I had never heard of. Everyone on the floor and in the kitchen had to go through background checks to work the event, so I guess they were pretty important. For me, it was just another night in the incredibly expensive, grand ballroom filled with billowing tulle and fresh flowers.

Louis was right, Linda had a knack for not being around when guests needed her but the first one to pick up her paycheck, which meant it would take me longer to close up our section.

I presented my desserts to an abandoned table. The only remnants of its guests were a few shimmering designer clutches, a spilled drink, and half empty glasses.

I placed my desserts at each setting with the fancy chocolate artwork swirled at the top and the cake at the bottom, just as the chef instructed.

Once the desserts were served, Louis came over grinning again. We stood shoulder to shoulder surveying our tables and lying in wait in case one of our guests needed attention. The empty table in front of me allowed for a quick reprieve from the hustle and bustle of the evening.

“Just stop,” I said, rolling my eyes and trying to hold back the laugh in my stomach. He was always teasing me to distraction. He was a good friend and one of the main reasons I took on the banquet jobs. Louis always made it fun.

“Look,” he said, his eyes motioning to the bar across the room. “Over there. The fillies are sugaring up the stallion.”

I glanced over to see about twenty or so young, beautiful women, smiling and chatting. In the center of it all was a dark haired man in a tux. I couldn't see his face or most of his body because the fillies were at least four deep.

“He's a popular one,” I said, playing into Louis's investigative drama.

“Sure is. I hope he looks over here,” Louis said, straightening up.

“I'm not sure Clark would approve of that.”

“Oh Sacs, I won't touch but it can't hurt to look and... wonder.” He strained to look. “Shoo, you silly girls. Let me see the goods.”

Louis had always the wandering eye. I knew he meant nothing by wanting to “see the goods” because for all the big talk and cute winks, he was completely devoted to Clark.

Louis was the first person I met in New York City. He brought Ashley and I along to any and every event New York City had to offer. Parks, parties, street festivals, grand openings, tourist traps, you name it, we were there. Louis loved Manhattan. He embraced every stinky street, crowded sidewalk, demonstration, and live event like it was his own personal celebration of humanity. He was the perfect person to meet when Ashley and I moved here.

I had come to New York City first. Ashley and I had planned to arrive on the same day but her grandmother passed away two days before she was supposed to leave. I did what I could with our apartment and then started my first job at the hotel's restaurant. I was thrilled to have landed a job in a place as elegant as The Belleza. Nestled next to the Waldorf Astoria, it had only opened a few years before we arrived. The décor was an elegant revival of historic New York City with a flair of old world Barcelona charm. I had only worked two shifts at the restaurant when one of the banquet managers asked me to work a banquet that Friday night. That was the night I met Louis.

It was love at first sight. He could tease me and I could take it then give it back. I spent the next two weeks with him and Clark tooling around New York City. By day, Louis worked at a senior citizen day care center and by night, when duty called, he worked in the hotel's banquet hall. Clark, the stoic, calm part of the duo, was a financial analyst down on Wall Street. They were two of the nicest people I had ever met.

After a night on the town and a few too many drinks, we stumbled our way back to Louis and Clark's apartment. It was there, flipping through TV channels, that we saw a show on The History Channel about the historical Lewis and Clark.

It was game on. The historical and adventure laden innuendos flew. Our alcohol induced hysterics gave way to snorts, contracted stomachs, and gasps for air, until Louis jumped up in a frenzy and ran from the room. Clark and I just looked at each other perplexed.

Louis reentered the room with the elegance of a prince. Then dropped to one knee, bowed his head, and presented me with a small box.

“Lauren Elizabeth Wells,” he began.

My eyebrow arched.

“Will you do us the honor of being our,” dramatic pause, clearing of throat, “our Sacagawea?” he said.

Dramatic pause on my part.

“I'm honored,” I said throwing my hand across my heart. “Will you have me Clark?”

He nodded in approval.

“Then, yes. Yes, I'll be your Sacagawea,” I said.

“Oh, Sacs!” Louis roared. “You've made me so happy!”

Louis was so proud of himself. It was like a scientific, historical, and spiritual revelation all rolled into one. From then on, I was Sacs.

“Sacs, look!” Louis said again. “He's bucking his way out of the herd.”

I watched laughing at Louis's dedication to the scene. Every event had a menagerie of animals, a stallion or two, fillies on the prowl or fillies being pursued, a few old goats, and even some jackasses.

The stallion walked away from the group toward a table where he shook hands and nodded to an older couple. It seemed he may have used them as his escape from the very crowded bar. Lucky for the stallion, the fillies remained at the bar drinking, giggling, and watching him.

“I wonder who he is? I haven't seen anyone get that much attention since Prince Harry was here,” Louis said.

I quickly brought my attention back to the table when one of the guests arrived to eat her dessert. I filled her coffee cup on cue from the beautiful silver carafe placed on the table next to me then went back into position next to Louis.

Louis suddenly smacked my arm then stiffened up. The stallion walked by just as I looked up.

Our eyes met for a split second. I quickly dropped my eyes to the floor letting his beautiful blues go. Strangely enough, in that split second when our eyes found each other, my heart dropped into my stomach and my lungs filled with air. I could feel my heart race.

Then I laughed at myself. Silly me for finding the very wealthy and very handsome guest completely and utterly attractive. There was nothing I could do about it anyway. Even if the handsome stranger did find my black, food coated skirt, white, yet now stained serving top, and hair bun attractive, our banquet managers forbid flirting with guests. I needed the money, not the date.

He passed close enough to me that the scent of his cologne caused my heart to skip. I shook my head then thought of Louis who, I knew at this point, must be beside himself. I glanced over to see him red faced and about to burst. Once the stallion was far enough away, Louis turned to me.

“Sacs, I can't take it! Oh my, Him!” he said panting.

“Louis, go get some water before you hyperventilate and Maria sees you,” I said.

I understood his feelings, I just had better control. Louis pranced into the kitchen fanning his hand in front of his face. He had me laughing out loud by the time he got to the swinging door.

As a matter of reflex and not by intent, I glanced over in the direction the stallion had traveled. Again, our eyes connected. This time I was a little braver and let our eyes linger for a moment. His expression was confusing. He smiled at me. I smiled back then he dropped his head and quickly looked away. I assumed he was forbidden to flirt with the help.

“Miss,” the woman at the table called to me.

“Yes, ma'am,” I said as her diamond necklace, earrings, and ring threw brilliant bursts of light across the table.

“Could I have a spot of tea for my husband? He is on his way back to our table and does not drink coffee,” she said.

“Yes, ma'am,” I said again.

I turned to the exquisitely carved wooden box placed next to the coffee carafe and presented her with a selection of high end teas. As she searched, my eyes popped up looking in the direction of the blue-eyed stallion. He was no longer where I had last seen him. I scanned the huge ballroom as the woman took her time picking up and reading each tea bag. The stallion was gone.

It was all a blur – the cold hands grabbing me in the dark, the voices fading in and out, the sound of car engines, car doors shutting, then silence.

The night was cool, but comfortable, nature's signal that summer was definitely over and fall was in full swing. It was the perfect setting to get out of our apartment, grab some dinner and enjoy the cool New York City night before fall ushered in the freezing temperatures and stinging winds of winter. Dinner was at a sidewalk cafe under a warm heater, watching the cabs bustle by and the people lingering, rushing, or strolling past us. The sun had gone down and the city was alive with electric sunshine.

After college, Ashley and I decided that an adventure was in store for the next phase of our lives. My family was from New Jersey and Ashley's from Colorado. Since we were great college roommates, it was a no-brainer to get an apartment together. We flipped a coin – New York City was heads and Los Angeles was tails. New York City won.

Our parents often called worrying over every sensationalized news story about New York City that came across their televisions. For Ashley and I, it was just business as usual in an amazing city living, learning, and loving. Well, not so much the loving part. We were both single, and aside from a few dates here and there, neither of us had met Prince Charming yet. Although, we were pretty sure he didn't exist anyway.

Ashley and I were walking back to the apartment joking about the drunk guy at the restaurant bar who bought us drinks. His frizzy hair, silly hat, and drunken “How you doin’?” smile were funny at first but quickly became a little creepy. Luckily, we weren't special. He bought a few other ladies drinks as well. We finished our dinner and headed out to a less crowded bar where we could sit and catch up.

We were inseparable in college and even the first few years in New York City but now our work schedules left little time for us to hang out. Although we missed spending time together, there was a wonderful simplicity to our lives and we were grateful.

We were almost at our apartment when the hands grabbed us from behind. Ashley's face turned to horror. I think she saw them first, before I felt them. She must have known what was happening. She was alongside me one second, then flailing and kicking the next with two large arms holding her, one hand over her mouth, the other around her arms. I would imagine that was how I looked to her.

The smell of cheap cologne and body odor permeated from the hand covering my mouth. There was a sudden prick to my arm, a feeling of warmth, and then darkness.

Sounds came from a distance – faded and garbled then strong and clear—then they were gone. Voices, running water, and maybe an engine of some kind, all sounds drifting softly through the air and eventually leaving me, again, in silent darkness.

I fought to open my eyes but it was a losing battle. I wanted to see someone or something, anything that would tell me what was happening and who these people were. I could only hear men speaking, never a woman's voice and never Ashley's. Their words were incoherent and ghost like – never speaking to me, only around me.

I tried desperately to open my eyes and get a glimpse of my surroundings but I could only keep them open for a few seconds at most, then the weight of my eyelids closed out the blurred world in front of me. I think I was given a drink and a little bit of food but I could have been dreaming.

The warm sun soaked into the skin around my eyes and on top of my hands. Feeling the heat on my face meant I was alive. I felt no pain only sleepiness. There was an arm under my shoulders and another over my lap, cradling me. I was very confused and could not figure out where I was or what I was hearing. There were no voices only the rhythmic sound of footsteps on an unidentifiable surface. A fog of confusion and fatigue clouded my thoughts each time I tried to piece together what had happened or where I was.

My mouth opened to take a breath of air, pulling a light piece of fabric into my lips and then pushing it away with an exhale. Odd images of kidnappings from the news or movies began flashing in my head but whatever lay across my mouth and nose was too light to be a gag.

I felt as though someone had injected me with a very strong Benadryl. My body was so heavy and my brain just wanted to sleep despite my advances to wake up. The weight of sleepiness pulled on me like an anchor slowly dragging me under water.

When I finally managed to open my eyes, the sun exploded in bright, white flashes of heat and light. Fuzzy images and blotches of color swirled around me, my weighted body still limp.

After blinking and squinting for what seemed like forever, my eyes were finally able to adjust. I was in the arms of a man. His chest and shoulders were wrapped in bright colored clothes that moved in waves, in and out of focus. Slowly, I raised my eyes. The man was looking straight ahead. His focus was intense, angry. His face was covered with cloth that came down from his head covering. He looked like a person I had seen on the news, someone who lives far away from New York.

Anxiety rushed from my heart to my stomach and limbs. I could feel my breath come faster and stronger, pulsing as my mind raced. The anxiety quickly changed to panic. Where was I? How did I get here? Where was Ashley?

I must have jerked or flinched because his head turned suddenly and his eyes came down to mine. I couldn't see any other part of his face except his crystal blue eyes.

I wanted to reach out and strip the cloth away from my face so I could breathe freely but my body remained immobile. His eyes locked on mine. For a moment, his eyes seemed panicked, then angry again. My brain was screaming for me to get up but my body would not respond. The sun was getting hotter on my skin and my breathing felt desperate. I tried to sit up or move myself away from him but my efforts were futile. The whole process was exhausting. My mind quieted as my head fell back and the world around me started to spin. My ears buzzed and darkness engulfed me.

I have no idea if I slept for hours or days. To me, it was mere moments from having seen Ashley last to being here, wherever here was. The air around me was cooler now. My legs and arms no longer felt as heavy and the wooziness that had been with me was slowly leaving my body. I opened my eyes and looked around trying to bring the fuzzy images into focus.

My tail bone hurt. Whatever I was sitting on offered little comfort and bruised my tail bone and lower back. Male voices bellowed and shouted around me, pounding through my head like a hammer, though the one who carried me here was still silent. I could feel his arm under my shoulders as he squeezed me closer to his body. I watched him, nodding his head and motioning to people with his free hand. He was giving orders without saying a word.

Again, hands were grabbing me. This time, they were warm. I knew I was being handed down from something. As my eyes focused, I saw that it was a horse we had been traveling on and my battered back the result of the saddle. My feet touched the ground and I stood wearily next to two men who were holding me up. I could not understand the words being spoken. They sounded French but I wasn't sure. One man seemed annoyed and starting yelling at me while I tried to balance on my wobbly legs. The blue-eyed traveler said something softly to the man and he immediately silenced.

Beneath my feet was sand – warm, soft sand. My bare feet struggled to find balance. The light clothing draped on my body floated and waved in the breeze. It was a stark contrast to the blue jeans and sweatshirt I had worn to the restaurant.

Two women came over and escorted me into a large tent. They took me inside and gently lay me down on a large bed at the opposite end of the entrance. I could hear them speaking to each other and bustling around. I thought for a moment I was going to be sick but instead, I shut my eyes and fell asleep.