



FORBIDDEN FRENCH

a standalone romance

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.S. GREY



Forbidden French

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Author's Note

Forbidden French is a full-length standalone novel. At the end, I've included an excerpt from **To Have and to Hate**.

Forbidden French concludes at around 90% on your device.

Happy Reading!

XO, RS Grey

FORBIDDEN FRENCH

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Part One

Chapter One

Lainey

I shouldn't be here, deep in the woods that surround St. John's Boarding School. This land is owned by the school, but only the southern half of it is open to the public. Students and locals can enjoy the neat walking trails and historical markers. Wooden benches and worn logs make for easy rest stops. The northern half of the forest is closed, though. It's meant to be a sanctuary for birds and other wildlife. Left alone, nature reigns.

I passed a *No Trespassing* sign a mile back. Thickets and brambles and overgrown vines block my way as I try to find the path the others have taken. I'm not confident I'm going in the right direction. In fact, I'm more than a little worried I'm wandering aimlessly into the woods never to be seen or heard from again.

A thick spiderweb grabs ahold of me and a shiver of disgust rolls down my spine. I leap and flail my arms like a fool, glad no one can see me trying to fling off the sticky wisps. I heave a deep breath, trying to compose myself. I'm letting the woods get to me. The darkness is hard to get used to. I'm using my phone's flashlight but have it pressed to my chest, trying to dampen the beam and stay in the shadows.

Another few steps and I see it now, the blades of grass and shrubs worn down from foot traffic over the years. Either the school's administrators don't care or they can do nothing to stop the select few St. John's students who wander wherever they please.

Here, the woods are quiet, but not silent. Peals of laughter and conversation lure me deeper, past where my good sense tells me to stop and turn back.

I see their campfire before I hear it. The burning logs whistle and hiss, crackle and split, sending sparks up into the night. A dozen people sit in ceremony around the fire, some on chairs or fallen logs, a few splayed out on blankets on the ground.

I'm careful as I continue to approach them. I don't have an exact goal. I think I just wanted to see it for myself: the infamous group in action. Why do they come out here? Why's it worth the trouble?

I don't want to be caught. It's safer if I hover on the periphery, watch for a fleeting moment, and then dash back to the safety of the paved road that leads to the heart of campus.

I slow my pace, edge closer, half concealing myself behind a beech tree.

I'm shaking like a leaf. Worse than the idea of being caught as a loser, arriving at a party I've not been invited to, is the sensation of being a witness to a crime. They shouldn't be here, and I'm privy to that now. What would they do if they caught me lurking like a voyeur?

My imagination is getting the better of me. All the stories I read are winding together in my head, mischievous pirates and spell-casting magicians. It's like I really expect them to

capture me, withdraw a sharp blade, and start performing some sort of blood ritual. Sacrifice the virgin. This group would love to conjure up the wicked—a role they know so well themselves.

My interest stems mainly from the secrecy. Like everything on this campus, any organization worth participating in is exclusive and elitist. Sure, there are the sanctioned school clubs and sports, but placement in this group is predestined.

The upperclassmen at St. John's are something else entirely. A band of brothers—no, a band of bluebloods so tightknit they'd never break ranks.

I press my hands to the bark and lean against the tree, edging closer as I scan the scene. I only stop when I spot him. He's across the circle from me, the furthest from where I stand. My stomach squeezes tight, and after a good long look, I continue taking attendance, convincing myself I'm here for everyone, not just him. But who am I kidding?

My fingernails dig into the bark as my gaze drifts back to him, prepared for one more self-indulgent glance.

Except when I look again, he's spotted me.

Fight or flight.

Now.

Neither.

I'm completely frozen, pulse pounding in my neck, in my stomach, in my hands as they shake against the tree.

He's the only one who's seen me, and I wait for him to call attention to my presence, to inform the rest of the group that there's an outsider among them.

My muscles tense as I hold still, barely breathing as he watches me lazily. A few more seconds pass, and I'm forced to breathe deeply, knowing it'll have to sustain me if I should need to turn and run.

I'm braced for him to lean forward and wave his hand, halt the conversation, and end this little game we're playing.

But he doesn't say a word.

Emmett Mercier, the crown prince of St. John's Boarding School.

His short, disheveled, soft curls almost look sweet compared to the rest of him. He has a straight, aristocratic nose and dark, furrowed eyebrows. Clustered black lashes frame blacker eyes. Leaned back like he is, it's his sharp jawline that taunts me as he closes his lips around a cigarette. No, a joint, I think, though I can't be certain—I've never seen one in real life. He inhales, and my breath arrests until he slowly releases a practiced exhale. He doesn't take his eyes off me through the rising haze of smoke. They rove over my dress and down my bare legs to the strappy sandals I picked from the back of my closet before the dance. Without him uttering a single word, I feel lacking. With one glance, he's managed to pull at my stray threads and unwind me.

It bothers me how handsome he is. There's an unfairness to looking like a fully formed adult while the rest of us still toddle around with our gangly limbs and soft cheeks, me especially. I'm so much younger than him, a child in his eyes.

He reclines in black dress pants and a crisp white shirt—his clothes from the dance. He's undone the top few buttons and rolled up his sleeves. His black suspenders slide over his broad shoulders. I wonder who his date was. Any of these girls would be a perfect fit. Francesca, Marielle, Collette—they're

not just pretty faces. Good looks aren't enough at St. John's. Take Francesca, for example: not only is she stunning and at the top of her class, she's also a budding documentary filmmaker. She took off four weeks last semester to capture footage of the humanitarian disaster in Haiti that followed after a devastating earthquake.

Of course, there's the possibility that he didn't go to the dance with any of them.

That idea is so much more appealing, and my heart runs wild with hope.

Then someone in the circle speaks up. The voice is booming and cheesy, a fake Shakespearean drawl.

"Behold little Lainey Davenport. Bow, peasants."

My stomach plummets.

So I was wrong. He wasn't the only one who noticed me lurking here.

They all did.

It was all a game. It always is with them.

"Well don't just stand there like a freak," Marielle says, waving me forward before taking the joint out of Emmett's hand. "Stop staring at us and say something."

I take a half-step out from behind the tree, but I don't move any closer. I know better.

They all sit there, staring and judging me, in their heads and out loud.

"You know, everyone calls you a ghost, but I don't see it. You're everything a little princess should be," Francesca notes, looking down her nose at me.

“Full of sweet innocence,” Marielle agrees mockingly.

“Have you ever stepped out of line, Lainey?”

My pulse jumps in my neck.

I searched for photos of my mom’s car accident online, hunting for the truth about what really happened. Once, I considered taking some of my dad’s leftover anxiety medicine when I found it sitting on his bedside table a week after his funeral. It was only a passing thought, not something I truly contemplated. I never would have done it.

So no, I haven’t really ever stepped out of line.

But I’m here now. Doesn’t that count?

I stand at the edge of a circle of seniors. The girls all seem to know exactly how to use clothes and products to enhance and draw attention to every beautiful feature they’ve been blessed with. The boys sit amongst them, terrifyingly confident, handsome, rich. They remind me of a pack of wolves, licking their chops at the sight of fresh meat dangling right in front of them.

I tried to wear makeup once. I came downstairs after applying a whole face of products the counter girl at Saks had sold me, and my grandmother sputtered and choked on her tea when she looked up and saw me standing in the doorway of the kitchen, obviously looking like a clown.

I did an immediate about-face and dashed back upstairs before she could scold me.

A twig crunches behind me and I jump.

“Easy there, Lainey.” Alexander laughs as he approaches, coming from deep in the woods with a case of beer clutched

under his arm. He purposely gets too close, his chest bumping my shoulder as he asks, “What’s got you so spooked?”

The group snickers, and I work up the courage to peer back over at Emmett. He’s not smiling; he’s thinking. His eyes are slightly narrowed, his full mouth gently downturned. He’s a part of the group—their fearless leader—but he’s his own entity too. He should be seated on a dais raised in the air to accentuate the sense of separation between him and the others, his loyal sycophants. He could get up right now and tell them all to fuck off, and tomorrow they’d gather near again, eager as ever for a morsel of his attention.

My spine stiffens when I realize how close I am to becoming one of them. Linger here, on the edge of their group, it’s clear what I want. A moment of his time would feed me for weeks. I’d have so much to think about back in my quiet room between bouts of studying.

Two of the girls bend their heads together and snicker, and I feel red-hot embarrassment creep up my neck.

Without another thought, I turn and run back in the direction I came from, forcing myself to slow down only after a passing branch tears into my cheek.

Chapter Two

Lainey

St. John's is a campus overflowing with ivy and stone and carefully trimmed boxwoods, and its traditions date back a hundred years. The girls play field hockey, the boys row and fence. There's a stable of horses for those who choose to play polo, and every year during homecoming week, there's a lacrosse game between current students and alumni. The buildings are ancient, creaky, and dark. There's a draft in winter time and an enduring heat in the summer. The architecture is of another era, not exactly intuitive. I've been lost here before, more than once. I took a turn down the music hall and ended up in the kitchens. A cook shooed me away with a ladle.

In the center of campus is the main lawn, where the boys' and girls' dorms face each other, separated by a few yards of grass. I'm up on the fourth floor, in a room on the corner with a roommate who despises the very air I breathe. She'd rather I keep quiet, or better yet, not exist at all.

She's called her friends into our room this afternoon. They're talking as if I'm not here, even though I'm perched on my bed, working ahead on some pre-algebra homework.

"I can't believe how big my boobs are now," Blythe says, admiring her body in the full-length mirror mounted to her

closet door. She's only wearing a bra and underwear.

"I'm insanely jealous." Nellie sighs. "But there's hope for me still. My mom says she didn't get boobs until she turned fourteen."

"God, that's forever. Here, I have a good push-up bra that should help until then."

I have no need for push-up bras. My body is changing in spite of my internal protests.

Like a weed sprouting through cracks in concrete, puberty seems hellbent on having its way with me. Fortunately, it's easy for me to hide my burgeoning body beneath my school uniform. My arms and legs are still spindly thin. With a sweater on, I look younger than thirteen even. I'm glad—I'm in no hurry to grow up.

Blythe and her friends, on the other hand, would love nothing more than to pass for twenty-five. She's tearing through her hanging clothes, searching for the sexiest thing she's got so she can take a selfie and make sure her ex-boyfriend sees it. She should have no trouble finding an outfit that meets that requirement.

Blythe's closet is overflowing, though none of it can be worn out and about on campus. We're allowed to wear whatever we want on the weekends as long as we're going off campus, but even those clothes have to fit within certain dress codes. However, if you're eating in a St. John's dining hall or studying in one of the libraries, even if it's midnight on a Saturday, you have to be in uniform.

I don't have any "weekend" clothes.

I have three pairs of Chanel ballet flats, all the same style in navy, black, and nude. I'm allowed a pair of tennis shoes

only for tennis, a pair of riding boots only for riding, and one pair of sandals. My school uniform is altered by my grandmother's personal tailor. Every morning before class, I tuck my crisp white button-down shirt into my knee-length plaid skirt. On top, I wear the school's cashmere cardigan. I own enough of everything that I can send it all out for laundering once a week and still find another hanging in wait in my closet.

I wear my thick dark brown hair down and pin straight, even in summer. Though most girls have abandoned it, I still wear the coordinating plaid headband every once in a while to appease my grandmother. She's not here on campus, but she has loyal spies everywhere. I was shocked when I was speaking to her on the phone last year and she told me she didn't think it was ladylike to keep my hair up in a messy bun every day for class.

I didn't bother asking how she knew. The Davenports are a legacy family here at St. John's, and my grandmother is on the board of regents. She has regular phone calls with various members of faculty including the headmaster and lead administrator. I wouldn't even put it past her to have someone posted here, watching me at all times. Their full-time job is to report my hairstyles and whether I had jam or butter on my toast that morning. *Today she's done a ponytail, and I'm sorry to report, but she switched it up and chose cream cheese today.* For that, they're likely paid over six figures, plus benefits. It makes me laugh to consider it. The absurdity of this life gets the better of me sometimes.

I look over to see Lavinia eyeing me curiously, but not in a nice way. It's more like how she would inspect someone who's escaped the looney bin. In her mind, I should be kept behind glass, observed from a safe distance.

Unfortunately, she's not alone. I hear the whispers about me around St. John's. I could set them straight. I'm not a witch, you idiots—or a ghost, for that matter. Just because my hair is dark and my eyes are an eerie pale green...just because I'm quiet and shy...just because I keep to myself...people fill in the blanks with the very worst. My mother would insist that I correct them. *Set them straight and scratch your way out of this torment. Fight like hell, kid.* She was fiery like that. She'd never allow anyone to walk all over her. It's a constant war, remembering and imagining what she would want me to do while balancing the very real advice from my grandmother, the woman I'm wholly dependent on now.

It's important to keep your calm. Decorum above all else. Girls should be polite and modest, timid and quiet. Speak only when spoken to.

In other words, smack yourself in the head with a rock and pretend you're living back in the 1800s. Women's suffrage movement? Yeah, it never happened.

I stare back at Lavinia, wishing I were bold enough to call her out.

What?

What is so interesting over here?

Blythe sighs when she notices our little standoff. "Lavinia, don't bother. You'll only encourage her."

Encourage me to what? Stand up for myself? Not likely.

I might think rebellious thoughts from time to time, might dabble in the idea of telling them all to go fuck themselves. I might sneak off into the woods to get a glimpse of Emmett Mercier, but at the end of the day, I'm still Elaine Davenport,

all-around good girl, rule follower, straight-A student. Oh yeah, and depressed.

I'm not actually sure if I have clinical depression. That would require a diagnosis, and I won't be getting one of those anytime soon because I won't be visiting a counselor anytime soon. Sure, I lost both my parents earlier this year in tragic ways and sure, it's been a bleak landscape inside my head lately, but my grandmother thinks I need to keep a stiff upper lip. Whatever that means.

Only the strange thing is, I'm not all that sad. I'm just... exhausted. Exhausted by the idea of dealing with girls like Blythe. Exhausted by the thought of trying to meet my grandmother's expectations. Exhausted by the routine of St. John's in general. I'm thinner than I should be because I'd rather stay away from the dining hall during meals to avoid the stares. I bought a rice cooker the last time I went into town and I use it to make food every now and then, especially when I'm desperate. To further avoid everyone, I study in a corner of the library that's rarely used. So what if there's poor lighting and a few spider families that fight me for the territory? I make do.

But the real secret, the embarrassing truth about what has kept me afloat this year is that I use Emmett Mercier the way some people use alcohol and drugs. I've built him up in my head. The way you can count on a favorite meal, a favorite book...Emmett is my reverie.

Chapter Three

Emmett

I'm the first to admit I don't play fair on the soccer field, but apparently neither does the guy trying to defend me. This whole game, he's been an asshole, faking injuries, shouting for the referee to call fouls, jabbing me when he thinks no one can see him.

Now, he nearly trips me up as I'm headed downfield, and I curse but break away. When he catches me again, he shoves me, playing dirty. It makes no sense. There are only a few seconds left on the clock and they're up two goals. Still, I'm not one to back down from a challenge. Some of these guys need soccer to keep their athletic scholarships. I don't. I enjoy the sport. I enjoy running until sweat is dripping into my eyes. I love the ache of a hard-earned victory. So when he shoves me, I go low and slam my elbow into his stomach hard enough to send him keeling over in pain, but not for long. He's up and swinging before I step back, landing a solid punch to my jaw before the ref gets ahold of him. My teammates don't have to pull me back. I know when to quit. I smile like a prick as they drag him away from me, tacking on a departing remark because I just can't help myself.

“Sac à foutre.”

French is my native language, so the insult rolls off my tongue in such a pleasing way. Nobody but Alexander understands it. He laughs beside me.

“I could have said worse.” I shrug, already heading toward the sidelines where my coach is waiting for me, fuming.

“Sure, like *tu es un sac à foutre*.”

I laugh despite the ache in my jaw.

“You’re a real idiot, you know that? We could have pulled out a win there at the end.”

I shoot him a sidelong glare. “*We?* You played three minutes the whole game.”

He looks insulted. “I’m a freshman.”

“I started as a freshman.”

His eyes narrow. “You’re a real *sac à foutre*.”

I smile just as our coach growls, “Emmett, get your ass over here!”

It’s hard to look contrite when you have the world laid at your feet. This game doesn’t matter. We’re not going to make it to the playoffs. Earlier in the season, we lost two of our best guys to injuries, and another starter got kicked out of St. John’s because of drugs. Pity. He sold good weed.

My coach does a rousing rendition of Guy Trying to Rein in a Troubled Youth. He tells me I need to show some respect and I can’t go through life ignoring the rules, but he’s wrong and we both know it.

I stand there, silent, until he gets it all out, and then he waves his hand in defeat and tells me to pack up my stuff with the rest of my team.

Alexander's waiting for me like a dutiful puppy. When I start heading back across campus, he falls in beside me.

"Parents Weekend starts Saturday. Excited to see daddy dearest?"

I ignore him, but he persists.

"Maybe Maman will come."

That's laughable. She's never come to a Parents Weekend at St. John's. We barely keep in touch, though she did call me out of the blue the other day. I almost let it go to voicemail.

"Oh Emmett! I miss my boys. Are you doing well? Learning and behaving as I taught you to?"

"I'm sorry. Who is this?"

She acted like she was in on the joke.

"Emmett, don't be silly. Now, have you heard from your papa lately?"

It's truly pathetic. After all this time, she's still infatuated with my father.

Frédéric Mercier is a complicated man. Most people wouldn't want to sit across from him in a boardroom, let alone a dinner table. He scared me when I was young, and any comfort to be found came from Maman. In our cold house, I equated happiness with her until I turned five and my father left.

Their divorce broke her.

She loved my father too much. When he left, our lives became a vacuum. I have memories of her being loving and attentive before they split up, but after, she checked out. Short trips turned into summers away from our home in Paris,

winters with no phone calls. She was always off looking for her happiness, and apparently it didn't include Alexander or me.

I used to give her the benefit of the doubt—it's no easy thing to heal a broken heart—but that's gone now. I see her for what she really is: selfish. Always searching, finding, leaving. When Alexander and I were still young and living in Paris, my father tried to be there some, but work kept him busy. You can't be the head of a global luxury conglomerate and make it home for dinner every night, not to mention he remarried after he divorced my mother. Found himself a nice little family, a princess for a daughter.

Mostly, Alexander and I were left in the care of nannies, some nicer than others. They knew we wouldn't be checked on, and that freedom bred carelessness and neglect. I was glad when we were finally sent to America to attend St. John's. Here, we're all on an even playing field, a motley crew of sad, neglected, rich kids. Poor us.

I almost lament the fact that my time here is coming to an end. The real world is biting at my heels, ready to sink its teeth into me.

It's the reason Papa is coming to St. John's for Parents Weekend. He has plans for me now that I'm eighteen and graduating soon.

On Saturday, I set my alarm for 9:00 AM and go for one of my long swims. Then I come back to shower and shave. I'm careful with my appearance, picking out a black suit. Other kids will be dressed more casually for the picnic on the lawn, but Papa will expect me to dress well. After all, I'm a reflection of him.

My roommate Harrison groans and flips over onto his front so he can mash his pillow over his head to block out the noise.

His parents aren't coming today. I asked, and the last time he heard from them, they were on a yacht in Cannes with bad cell service.

“Could you get the fuck out already so I can sleep?”

Ignoring him, I focus on fixing the cuffs of my shirt. I pride myself on dressing well, something Americans could learn from the French, to be honest. Even if my father didn't own half the luxury menswear market, I'd still care about the fit of my clothes, style, and appearance. American men equate that with homosexuality, like a man is more of a man if his pants are baggy, if he hasn't washed his face in three days.

I'm early to the picnic luncheon, scanning the thin crowd out on the main lawn, but I don't spot my father yet. Musicians with string instruments are already playing. Waiters in matching uniforms pass around canapés as well as sparkling juice for the students, champagne for the parents.

Near the main building, I spot my father intensely discussing something with the headmaster, likely advising him on how he could better run his school. At his side is his assistant, Wilson, with his iPad at the ready. Older and severe, he's been employed by my father since GHV's infancy, and I liken him to a loyal valet. If my father were on fire, Wilson would throw himself onto the flames. He's with him every waking moment. I have no idea what his salary is, but whatever my father is paying him, he should double it.

I stroll over toward them in an effort to rip off the Band-Aid. The sooner we begin this charade, the sooner it will end.

My father spots me when I'm a few feet away and dismisses the headmaster with a bored flick of his hand. As I approach, he takes me in, looking for any shortcomings. I think he's disappointed he can't find any—after all, I take after him so well. I could be a carbon copy, as tall and formidable as he is. We share the same black hair, the same dark eyes. He's clean shaven so I can see the permanent dimples in his cheeks and chin, the same as mine.

He glances behind me, his eyes narrowing.

“Where is your brother?” he asks with a thick French accent.

Mine is mostly gone thanks to so many years spent at St. John's.

I slip my hands into my front pockets and shrug. “Busy, I suppose.”

He doesn't like this. His lips flatten into a disapproving frown.

“You'll tell him to call me,” he says, switching to French. He feels more comfortable with his command of his native language compared to English, though his English is just fine. Better than mine, really, but he has an ego to contend with, so we speak French whenever the audience allows. “I've traveled a long way to be here today. It's a disappointment not to see him.”

Well if we're bringing up family...

“And how is Emelia? Give her a hug for me.”

“Watch your tongue,” he says swiftly, his gaze flitting back to me with a harsh glare.

He doesn't like me bringing up my half-sister, which means I enjoy it all the more.

I suspect my father was cheating on Maman before their divorce, and Emelia is likely a product of that infidelity. She means nothing to me, the daughter of his second wife, a woman he's no longer even married to. I never see her, never think of her really.

"You should enroll her here at St. John's. Alexander could keep a close eye on her."

His features harden as he assesses me with cold, calculating eyes.

"It's such a shame you still act this way. You'll be graduating soon. I think it's time you grow up, no?"

I look away as my jaw clenches, my molars grinding in annoyance.

There's a silent standoff. He knows he's won when he tells me, "It's time to discuss your future. You graduate in two months."

"Ten weeks," Wilson confirms like some automated machine.

"There's a place for you at École Polytechnique." His alma mater. "You'll begin courses over the summer. A counselor has assured me you'll be placed in advanced classes and on track to graduate early. At night and on weekends, you'll intern for GHV, working your way up from the mailroom. When your coursework allows, you'll also travel with me and attend board meetings. Wilson will facilitate that."

He looks back at his assistant, and Wilson nods in confirmation.

“And when I graduate?” I ask, mostly because I’m curious to know how far they’ve planned out my life.

He replies without missing a beat. “You’ll take your place at GHV. By then we’ll need someone manning the North American division.”

Some sick part of me relishes the idea that he wants me to follow in his footsteps, to fulfill my destiny as the heir to his empire. Despite the rebel in me, I want his validation and his praise. That lonely boy in Paris would have loved to make his papa proud.

I know better now. I wish I could rise above it all, disregard his feelings, and pave a path of my own like Alexander is trying to do. My brother can be meek and a follower, too susceptible to drugs and partying, but at least he had the courage to skip this luncheon. At least he isn’t the spitting image of our father.

Wilson steps forward and adjusts his glasses. “Sir, the meeting with Moncler is in half an hour. The signal here is spotty. I suggest we head back to the airport, though I’ll defer the decision to you.”

My father nods without argument, already prepared to leave.

There will be no picnic blanket and sandwiches for us, no brief catch-up and posed photos for Facebook. What was the point of him being here at all? Was it simply so he could take stock of his investment? Check to see if his prized racehorses are being properly cared for?

He gives me one last once-over, pausing when he reaches my face.

“I don’t want to see anything like that ever again. You’re a representation of the Mercier family, and you’ll behave accordingly.”

He’s referring to the shiner on my cheek from where I took that punch at the soccer game.

Then he turns, motioning for Wilson to hand him his phone, and poof, he’s gone. Back from whence he came.

Tonight, I wish I had an actual friend. I used to have one here. Jonathan was his name, but he graduated a few years ago. His family is in the wine and spirits industry. Actually, my father tried to buy their company a few years ago, but they held out. Jonathan’s a good guy. We played soccer together, talked about more than the usual locker room bullshit. He also left me with a bottle of whiskey as a parting gift before he left St. John’s.

I’ve had more than my fair share of the bottle tonight. My head is spinning, but I take another sip because I want to keep a firm grasp on this oblivion. I like it here where the world is paused, the chaos muted. I’m in the library because it’s quiet and no one will look for me here. The guys will knock on my door, wanting something. I want to stay in the back stacks, where the books are so old and the smell of mildew is so strong and sweet that I feel like I’ve fallen into a dream.

Then I hear it.

Someone.

“What the fuck do you want?” I growl.

There's a sharp intake of breath and then scurrying feet. I turn to see a blur of pink tulle. It's the Davenport girl. The basket case.

I saw her earlier. She was dressed in that same pale pink tulle dress, her dark hair softly curled. She looked like a doll fresh out of the package. At the Parents Weekend picnic, she sat dutifully on a blanket beside an older woman while three sharply dressed attendants flitted around at their beck and call.

Everyone at St. John's whispers about Lainey. She's fragile. Small. Thin. The kind of quiet that scares the shit out of people. Is she lonely or is she haunted? I've heard the jeers about her, the sick shit people say even though she's just a kid.

I feel bad now that she was the one I yelled at.

Of everyone at St. John's, she deserves my wrath the least.

Chapter Four

Lainey

I want this day to end. Having to endure my grandmother being here on campus was like having to entertain the Queen of England all afternoon. She came early and stayed late, peppered me with a thousand questions. Who are my friends, and which classes do I prefer, and don't drink tea in great gulps, and for god's sake, stop slouching.

When her Rolls-Royce pulled off down the Cyprus-lined drive, I wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed with a good book and a mug of hot chocolate, but when I returned to my dorm, I found a sign pasted to the door.

GO AWAY.

Blythe does this every now and then, essentially kicking me out of my own dorm. Usually it's only for a few hours, though once it was for an entire weekend. I slept underneath a table in the library and had a backache for a whole week after.

When I saw her note earlier, I stood outside my door for a minute, letting the inconvenience of it all sink in. I needed inside my dorm. At the very least, I wanted to change out of my ridiculous dress. My grandmother sent it to me last week with clear instructions to wear it for the luncheon today. I felt like a five-year-old on her birthday, so pink and frilly. Worse, the fabric was itchy as hell.

I sighed and let my forehead hit the door.

“READ THE SIGN!” Blythe yelled.

I pinched my eyes closed and tried to keep myself from screaming back at her. There’s no use. I’ve gone down that route. I’ve told a teacher, told an administrator, told the headmaster. It always winds up making my life worse in the end. Why can’t adults understand that? I don’t want them to bring Blythe into their office for a stern talking to—I want them to kick her out of St. John’s altogether.

It wouldn’t matter though. A new, worse version of her would crop up in her place. Oh god, the horror of that almost makes me shiver out of my skin. If I were Catholic, I’d do the sign of the cross at the thought.

As I walked away from my dorm, I did so while wishing she’d contract some incurable, horribly disfiguring STD. Is that too much to ask of karma?

With nowhere left to go, I headed to the library because I didn’t feel like getting my head chewed off if I interrupted Blythe and her partner again. Silly me, I ended up getting my head chewed off anyway.

I didn’t even notice Emmett was in there when I first arrived. I was going back to the spot where I like to study, where the books are so dusty and forgotten that I’m more likely to run into the Ghost of Authors Past than another living person.

I was still recovering from the shock of seeing him there, one aisle over, sitting on the floor with his back to the stacks and a whiskey bottle dangling between his bent knees, when he shouted at me.

“What the fuck do you want?”

I leapt a mile in the air.

I should have kept running until I was out of the library, but I only made it three aisles down before I panicked and took solace within the stacks.

Even now, my heart is still lodged halfway up my throat. Tremors run through my hands and fingers.

I've been dropped into a horror movie.

"I know you're in here," he says, his voice eerily devoid of emotion.

I stay perfectly still, waiting for him to make the first move.

Time slows to a crawl. I'm kicking myself for not finding a better hiding place.

For a few long seconds, my heartbeat thunders so loud it's all I hear. My chin trembles. Then, I focus in on him: the heavy clink of his whiskey bottle as he sets it down on the parquet floor, the rustling of clothes as he stands, the ominous tap tap tap of his soles as he slowly starts to hunt me.

"Montre-toi...montre-toi...où que tu sois."

I don't understand his French, but I recognize the sing-songy cadence of his taunt.

Come out, come out wherever you are.

Though I wish I could stay frozen, I have no choice but to gather courage, turn around, and peer between the books so I can see what he's doing. I watch as he comes to the end of his aisle and looks both ways before turning right, away from me.

I clench my jaw, sick of the trembling.

“There’s no reason to be scared,” he tells me, his words smooth as butter.

So then why do I feel on the brink of tears?

“Do you think I’m some kind of monster?”

He keeps walking away, in no hurry at all. He gets to the end of an aisle, leans over to peer down it, and then, upon finding nothing, continues on. His search is lazy; he knows there aren’t many places I could have gone.

I’m a sitting duck if I stay where I am. He’ll turn back, come this way, and find me.

Ignoring my racing heart, I start to take a step when he takes a step, using the sound of his walking to disguise my own. My goal is to make it to the rear exit of the library, the one that leads to a dark, safe corridor.

I’m almost past the first hurdle, slinking to the end of my aisle when he suddenly pauses and turns back, no longer walking away from me.

I freeze.

“You know maybe *I’m* the one who should be scared, alone in a library with Lainey Davenport. If the rumors are to be believed, I might not make it out of here alive.”

Embarrassment washes over me, but not for long. Anger follows, so much pent up from the shitty day I’ve had. First my grandmother, then Blythe, now him.

“You know you don’t help yourself when you do things like this, lurking in the shadows, acting as if you’re mute.”

“I’m not,” I snap impulsively.

His head whips in my direction, his gaze meets mine through the bookshelves, and his mouth curls into a fiendish smile.

“Ah...there you are. *Petit de la souris.*”

I watch him warily as he approaches, wondering what his plan is, worried he'll suddenly realize our respective roles: lion and lamb.

My hands ball into fists as he walks to the aisle just before mine and turns in, stopping once he's right in front of me. I feel my heart pound down in my stomach as the books that separate us get tugged away one by one, tossed carelessly to the ground, until his suit-clad chest is fully visible through the gap.

Then, slowly...he bends down so we're eye to eye.

For a brief moment, we merely look at each other across the top of the empty shelf.

I've never seen him this close before. He's cast in shadow, but he might as well be cast in bronze, a beautiful boy with sharp cheeks and hard angles and mean eyes. His is the body the devil would take if he wanted to walk the earth.

I wonder what he would say if he knew I keep a photo of him underneath my pillow, a page I ripped from the St. John's yearbook. He's grown up even more since that portrait was taken, taller by the day.

He tips his head, studying me.

“So you do have a voice.”

I narrow my eyes, but my annoyance only amuses him.

“Why are you here?” he asks, gentler now.

“It’s not because of you if that’s what you’re thinking.”

His dimples pop. He thinks I’m lying.

“Do you regularly sneak around in the library?”

I regularly sneak around everywhere. I’ve been having trouble sleeping lately.

Death will do that to a person.

“What are you scared of?” I ask myself sometimes.

I don’t know how to answer. It feels silly to admit that I’m scared to close my eyes, that the night my mom passed away, I was woken up from a deep sleep, my grandmother’s maid standing at my door, her hand covering her mouth.

I can still hear her racking sobs.

“Lainey, you poor thing. You poor soul. I can’t bear it.”

When I went to sleep, my mom was alive. When I woke up, she was gone.

Logically, I know sleep will not steal the living from me. I’ve slept many nights and woken up to find my grandmother still alive and well. I know I’m not cursed like that. Only, at night, when it’s dark and quiet and I’m alone with my thoughts, I can sometimes convince myself otherwise.

The first time I left my dorm for a midnight stroll, it was on a night when insomnia had a firm grip on me. I was tossing and turning and knew I was annoying Blythe. Her groans of agitation told me I had better lie still and soon. Instead, I got up, slid on a pair of flip-flops, and left my dorm. The faculty here are lenient when it comes to curfews. This is a posh boarding school with enough privileged students (AKA Daddy and Mommy are wrapped around their little fingers) that the faculty has learned they have to pick and choose their battles.

Nothing illegal, but beyond that, use your judgment, and quite frankly, even the illegal things get overlooked most of the time. The amount of drug use at St. John's could rival Studio 54 in its heyday. Still, most of the time, the faculty is more than happy to ignore the stench of weed or a little bit of white powder if those tuition checks keep rolling in and those hefty endowments keep clearing.

Walking out of the building, I had no goal in mind. I just knew I wanted to be outside, so I used the moonlight to guide me. First, I went to the rose garden, gently feeling my way around the bushes, smelling my favorite varieties, the ones I come back to time and time again. Then, I proceeded to the woods surrounding the manicured lawn, and finally down to the pine-rimmed lake where the rowing team practices.

That's where I found Emmett.

He was sitting on the dock that leads out into the dark water, feet dangling down, lit by the full moon.

His presence startled me the same way it did tonight in the library. He wasn't supposed to be there; it felt like he was invading my dreams. A person should be able to wander alone at midnight without fear of stumbling upon someone, but there he was, awake like me.

While I was still absorbing the shock of seeing him, he stood, dove off the end of the dock, and started to swim. I waited for him to pause and catch his breath, to bob aimlessly or simply float on his back, cast in moonlight. Instead, he kept going. His strokes were precise and practiced, one after another after another. The rhythm was perfect. He was obviously a competent swimmer, but the lake was big, and I had no idea what he was planning.

Worried, I took deep breaths as if trying to gift him my air as he shrank down to nothing, disappearing in the distance. I could barely see the other side of the lake; surely he wasn't planning to cross it. It seemed like a nearly impossible feat, like those psychos who swim the English Channel. Sure, it can be done, but at what cost?

I looked behind me, searching for help though I knew I would find none. It just seemed like I needed some kind of plan for what I'd do if he didn't reappear soon. He was out there all by himself, or at least he assumed he was. I could hear my grandmother's admonishing voice in my head. *How incredibly foolish of him.*

My brain conceived of all possible outcomes. If he went out there to drown, I would be the last person to see him alive, thus I'd be the first person on their suspect list. I'd be hauled off to the police station for questioning.

The stress was starting to eat away at me. I could really imagine myself getting taken away in handcuffs, not to mention the very real horrifying fate if I'd just witnessed a person dive to their death.

Just when I was sure it was time to alert someone, consequences be damned, he heaved himself back up onto the dock and splayed out, gulping in huge breaths, his wide chest rising and falling. I imagined how hard his heart was pounding in his chest, a kick drum against his ribs.

He looked spent.

I didn't realize it then. Only after weeks of watching his midnight swims have I come to understand that moment is precisely why he does it. The feeling he gets at the end of his swim, that utter exhaustion is his goal. He lies there on the wooden dock, his face toward the sky, and he seems for once

at peace, calmed by exertion. It's the same thing I strive for during my late-night walks. I like to think we're the same that way. Twin souls. The midnight wanderers.

Chapter Five

Emmett

“Do you regularly sneak around in the library?” I ask her, standing one aisle over, giving her enough space that I hope it will keep her from running again.

She doesn't answer.

In fact, she doesn't even look remotely compelled to answer my question.

I've never met anyone like her. Her ability to stare someone down without uttering a single word is so intriguing to me. Half these kids at St. John's never shut up. There's always something to brag about, some trip they just took or some celebrity they're supposedly friends with. Who cares. None of it's real. Not like this.

“Do you not like that question?” I ask her, gentling my tone as I lean in. “What about another? Who gave you those eyes?”

Her dark eyebrows furrow as if she has to really think to come up with the answer.

“They're a shade of green I've never seen before,” I add, hoping to get her to lower her guard.

She looks shyly down to the floor and then back up with conviction in her gaze.

“My dad.”

Her voice is so delicate and light.

“Do they make me look scary?” she asks, sounding so sad at the prospect.

I have a sudden urge to reach out and brush the side of her cheek with the back of my finger like my mother used to do when I was little. I wish I could reassure her that every cruelty she’s ever had to endure will only make her stronger in the end, but that’s a lie. Some people get the short end of the stick, and Lainey Davenport is one of those people.

My back is starting to ache from crouching down to her eye level, so I prop my elbow up on the shelf before I reply, “No offense. I’m not sure if you were hoping to lean into the whole mysterious persona, but you just look like a little kid. Nothing scary about you, eyes and all.”

Her delicate chin rises in defiance. “I’m not a kid.”

“You’re twelve,” I say, sounding less than convinced.

“*Thirteen.*”

“Thirteen,” I amend.

“I’m not that young,” she insists.

Oh right. *I’m not that young*, says the diminutive girl with rounded cheeks and trembling shoulders.

“I don’t know why you’re trying to shirk off youth. I’m young, you’re young—big fucking deal. We have years to make mistakes and learn from them and grow up.”

Her mouth flattens in a discontented line, but she doesn't argue.

It strikes me suddenly that I've been granted something very few kids at St. John's have experienced—an interview with Lainey Davenport. Anne Rice wishes she were in my shoes.

I barely know what to ask first. I want to know it all.

I start with, "Why did you seem sad when your grandmother was here earlier?"

She rears back in shock and shakes her head. I don't know if she's surprised I noticed her or if she's surprised she wasn't doing as good of an acting job as she thought during the picnic luncheon.

She looks away like she's considering her exit strategies, and I realize too late that I might have delved too deep too soon. Perhaps I shouldn't have said anything. I don't want her to ask me *why* I noticed her looking sad. The fact is, Lainey is hard to miss. The swell of rumors that surround her act as a buffer between her and the rest of the student body. She walks around with a black cloud hanging over her head. Even if there were no whispers, I think she'd always stand out with her contrasting features, such dark hair and such light eyes. I suppose I'm simply intrigued by the girl who's intrigued the whole school.

After taking a moment to compose herself, she looks back at me and steps closer to the shelf, closer than she's dared this whole time, and instead of replying to my question, she fires one back at me with one brow raised tauntingly.

"Why did your dad come all the way to St. John's only to stay for a few minutes?"

What a loaded question. Perhaps it's her way of telling me I'm not the only voyeur among us.

Interesting.

I like this game.

I wave my finger up and down her body. "Why did you wear that frilly dress? Do you like it or did you have no choice?"

"Why did you wear that suit?"

I nearly grin at her intelligence.

I lean in. "Why don't you stand up for yourself when people bully you?"

She leans in. "Why do you always seem angry and detached from the rest of the world, even your own friends?"

"Why is a little mouse like you hiding in the library at this time of night?"

"Why is a devil like you asking me all these questions?"

She's breathing hard and her nostrils flare. I get this great sweeping feeling like I can see her down to her soul, and yet at the same time, it feels like if I held my hand out to touch her, it would pass right through the air, merely a mirage.

I never do get my answers.

The whiskey took effect, or maybe she grew bored of my taunting—she left after her last question, spinning on her heels, her dark curls bouncing.

The next morning, I wake up with a pounding headache, the kind of pain I know won't budge even with Tylenol. I almost feel sorry for myself. It was stupid to drink that much. I

never do it, hence why I still had that almost full bottle of whiskey three years after my friend gave it to me.

I wince when I sit up and look over to see that Harrison isn't in the room. His bed is a crumpled mess. The clock reads half past eleven. I accidentally slept through breakfast in the dining hall, not that food sounds all that appetizing at the moment anyway.

I think of last night and wonder how Lainey is feeling this morning, then I brush the thought aside. She's not my concern. Whether she wants to admit it to herself or not, she's a kid. I have no business befriending her. Actually, I have no business befriending anyone right now. I have a set of goals that were hand-delivered to me yesterday by a cyborg in a suit. I have ten weeks left in this place, and then I'm gone, back to Paris where my life will consist of coursework and my internship at GHV.

Lainey will need to learn to fend for herself.

The door's flung open, and Harrison walks in balancing three plates of food.

"First of all, idiot, you slept through breakfast, but I'm a good friend so here's some cold eggs and hash browns. Pancakes and sausage too, though I took a bite out of both on the way up."

Plates clatter as he haphazardly sets them down on my desk.

"Second, where the hell were you last night? I swear to god if you're sleeping with Pippa again, you're going to regret it." He mimes the infamous *Psycho* knife scene. "She's batshit, man."

I get up out of bed and try to ignore the fact that the world feels like it's tilting on its axis. "I wasn't with Pippa."

"Good, because I think Francesca is into you, and you cannot walk away from that. Please, for me, just spend the last few weeks before you graduate making the rounds."

"Francesca isn't my type."

"Collette then?"

"No."

"Are you kidding? It physically pains me that you don't take more advantage of the French shit. You could just wander around saying whatever the hell you want and these girls would go wild for it."

I rub my temples, trying to ease the headache that seems hellbent on staying put.

Harrison starts another sentence, some other thing that's going to annoy me.

I look at him out of the corner of my eye. "Could you just shut up for five seconds?"

"Unfortunately, no. It's a real problem."

Chapter Six

Lainey

I stay away from the library for the next few weeks, but that doesn't mean I don't see Emmett. I've developed a nighttime routine, leaning into the insomnia, appreciating it now, actually. Around 11:30 PM, I slip out of bed, quiet as a mouse. *Petit de la souris*. I looked up what that means, and I find I don't mind the nickname; it's fitting. My shoes wait for me near the door, and I slip out of the dorm while Blythe sleeps on, oblivious. She never wakes up, but even if she did, I have a bathroom excuse ready to go in my head.

I sneak out the side door of the building, careful to keep it propped open slightly, and then I head straight down to the rose garden. On nights when the moon isn't reliable, I bring my phone for its flashlight. Tonight, I don't need it as I wind through the narrow path, looking and feeling and, every so often, bending down to sniff.

The garden is tended meticulously, fertilized and watered and pruned, more gorgeous now in mid-spring than ever.

Always before I leave, I find a rose, one that's already fallen to the ground. It doesn't have to be perfect. Wilted and brown-tinged, they're still lovely. I carry it down to the lake and try to spot Emmett's lone figure meticulously slicing

through the dark water. Sometimes, when the moon is full and bright, I see him right away. His heavy arms swing up and out of the water, over and over, as rhythmic as a metronome. Other nights, when the sky is black, I'm left with my imagination. I wonder how he does it on those nights, how he's still able to cut across the lake and not end up lost, veering around in circles. I've watched him confidently cross enough times now that it doesn't worry me anymore when he disappears. He always comes back.

On the bright nights, when the moon is full enough for me to clearly make him out, I walk all the way down to the dock and sit down to watch him. I relax, leaning back on the wooden boards, enjoying the view of the towering pines that rim the west side of the lake. I only stand to leave when I see his figure growing larger on his return journey.

But on the dark nights, I'm more cautious. I don't linger as long. I leave him his rose right on the edge of the dock so he can't miss it before I sneak back up into the school. It's a secret that's fun to keep, and I wonder what he thinks of the roses. I don't stay to watch him find them. I imagine he peels himself up and out of the lake, water sluicing down his face, drops sliding down his chest. I know from watching him that first night that he gulps for air when he first gets out, barely able to catch his breath. It's no easy feat to cross that lake once, let alone twice. I imagine him wiping his hands down his face, shaking off the water. Then slowly his gaze drops down to the rose. A bright yellow, a spotty pink, a faded white, a bloody red. Each night it's something different. I wonder what he does with them, if he notices them at all.

On tonight's wander through the garden, I find a bloom that's the color of peach sorbet, and its lingering smell is just as sweet. I toy with the soft petals as I walk down to the lake.

I'm slightly earlier than usual, so I'm cautious as I approach, worrying that Emmett might not have begun his swim yet. He's never caught me watching him. If he finds out it's me leaving him the roses, the mystery's gone, the fun is over. More than that, I worry what he would assume about them. They might seem like a proclamation of love, but they aren't. They're just innocent roses that would otherwise stay forgotten in the garden.

I slow my pace as the water comes into view, and I hug the edge of the forest to be sure I have a place to duck and cover if I need it.

When I look at the dock, I misstep and nearly trip.

Emmett isn't alone.

Tonight, he's brought a girl down here with him, and they aren't merely sitting and talking. They're lying on the dock, and Emmett is on top of her. The shadows make it hard to see what they're actually doing, if they're clothed or...

She arches up, her head tilting toward the night sky, and she looks like she's in ecstasy, like a statue I saw in the Louvre last summer. The moment my grandmother saw me eyeing it, she turned me away and called it crude. I peered back though, trying to figure out what she was so offended by. The sculpture was so beautiful to me. Love so blatantly on display should never be made to feel dirty.

I step forward, and a twig snaps under my shoe. I suck in a breath and freeze, but neither of them look up. Emmett is too lost in her.

His hand disappears into her bikini bottoms, and I feel something squeeze my chest, an emotion I first mistake for anger.

I'm *not* angry though. Emmett is so much older than me. Of course he has girlfriends, or at least girls he sometimes kisses. I've seen him with them around campus. It's not all the time. He doesn't seem to flaunt his relationships like the other guys in his group. Emmett is either more discerning than your average eighteen-year-old boy, or he's better at keeping his activities concealed behind closed doors.

I truly don't mind the fact that I'm being confronted by him and another girl. They're getting more into it now. I should leave. It's wrong to be here watching them, but my feet feel like lead weights.

I realize this tight feeling weighing me down is sadness at the idea that he would bring her here, to our place.

I let my rose roll off my fingers and drop onto the grass before turning back to walk to my dorm.

I have a harder time than usual sleeping. I try to go under my blankets with a reading light and a book, but Blythe gets angry, so I give up and lie there in bored silence, staring up at the ceiling.

I wonder if I'll be doing stuff like that when I'm Emmett's age. It's hard to even imagine, not just because I don't know *exactly* what they were doing, but because I can't think of one boy who would want to be down there on that dock with me.

The next morning, I wake up and get ready, brushing out my long hair until it shines then pushing it back away from my face with one of my plaid headbands. After dressing in my uniform, I pick navy flats from my closet and accessorize with the dainty gold heart necklace my grandmother gave me for my thirteenth birthday. I even brave a quick trip to the dining hall to eat breakfast before heading to chemistry.

After I eat, I'm walking in the courtyard, trying to get from one building to another with as little interference as possible. I've learned that keeping my head down seems to provoke the assholes less. If only I could disappear altogether...

I'm cutting across the center of the path, near the fountains with antiquity-inspired sculptures of water nymphs, when someone steps in front of me, blocking my way. I stop myself just before I collide with Blythe. Behind her, like a pair of cronies, Lavinia and Nellie stand with their arms crossed as if they're daring me to try to cut past them.

Immediately, I feel the color drain from my face.

Interacting with me in public isn't done by students who want any sort of social life. Blythe decreed me untouchable, and the kids in my grade are nothing if not loyal minions to their overlord, who's currently beaming with excitement.

Really, I don't think I've ever seen her look happier than she does right now.

Knowing it's time to get a move on if I want to make it out of here in one piece, I take a step to the right. Blythe follows.

I cut back to the left, but she predicted my move.

I sigh and cross my arms, trying to disguise the fact that I now have a death grip on my book bag. They've stolen things from me before, and I can't let it happen again. I have algebra homework in my bag that I need to turn in to Mr. Fisher after chemistry, and I don't think I'll have time to redo it if they decide to take it.

I brace for impact just as she begins.

"Did you really think you would get away with it?"

She looks back at Lavinia and Nellie, and the three of them all cackle like she's never said anything funnier.

"It's *sooo* pathetic," Nellie says, pinching her face into a grimace like she's embarrassed on my behalf.

Students are starting to gather now, eager for front-row seats to The Blythe Show.

She looks out at the forming crowd, and her eyes gleam with power. She lives for the spotlight, no matter the cost.

"Have you guys seen this?" she asks, holding out a small piece of paper for them to look at.

The crowd leans in for a good look, and she obliges them.

She doesn't even have to finish her next sentence before my world implodes. As soon as I hear her say "Look what she keeps under—" I know what they've found.

I know she will say "her pillow," and I know she will follow it up with "His picture!"

"Whose?" someone in the back shouts.

"Emmett's!"

No last name required. At this school, in this life, there's only one Emmett that matters.

"Oh my god, she *loves* him," a girl from my English class declares.

A boy I recognize from art says, "She cut his picture out of the yearbook like some kind of stalker."

The word *freak* hisses through the air, landing like an arrow in my heart.

"There's probably more too."

Whoever says this, I can't tell. Tears are already starting to crowd the corners of my eyes. Soon they'll drop.

"You need to be careful, Blythe. I can't believe you have to sleep right next to her."

For a moment I imagine what my mom would do in this situation, the words she'd have for these people. She'd eviscerate them. They would bow at her feet by the time she was done.

And for what it's worth, I do try. My jaw ticks. My lips part, but then the first tear falls, stalling my courage and my words.

Collette, an older girl who hangs out with Emmett and his friends, slices through the crowd and steps across the invisible boundary separating me from everybody else.

"Blythe, you can be such a little shit sometimes, you know that? Give the poor girl her picture back."

She yanks it out of Blythe's hand then looks down at it. Her mouth forms a perfect, surprised O. I wish so desperately I hadn't scrawled a heart at the very top of the picture a few weeks ago, the night before my thirteenth birthday. My red pen marks a foolproof confession.

"Is this yours?" she asks, looking up at me with brown eyes overfilled with pity.

I'm still formulating an answer, trying to decide how I could possibly answer that question with the truth, when her gaze rises over my head to someone standing behind me.

A loyal hero through and through, Collette tries to turn the photo to hide it, but the person behind me has already seen it. I know it's him without turning around. I know by the hush that's fallen over the small crowd that the worst has happened.

The object of my fantasies, the subject of my secret photo is here, witnessing the most embarrassing moment of my life.

“*You’re all pathetic,*” I wish he’d say. “*Lainey, come on.*”

In this fantasy, he’d take my arm and whisk me away from the mean girls, putting them in their place.

Real life is so painful in comparison. His silence is an acid bath on my already exposed wounds.

Shaking, I turn to peer over my shoulder to confirm. I *have* to know.

Emmett stands in front of a group of his friends with his sharp gaze on me. I’m surprised by the anger in his expression; his dark eyes have never seemed so intense. I feel his frustration aimed at me like it’s a physical force. It’s the final crushing blow in Blythe’s torture. She found herself an unexpected ally, and I’m sure she can hardly believe her luck.

Whirling around, I rip the picture out of Collette’s hand, tearing the corner in my haste to leave. I don’t care that I’m running. Like always, I’m giving them what they want.

I put as much distance between them and me as I can. I go to the pine trees by the lake, the tall ones on the far side, and slowly slink down to rest against a trunk. With my knees bent up against my chest, I look down at his image, ruined now, torn and wrinkled and soiled by Blythe’s grubby mitts. My hands shake with rage. In a fit of defiance and anger, I start to tear it up. Then I use my fingers like trowels, digging down into the soil beneath me, over and over. I plant little pieces of him, knowing nothing will grow.

Of course it won’t. I’m not planting seeds; I’m burying them.

Even before I’m done, I regret it.

I mourn the loss of that picture as soon as it's gone.

Chapter Seven

Emmett

I have a checklist of tasks I need to complete before I can walk away from St. John's. I already finished final exams, but I need to return my library books, pack up my dorm, and have an exit session with Ms. Duval, the school's guidance counselor. Every student sees her for four sessions a year. She's well into her seventies, heavysset, and has no time for anyone's shit.

"You're late," she tells me when I walk into her office.

"Apologies."

I take the designated seat on the couch across from her chair. She never sits at a desk. She wants students to feel relaxed, which is why her office is decorated like a living room with worn furniture, lamps, and knickknacks.

"It's fine. I have my lunch break after this, we'll recover the ten minutes at the end."

I don't argue with her, don't have the heart to make her job any harder than it already is. Ms. Duval always seemed to be able to level with students. Even when I was young, she treated me with more respect than I probably deserved.

"What's with the books?"

She's referring to the stack I set on the couch beside me.

“I need to go to the library after this. I’ve hoarded these in my room over the last year. I’m sure the librarian wants them back.”

She studies them, seeming impressed with the selection. “I didn’t realize you were such a voracious reader.”

I shrug. “It helps pass the time.”

She laughs. “You sound like a prisoner.”

I raise a brow as if to say, *Aren’t I?*

She smiles and slips her reading glasses off her nose, folds them in her hand. “So how have you been?”

“Great.”

“How about stress levels? It’s not uncommon for graduating seniors to experience a great deal of worry about the transition to college.”

“When did you suddenly become a shrink? I thought this exit interview was meant to be about you telling me what courses to take in college, ensuring I’m on the right track with school. My stress levels are fine. Worry?” I shrug. “Nowhere in sight.”

She seems amused. “You don’t need input in that area. You’ve managed to achieve perfect grades while at St. John’s. Becoming the valedictorian of your graduating class is no small accomplishment, and you were accepted into every Ivy you applied to”—I open my mouth, but she doesn’t let me butt in—“and though you might credit your accomplishments to your family’s name, I have no doubt you would have achieved similar results even without your father’s influence. I think you’re all set in the academic department.”

I start to stand. “Then if you’ll excuse—”

“Sit.”

I sigh and take my seat again.

She waits for me to realize this meeting is going to happen whether I want it to or not, and when I finally meet her gaze, she gives me a small, reassuring smile.

“This is our last meeting, Emmett. In college, you’ll become one of many. It’s easy to get lost. I don’t want that for you.”

“I assure you, I’ll be fine.”

“Humor me for a moment.”

It takes everything in me not to groan.

“Where do you see yourself after college?”

“Working for my father’s business.”

“And does that prospect make you happy?”

Happiness...what the hell is that?

“Sure.”

“There are sports clubs at Princeton—”

I’m quick to cut her off. “I’m attending college in Paris.”

Her brows rise in shock. “Really? I thought you’d accepted an early place at—”

“No.”

She exhales and sits back, almost looking defeated.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tack on. “I wouldn’t have had time for sports anywhere.”

“Right. Maintaining perfect grades will take a lot of your attention.”

Though I know she's intentionally goading me, my tone is final when I reply, "Exactly."

"Can I ask who it is you're trying to impress?"

It's a dumb question. She already knows the answer.

After the counseling session, I head to the library and find it completely deserted. The staff has already left for the day. The building is dim, and what little natural light there is shines in through the stained glass windows near the ceiling. No one wants to be in here now that finals are done. Most kids have already left St. John's, save for the seniors. People are out partying and enjoying their last few hours of high school.

Tomorrow, I graduate. The school will be overrun with proud families. Mine will consist of Alexander. Wilson has already arranged for my things to be shipped to Paris, and I have to get everything packed into boxes before tomorrow morning. The movers will arrive at 10 AM. My flight leaves at 2 PM. A car will be waiting to take me to the private airstrip directly after the ceremony.

Just like that, my childhood is over.

Alexander will spend the summer in New York City, hiding out from my father. He was supposed to be a summer intern at Cartier, but he's blowing it off. He doesn't even have a place to stay, but he's not worried. Alexander always seems to find a way.

My shoes echo on the parquet floor as I walk deeper into the quiet library. A wave of nostalgia hits me as I take in the familiar book stacks, the framed oil paintings, Shakespeare's bronze bust, the study cubicles with the uncomfortable chairs I avoided like the plague.

There's not a lot I'll miss about St. John's, but I will miss the campus.

My gaze roves over the back stacks, and I'm just about to continue on to take my books to the return desk when I see something out of place among the shelves.

La petite souris.

Her dark hair almost blends in with the shadows, but there's a beam of light surrounding her. Specks of confetti made from dust dance in the air above her head, making her appear angelic, like a chosen child of a god I don't believe in.

I'm walking toward her before I'm consciously aware of it. She's crouched on the floor with her knees pressed to her chest. Her arms are wrapped around her legs, her chin resting on her knees.

As always, she seems sad.

I know she must realize I'm here, but she keeps her focus straight ahead on the shelf across the aisle.

"We really can't keep meeting this way."

She blinks but otherwise remains perfectly still.

"Go away."

I don't.

I study her, willing her to look over at me. I need to see her eyes one more time before I leave St. John's.

"You really disappointed me the other day."

"Go away."

Her words aren't minced. She throws them at me like she wants them to wound.

Still, I walk into the aisle where she's sitting and slowly slide down the shelf to sit beside her, dropping my pile of books in front of us.

I wait in silence for a bit, letting her get used to me. She doesn't uncoil her arms or stretch out her legs, but eventually I get the sense that she's made peace with my intrusion.

"Why is it that you seem to have a voice with me but no one else? You should have stood up to Blythe."

There's a long bout of silence, so long I worry she might never speak again. When she does, I'm relieved.

"I wasn't doing anything with that picture. I'm not... It wasn't what they said it was. I'm not a freak."

"We're all freaks, Lainey. Get over it."

She finally looks over at me, her green eyes ablaze with fury. "You're an asshole."

"Good," I say with a proud nod. "That's exactly what I want you to say to Blythe the next time she tries to bully you."

Her eyes narrow angrily. "You know *you* could have said something."

"And how would that have helped you? I'm leaving. In fact, I already have one foot out the door. Soon you'll be here all on your own."

"I'm already on my own."

She watches me roll my eyes, and then I tip my head back to rest it on the shelf behind us, looking out across the aisle. "You think that feeling is unique. You think you're the only person at St. John's who's sad and misunderstood, but in fact it's just an excuse."

“I wasn’t aware I signed up to be lectured by someone I don’t even know.”

I smile, but she can’t see it.

“Don’t we know each other? It feels like it, a little.”

I almost tack on a joke about her keeping a picture of me under her pillow, but I bite my tongue before I go that far. She’s so young; I forget sometimes.

It didn’t bother me when I found out about it. Why would it have? As cliché as it is, a god loves to be worshipped.

I do wish I could console her without making her feel awkward about it. Whatever feelings compelled her to cut out and keep my picture, I doubt they’re real. She’ll meet someone someday who will be worthy of having their photograph cherished. It’s a shame she doesn’t realize it.

“Are you happy to be leaving this place?” she asks with a quiet voice.

It feels like a question the guidance counselor asked me a moment ago, and whereas in her office it felt like I was checking boxes, doing my duty so I could leave, sitting with Lainey, it feels like honesty is the only option.

“Yes and no.”

Her brows scrunch with confusion. “But you’re heading off to college. Aren’t you excited?”

“It’s not as simple as that.”

“Is it because you don’t want to leave your friends behind? Your girlfriend?”

I try to think of who she could be referring to. There was a night a few weeks ago when Francesca and I got carried away,

but...

“I don’t have a girlfriend, so no. And my friends will all be within arm’s reach, even if I’m halfway across the world. I’m going to school in Paris, and between you and me, I’m ready for a fresh start.”

“Well then what’s holding you back?”

Now I’m the quiet one.

She bumps her shoulder against my arm lightly. “You can tell me. I’m good at keeping secrets.”

I nearly smile at her earnestness.

Instead, I shrug. “It’s not some big thrilling thing. Just... people expect a lot from me. There’s a life plan I need to follow.”

“Or what?”

“Or...nothing. I’ll be unremarkable. A failure.”

She doesn’t reply, and when I turn to look at her, she’s furrowed her brows as if she can’t comprehend that fate for me.

Then she looks down at where her arms have a firm grasp around her legs. “Yeah...well, I envy you getting to leave. I still have so many more years here.”

“It doesn’t have to be miserable.”

“I have no friends,” she says, point-blank.

“You could try to put yourself out there more.”

“The same way you try to be less angry? Less intense? And how does that work out for you?”

What an astute little thing.

“You’re right. People are who they are. But sadness is a heavy thing to carry for so long.”

“I’m allowed to be sad—I’m grieving.”

Right. Her parents both died earlier this year. It was fuel for a lot of the rumors about her. I feel like an asshole for forgetting that.

“Do you want to talk about—”

“No.”

She’s made herself clear, but I still feel bad, so I volunteer something I’ve never shared with anyone else at St. John’s outside of Alexander.

“I had a sister about your age.”

Her eyes widen in alarm. “Is she dead?”

“No. I used to wish, sometimes...” Fuck, that’s cruel. I shake my head. “She’s not at St. John’s. In fact, I barely know her. We have different mothers, but I imagine she’s a lot like you, smart and quiet.”

“How do you know I’m smart?”

“Wild hunch. Are you not?”

“I am,” she says indignantly. “I get As in all my classes.”

“Good.”

She suddenly leans forward and pushes aside some of the books I’ve brought to return so she can read the spines more clearly. “Are you kidding? I’ve been waiting for this book for months. I was about to just buy it.”

I look down at the copy of *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck.

“You’re reading *East of Eden*?”

“I would be, only someone’s been hoarding it.”

I almost chuckle as I lean forward to grab it and pass it over to her. “There, it’s yours. If you’re interested in that one, I think you’d also like *A Farewell to Arms*.”

Her eyes light up. “I just finished it last month.”

We sit there for a while, letting our conversation shift to books, deciding which ones we think should be shelved as classics and which ones are completely overrated. We both prefer Steinbeck to Fitzgerald, and if we’re getting away from American classics, fantasy is our ultimate escape genre.

“Have you read the *Mistborn* series?” she asks, sounding hopeful.

“I tore through it in a week.”

Her entire face lights up with joy.

We could stay there the whole day talking books, but my phone buzzes in my pocket. It’s Harrison or Alexander, and if not them, someone else wanting to meet up and say goodbye. I ignore the first call, but another swiftly follows. I sigh, and she gets the picture.

“Do you leave tomorrow?” she asks, unable to meet my gaze.

I nod.

“You have so much to do, I’m sure.”

“Unfortunately.”

My room is barely packed.

With a reluctant sigh, I stand. I’m about to collect my books, but instead I point down to them. “Take them. Hoard

them like I did if you want to. You'll like them. I have impeccable taste in literature, as you now know."

She laughs then nods, already pulling the top one off the pile so she can run her finger along the spine.

With nothing to keep me there, I start to walk away, but there's a strangeness to the moment, a tightening in my chest as if I'm doing something wrong, failing somehow.

"Emmett?"

I glance back, relieved to have an excuse to look at her just one more time.

Her eyes are smiling for the first time since I've seen her, the green so vivid they seem otherworldly, more fitting of those fantasy books we both love than this dark and lonely library.

"Thank you."

The words carry so much weight, as if she's thanking me for much more than the books I just gifted her. Her brows crease in frustration and her lips part. She's working up to say something else, and I linger there, giving her time to gather the courage.

Then she sighs and shakes her head. "...for the books." Her shoulders sag. "Good luck in Paris."

Part Two

Chapter Eight

Lainey

I grip the hard metal rail as the wind whips past. I'm standing on the balcony's edge, trying to determine the distance between me and the concrete sidewalk down below. If I were standing on the second floor, I could *maybe* walk away from a jump unscathed, but on the third floor of my grandmother's townhouse, the distance doesn't bode well for my chances of survival, not to mention I'd likely land on one of the unsuspecting people strolling by, and there's a difference between being suicidal and homicidal. There's no need to take anyone down with me. Though, to clarify, I'm not trying to end my life. That's not what has me standing here on the edge, looking down. It's simply the idea of freedom that has me letting go of the railing and leaning a bit over the edge. It's just enough to throw my balance off by a hair, enough to give me a taste of what the free fall might be like.

I swallow a squeal.

My heart is already pumping wildly, like I've fully made up my mind to jump. A cold sweat coats the back of my neck.

The bustling city block is completely oblivious to me standing up here. People race home from work to their loved ones.

I could join them.

I could *be* one of them.

A soft knock on my bedroom door has me twisting around in panic.

Margaret's kind voice filters through the quiet room.

"Lainey, Tom will be here in thirty minutes to drive you to the club. Your grandmother wanted me to ask if you need any help getting ready?"

"No!" I rush out, my gaze flitting around my bedroom. I calm slightly as I realize there's nothing nefarious in here for Margaret to find. There's no crime scene to hide. She's not privy to my inner thoughts. Thank god.

"I'll—I'll be done in just a minute. I'm just doing my hair now," I lie, rushing over to my vanity.

It was foolish of me to stand out there for so long, letting my mind wander. I'm going to make us late, and if I do, I won't hear the end of it for the rest of the night.

I sit and take a deep breath, meeting my reflection in the mirror.

I wince. The wind out on the balcony wasn't kind.

My hair is as unruly as I've ever seen it. It's curly by nature, my Brazilian roots striving in vain for liberation. Once, when I was a teenager, my grandmother told me when I wear my hair natural, it makes me look "positively feral". So, for years, I straightened it into submission, topping it with that damn plaid headband. Now, I embrace the slicked-back bun trend, grateful for the time it saves me when getting ready.

Quickly, aware of the time crunch, I add Piaget diamond studs to each ear, the perfect understated size.

My makeup, too, is subtle. It's the name of the game in our world. New money screams; old money whispers. When I'm done, I assess my work. I look fresh-faced and demure, but not really. My eyes will always remain upturned at the outside corners—siren eyes they're called. My cheekbones will always cut. My lips are full no matter how much I wish otherwise, which is why I never wear lipstick shades that draw attention to them. Today, I use a balm called *Enchanting Kiss* by Charlotte Tilbury, a color that perfectly complements my skin tone.

The Herve Leger dress Margaret laid out for me earlier has a one-shoulder sleeveless neckline and an asymmetrical hem that falls just below one of my knees. My grandmother's tailor has ensured it fits me like a glove. I like the dress; it's beautiful. It was handpicked for me by my personal sales associate at Neimans, and Margaret has taken the time to lay out a coordinating pair of Tom Ford heels to go along with it. There's a Cartier watch and an Hermès clutch as well.

Margaret and my grandmother go through my wardrobe once or twice a month, weeding out the bad apples: the clothes I've worn more than twice to a public event, a style that no longer suits me, a designer who is no longer in vogue. Then we make a trip to Neimans, or more often, our stylist just comes to us, accompanied with racks of garments. I haven't lost touch with reality. I understand that for many people, these luxuries would seem spell-binding and intoxicating, or at the very least exciting, but a gilded cage is still a cage.

No.

I snap the lid on that thought, angry with myself for letting it fester for longer than usual. With haste, I add the Cartier watch to my wrist and pick up the clutch, repeating to myself

how grateful I am for my life and everything I have until the words actually seem sincere.

There are dozens of private clubs in Boston, but only two of them truly matter, and my grandmother frequents both. The Somerset Club is the most exclusive, formed in 1826. Members are granted access only through legacy status. Legend has it that when a fire broke out in the 1940s, firemen were forced to use the service entrance to extinguish the blaze so as not to disturb the members who were dining in the front room. The Algonquin Club is new by the old guard's standards, having only opened its doors in 1886. It hosts speaker series, member receptions, private dinners. Because it has slightly less stringent membership policies, in addition to presidents, heads of state, foreign dignitaries, and preeminent locals, I've seen my fair share of celebrities there. It's where we're headed tonight. Professor Rasmussen, an eminent botanist from the University of Copenhagen, is scheduled to deliver a lecture on orchids. My grandmother and I arrive early enough to have a drink in the lounge, and the room is crowded with faces I recognize right away. Names are drilled into my head, families of importance especially.

I'm sitting beside my grandmother, sipping a dirty martini. The conversation has turned to the Brahmins, which were to Boston as the Four Hundred were to New York City, prominent old families that seem to be forever on the lips of people in this room. Why talk about the present when you can dredge up the dead?

I keep quiet and listen, amused more than anything.

“She was absolutely abhorrent.”

“Who?”

“Isabella Gardner.”

“You all do realize that had John Lowell Gardner Jr. not given her entrée into Boston society, we would all be better for it, right?”

“Where was she from originally?”

I’m shocked they don’t already know the answer. I swear we’ve had this conversation a dozen times.

“She was a New Yorker whose father was considered the last of the East India merchants.”

“Why was she so bad?” someone asks.

My grandmother’s eyes practically bug out of her head. “She was a spectacle. An eccentric. She drank beer instead of tea, and there was a rumor that she used to walk down Tremont Street with a leashed lion.”

“Worse, she openly flouted the styles of the day.” My grandmother’s friend, Diana, chimes in. “She prided herself on wearing absolutely enormous diamonds. It was obscene.”

Short of the leashed lion—which just seems cruel—I like everything I know of Isabella Gardner. Flouting societal norms, paving her own way? She was brave.

“I enjoy her museum,” I say, speaking for the first time since the topic was broached.

Every gaze swivels to me as silence falls over the group.

What a feat—I’ve managed to steal everyone’s tongues.

In lieu of agreeing with me, they choose to stay mum and merely exchange glances, determining what the general consensus will be in response to my comment before they dare

speak up, which just goes to show how annoyingly dull these people can be. It's as if no one has a brain of their own. I'm not trying to defend Banksy's contribution to contemporary art—though I would love to. I haven't said anything controversial. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum is world-famous. It houses some of the finest paintings and sculptures in North America, featuring artists that range from Titian, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, and Botticelli to Manet, Degas, Whistler, and Sargent. For God's sake, the very first Matisse to enter an American collection is there on display. To belittle its importance is juvenile and petty. It's not as if Isabella can hear them chiding her. What does it matter now if we approve of her or not?

“I prefer the Museum of Fine Arts,” Diana says, shifting the conversation.

My errant remark is already forgotten.

The night whirls on.

The following evening, Margaret picks a Tom Ford dress with a Loulou chain bag by Yves Saint Laurent, along with Chloe heels. We attend a tasting hosted by the Boston Landmarks Commission. The chef, an up-and-coming name in the Boston foodie scene, tries to lure me into a flirtatious conversation, and my grandmother puts a stop to it right away.

“Lainey, come take your seat.”

Wednesday evening, we're invited to a small concert at Diana's home. She's managed to pluck a quartet of musicians from the Boston Symphony Orchestra to play just for her and her invited guests. To enjoy the music, we crowd into her sitting room as waiters pass around hors d'oeuvres and signature cocktails. For the evening, Margaret chose a custom Valentino cocktail dress and Valentino heels that bite into my

feet every time I take a step. I'm sandwiched between my grandmother and Diana, so even if I wanted to talk to the few guests in attendance closer to my age, I can't.

Thursday night, I'm granted a reprieve. I stay up in my room reading a romance novel I have to hide from my grandmother. It's not that she can forbid me from reading it, it's that I don't want to suffer the discomfort of a disappointed glare or reproachful shake of her head if I can avoid it. When the sun has fully set, Jacobs, my grandmother's head butler, knocks on my door to deliver a tray of tea, and I tuck the book deep under my covers before I tell him to come in.

Friday is different, a day I've been looking forward to for months. Tonight's event has nothing to do with my grandmother or her friends; it's for my work.

Every week, I'm allowed eight hours of consulting work at Morgan Fine Art Gallery, usually on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. My grandmother arranged the position for me; she and Mr. Morgan are old friends. I'm not even aware of exactly what I get paid, *if* I get paid. For all I know, it's a volunteer position, but I love it either way.

It allows me to utilize my extensive knowledge of the arts, applying my undergraduate degree in art history and my graduate degree in art management and curatorial studies. Every day is different. At times, I work directly with our signed artists, helping to curate and design their exhibitions for the gallery. Other days, I assist clients in helping to select works to build out their collections. I enjoy the logistics of packaging, transporting, and displaying art. Back-end or front-end—no task is too tedious or bothersome in the gallery. If I could, I'd be there seven days a week.

For the last month, I've been working with one of our artists named Aaron Pavlicek as he's prepared for his contemporary art show that opens tonight. I really enjoy his work. He incorporates paper, fabrics, dry pigments, gold leaf, and found materials to create collages with depth and presence. He doesn't shy away from color either—something I love in an artist—and I suspect he'll be a raving success with the right collectors.

I'm practically giddy as I walk through the gallery that evening, surveying his pieces. I already have a few favorites that I hope will sell first. The doors only opened a few minutes ago, and already people are filtering in as waiters clad in black and white ensure everyone has a drink. A group of art critics and collectors crowd around Aaron near the front door. Mr. Morgan—his main dealer—stands by his side, fielding questions and ensuring Aaron doesn't overdo it. With artist interviews, less is more. It's better to let your art do the talking.

Aaron catches my gaze across the room and winks playfully. My cheeks heat, something that can't be helped with as little experience as I have dealing with men. It's sort of pathetic at my age. A man could merely look at me with intent in his eyes and I'd melt into a puddle on the floor. It doesn't help that he's handsome and roguish with messy blond hair and a scruff-covered jaw. All month, he's been making it obvious that he would like to take me out to dinner if only I'd agree to it, and all month I've made it clear that I don't like to mix work and pleasure, though that's not really the truth. The reason I've turned him down is simply that Aaron is not for me. My future has already been arranged.

A man and a woman stand in front of one of his pieces and I stroll over, careful to approach in a mindful, gentle way so I

don't come across like an overzealous salesperson.

“Beautiful, isn't it?” I ask with a smile.

The couple looks over at me and they both nod, though the woman doesn't seem wholeheartedly convinced.

“Are you familiar with Mr. Pavlicek's work?”

“I've seen a few of his pieces in *Architectural Digest*,” the woman responds, sounding a bit haughty. I get it; she doesn't want to come across as a novice.

I make sure to seem impressed as I respond, “Yes, I think one of his collages was featured in the magazine just last month.” I glance between them, asking for their names, then I smile and introduce myself. “I'm Lainey Davenport, one of the art advisors here at the gallery. I'm happy to help if you need anything.”

I'm about to step back—to give them a bit of space—when the woman holds out her hand to stop me.

“Do you think this piece will retain its value? Fifteen thousand seems like a steep price to pay for an emerging artist.”

Though it might seem shocking, I'm quite familiar with this line of questioning. There's a whole host of reasons why people decide to purchase art, least of which is that they appreciate the art. Sure, there are the enthusiasts, the ones who are in it purely for the enjoyment of possessing something they find beautiful, but those collectors are few and far between. Most often, clients who frequent galleries as exclusive as Morgan's use art the same way people use designer clothes and jewelry: as a means to show off, and if they happen to be making a sound financial investment in the process, all the better.

I find it slightly amusing that far too frequently, the clients who spend unimaginable amounts in the gallery couldn't tell me the difference between Manet and Monet; they merely want me to predict if their Magritte will accrue value and impress their friends as much as their Masson. Someone just last week asked me, while pointing to an abstract piece by Kandinsky—an artist known precisely for use of color in his compositions—if I thought the paint choices were “too garish”. I could barely keep a straight face as I assured him the colors were impeccable.

“Mr. Pavlicek is quite established in the art world,” I explain to the couple. “This is his third show at Morgan's, and his pieces are always highly sought after. In fact, Saatchi purchased two pieces from his last show.” Their eyebrows jump at the mention of the famed art collector, so I decide to go in for the kill. “He was also deemed the darling of Art Basel last year by *Faire Magazine*. I have no doubt you'll be pleased with the value of this piece over the years, and more than that—” My sentence comes to an abrupt awkward halt as my gaze catches on a man walking through the door of the gallery. I'm stunned, almost beyond repair.

The couple stares at me expectantly, obviously waiting for me to continue, and I eventually do with a forced laugh that hopefully conveys I've merely lost my train of thought and not my whole goddamn mind.

“This collage is one of my favorites in this collection,” I finish abruptly, already stepping back. “I apologize, there's something I need to take care of...if you'll excuse me.”

It's horribly unprofessional to leave them hanging like that, but I have no choice—I feel like I might pass out or throw up or something else equally as mortifying.

I swallow down my nerves and press a shaking hand to my stomach, hoping to staunch the quell of unease building inside me. I edge around the side of the room, trying to put as much distance between me and the person who just strolled in as possible.

I wish I hadn't recognized my old classmate right away. It's been well over a decade since I last saw Emmett, so he should be nothing more than a stranger by now, especially considering the stark differences between the boy I knew at St. John's and the man across the room. Even as I flee, I can't help but peer back at him. He's only grown more fearsome with age. It's as if he's taken a flame and burned off the edges of boyhood, only to step clear of the ashes wholly formed as a tall, confident man, the embodiment of arrogant grace.

He's easily the most well-dressed man in the room clad in a black suit and tie with a decadently crisp white shirt. His sartorial accomplishments are mainly in the details though: the expensive tailored cut of his suit, the vintage black leather watch adorning his wrist, the gold cufflinks likely stamped with his family's crest. I bet if I were to peer closer, there'd be two letters embroidered in cursive on the cuff of each sleeve: E.M.

It seems so unfair that he's allowed to waltz into people's lives like this.

I was able to detox from my infatuation with him once, but it was painful and exhausting. I'd rather not endure the agony of it all again, which is why I'm now lurking in a corner of the gallery like some ill-mannered recluse who's only just stepped foot into society for the first time in her life.

I haven't decided what I'll do.

I could come up with some excuse and leave, but I don't want to leave the gallery high and dry. We're already short-staffed because Collette is out of town for a bachelorette party, which I now realize is a huge blessing. She's a fellow St. John's graduate who was—or *is* part of Emmett's friend group. She would undoubtedly complicate this situation.

If Collette were here, I'd be forced into conversation with Emmett, and I haven't determined yet if that's something I want. The thought is intriguing. I'm not the same girl he used to know, but then...aren't I? He knew me to be shy and quiet and, in large part, I still am.

I mean, look at me. It's like I'm trying to become one with the wall.

If I'm not going to continue to flee (though I should), I have to leave this corner. I can pull off the eccentric loner look for a few minutes, but beyond that, I just seem weird. The waiters are already eyeing me curiously.

I pretend to straighten a piece of artwork on the wall near me.

There, that's better.

Then I turn and step back into the throng, grateful that so many people have arrived for Aaron's exhibition. As I wade through the crowd slowly, picking up a glass of champagne, I smile and nod to the guests I recognize. I get waylaid a time or two, chatting with some of Morgan's most loyal clients, ensuring I pay respect where it's due so they feel obliged to think long and hard about acquiring one of Aaron's pieces.

Before long, I find myself near Emmett, and it's not completely accidental. I've always been susceptible to his magnetism, this unyielding need to be near him, even back at

St. John's. All those nights I found myself creeping around the lake at night, I told myself I was just having trouble sleeping, but in truth, I was looking for him.

Tonight, he's not alone.

He arrived with three others, all women. They're dressed fashionably and all done up. I recognize who they are to him because of the logo embroidered on one of their bags. Pierce Waterhouse is an interior design firm known throughout the city. They are well acquainted with our gallery; we've sourced pieces for their clients dozens of times before.

It appears Emmett is in the market tonight, and these three are here to help him choose wisely. I watch in horror as one of the women pulls out a swatch of Schumacher fabric and holds it up to one of Aaron's pieces to compare the fabric with the abstract work. It takes everything in me not to groan in agony.

They continue on, stepping in front of one of the largest collages in the collection, but Emmett lingers where they left him, checking something on his phone.

Impulsively, recklessly, *stupidly*, I step closer and lean in before common sense can grasp my neck and yank me back. I face away from him and speak as if I'm giving him some private piece of intel meant only for his ears.

"Tell your designers they should put away the fabric samples. Art should never be chosen that way."

I'm already moving on, having done my civic duty for the day, but his voice stops me in my tracks.

"Excuse me?"

I turn toward him and feel my chest constrict with nerves. Up close, it's impossible not to shrink in submission, just a little. There's a French severity about him. It's in the cut of his

cheekbones, the mean set to his jaw, his dark brooding eyebrows. He's all sharp angles and warning signs. *Do not approach. Do not expect kindness.* Or more simply, *Beware.*

Shockingly, I find my voice.

"It's a mistake to try to ensure a painting matches your couch. If you want to create a space so maddeningly cohesive and mundane, why not just go to Hobby Lobby and grab a plank of plywood someone's painted over? 'Live Laugh Love' stenciled right down the center."

He looks like he's fighting back a smile.

"You sound like a snob."

I lift my chin, not the least bit upset by his assessment of me. "I *am* a snob...at least when it comes to art."

He lifts one dark brow. "At least you're self-aware."

"I'm not kidding." I point behind him to the women who at this very moment are withdrawing *more* fabric samples. "Your designers will have you walking out of here with the least interesting piece just because it happens to include a specific shade of blue that coordinates with some throw pillows."

He deftly slides his phone into the pocket of his suit pants then turns to give me his full attention. His predatorial traits are suddenly emphasized, our height difference more apparent now than ever. I imagine this is what it might feel like to sit across from him in a boardroom. I'm surprised I don't lose the contents of my bladder as he asks simply and arrogantly, "And what would you suggest instead?"

My eyes widen. "Me?"

"Yes. You, the girl who's inserted herself into something that's none of her business. I'd like to hear the rest of your

advice.”

The fact that I’m able to keep my voice steady as I reply is only because we happen to be discussing the one field I feel fully confident in. Art belongs to me the way the rest of the world belongs to him.

“Very well...” I take a moment to compose my thoughts. “Truth be told, I would suggest you leave the interior designers out of it. They do their job well, but this likely isn’t their arena. Find an art consultant, someone who can help you choose pieces based on a multitude of factors. A man like you —”

“A man like me?” he asks in mock offense.

I wave a hand over his outfit, not quite prepared to admit I know who he is. This is the strangest conversation I’ve ever had, and I can’t tell if he’s only trying to amuse himself by dangling me on his line like this or if he truly doesn’t remember me. To him, this might just be some big game, but there’s no tell. He’s not given himself away. I genuinely don’t think he recognizes me.

“A man who clearly cares about appearances,” I reply quickly, not wanting to reveal too much. “No matter why you’re here tonight, to acquire one piece or many, you’ll want to build a collection that will endure, something that includes physical art: antiques, sculptures, rare books, even. Then you’ll need a mixture of paintings and drawings chosen wisely. You’ll want diversity. There’s no sense in scooping up a slew of Picassos and Degas, not unless you’re trying to control the market. One or two will do. In addition to that, I would encourage you to look to emerging artists to fill most of your collection. Mattea Perrotta, for instance.”

“Is this her work?” he asks, motioning to the artwork on the wall.

I frown. “No.”

Does he not even realize which artist he’s come here to see?

“Aaron Pavlicek is the artist-in-residence here tonight.”

His dark eyes assess me. “I see. And Mattea Perrotta? What does she do?”

“What *doesn't* she do?” I retort, not even bothering to curb my passion for his sake. I’m not giving him advice so much as bludgeoning him with it. “Her abstract paintings are a balance between masculinity and femininity, the unconscious desire, and the female body. They’re evocative and timeless. In her most recent collection, she attempted to reinterpret mythological characters through the lens of contemporary female narratives, and she succeeded handily.”

There’s a beat of silence after I’ve finished, and I feel like a fool for rambling on like that. His gaze studies my face, slipping briefly down my body, quickly enough that had I blinked, I would have missed it.

Then he simply nods. “You’re hired.”

My jaw drops. “I—that’s not what I do.”

“Are you sure?” He seems almost amused. “You seem adept enough.”

It’s barely a compliment, but it’s enough to throw me off balance. “I’m not a personal consultant. I work for the gallery.” I motion toward the art on the walls. “My responsibility is to sell the works we have here.”

With this remark, he can no longer help himself. He unfurls a deliciously cruel smile before a rich laugh spills out of him. He whispers a French curse before speaking again.

“Please don’t take offense, but you’re doing a horrible job of it.”

My cheeks turn the oh-so-lovely shade of a ripe summer tomato. Embarrassed, I look down until I’m sure some of the red has faded.

I start to step back. “My apologies. You’re right. Aaron Pavlicek has quite a few pieces here that I think are worth your attention—”

“Then by all means, lead me to them.”

He extends his arm, motioning for me to walk so he may follow, and just as I suspected, his initials are handstitched on the cuff of his shirt sleeve. The realization sharpens our encounter, reminding me of the absurdity of this exchange. Emmett Mercier is truly here in Morgan’s.

“Your designers...” I say weakly, trying to remind him of his obligation. “I think they’re waiting for you to join them.”

They are. The three women are still a few feet away, staring at me with narrowed eyes and pinched mouths. Obviously, they’d like me to hand over their client.

Emmett pays them no mind, the weight of his full attention still resting on me.

He tucks his hands into his pockets with relaxed grace. “You’ve just explained to me that they’re a trio of bumbling idiots when it comes to art, and you were rather curt about it, I might add. Now you’re prepared to throw me back to them?”

He's laid his challenge down at my feet: remain in his company and try to survive or flee and never cease to regret it for the rest of my life.

I hate that I still feel overwhelmed by him.

To calm my nerves, I smooth a hand down the front of my fitted Chanel dress as I take in the art on the walls behind him.

Aaron's collages serve as a reminder.

This is my world.

Not his.

I nod, relenting. "Right this way."

Chapter Nine

Emmett

The girl is bold, I'll give her that.
She has my full attention.

I can't remember the last time someone dared to give me unsolicited advice. Most people know better. Employees at GHV have been fired for less.

The way she spoke to me...the spark in her eyes—it was admirable to say the least. I get the impression she could face down the devil and walk away from the encounter with little more than soot stains on her clothes, but as much entertainment as that encounter would provide, I'd hate to see it. I happen to enjoy what she's wearing. Her short black dress hugs her petite frame tightly and does a fine job of revealing her long shapely legs.

She's walking slightly in front of me, leading me around the gallery.

The experience is surreal.

I know my place in the world; I learned it in infancy. My father is the eighth richest man in the world depending on the day and the markets. I'm untouchable, beyond reproach. People cower at my feet. Grown men shiver in my company,

and it's not because I'll run to Papa if they do something wrong. I'm the one they fear. I'm worse than he is.

If this girl knew better, she'd be running instead of walking. She'd deliver an apology to me on behalf of her gallery and beg me for my business. She'd yield on bended knees with a quivering bottom lip.

As we walk, I recall her demand that I drop my designers, and I have to fight another smile. Her entire speech was unexpected to say the least. It was like hearing a lion's roar come from a kitten's mouth.

A kitten, yes. Something about her is distinctly feline and fierce.

She turns back to assure herself I'm still trailing after her, and I'm granted another peek at her striking eyes, notable not only because of their color, though the pale green is quite rare, but because they're curved up at the edges in such an alluring way.

She stops in front of a large abstract red and white collage with newspaper clippings that are hard to read from where I stand at a slight distance, trying to take the piece in. More than that, I have a hard time peeling my eyes off her to actually take in the art.

She gives me a moment to settle in front of it before she begins to speak, her tone no less confident, her chin as high as ever.

“This is one of Aaron's most compelling pieces. It's mixed media and newsprint on canvas. It's approximately seven feet by five feet, signed en verso. Though it might not be obvious at first, the collage mirrors Picasso's *Guernica* and is meant to be a powerful anti-war symbol. The large swathes of red

portray the suffering wrought by violence and chaos. If you step closer, you'll see that layered among the red paint and paper are newspaper clippings Aaron has managed to collect, all from April 26, 1937—the day Guernica was bombed by Germany during World War II. If you've seen Picasso's work, you might recall that there is newsprint on the painting as well to reflect how Picasso first learned of the massacre.”

I nod. “As a Frenchman, I know the work well. He painted it in Paris during the German occupation. I'm sure you've heard the story of when the German soldiers first encountered the painting.”

Her green eyes spark as she shakes her head.

Ah, a chance to tip the scales a bit. I can't resist.

I take a step toward her, keeping my voice low. “In 1940, the Germans occupying Paris decided to make an inventory of all bank vaults in the city, and Picasso was summoned to the Banque Nationale du Commerce et de l'Industrie where he had two vaults next to Henri Matisse's.”

She nods as recollection dawns. “Yes, of course. He saved countless works from being destroyed during the occupation. Renoirs, Cézannes...”

I nod. Good girl.

“Picasso showed the soldiers the contents of his vault, and after he deceived them and said with confidence that the paintings housed within were worth next to nothing”—her lips curl into a smile at hearing the delicious lie—“the investigators decided to visit Picasso's apartment, where they came across a photographic reproduction of *Guernica*. Legend says the soldiers inquired about the painting, asking Picasso, ‘Did you do this?’ to which he replied, ‘No, *you* did this.’”

Her eyes widen in understanding.

“Your story gave me chills,” she admits, looking down at her arms where the hair is standing on end.

I’ve had nearly the same reaction, though purely because of her.

“I’ll purchase the piece.”

Her lips part in shock.

“I...” She trails off and shakes her head, looking away. “You shouldn’t have let me go on like I did before. You clearly know what you’re doing when it comes to art.”

“I’m a novice, I assure you.”

Humility is not something I’m very familiar with. It feels foreign on my tongue.

“Consider the work sold,” I insist, more stern now than a moment ago. I don’t enjoy repeating myself. “Now show me another.”

Her gaze whips up to find mine.

“You can’t be serious,” she says, sounding nearly breathless.

“Why on earth would I be kidding?” My patience is suddenly growing thin. “Do you know who I am?”

At this, she laughs, a great wild sound that has my heart galloping in my chest.

With flushed cheeks, she advances on me until we’re nearly chest to chest. “I was about to ask you the same thing. Do you remember me? Surely you do.”

The question takes me aback. I frown, considering her, my gaze cutting swiftly down her figure as my brain works

tirelessly to place her. Surely I would remember seeing this woman before with her dark hair and prominent cheekbones, her clean, smooth skin and full lips. There is something on the periphery of my mind, some nagging feeling that I'm missing something right in front of me.

"I admit you do feel familiar."

"Feel," she repeats, tilting her head curiously. "What an intimate word."

I'm tempted to reach up and take hold of her slender neck, to tip her chin back so the light catches on her face, highlighting every detail until some memory shakes loose inside my mind. Annoyance bleeds into anger.

Who are you? I'm about to demand just as the clouds part and fate gifts me my answer.

"Lainey, I hate to interrupt," says some young girl who's wearing a white name tag pinned to her shirt and an uneasy frown. She looks like a college intern, which would explain why she thought it was appropriate to interrupt our conversation even though I'm the most important client they have in here.

She pays me no mind, her big worried eyes pinned on *Lainey*. "Could you help me for a second? This customer is quizzing me on our post-modern works, and I feel slightly in over my head. Would you—"

"Of course." The intern doesn't even need to finish the thought before Lainey seizes the opportunity to leave me now that the mystery is solved. She places a reassuring hand on the girl's arm and barely gives me a departing nod. "I'll send someone over to help you, Mr. Mercier, and I'll place a hold

on the Guernica piece, as you requested. Now, if you'll excuse me."

She slips away before I have a chance to speak. I'm left to watch her get swallowed by the crowd of people, a few of whom have been anxiously waiting to talk to me. A man nearly leaps in front of my face, cutting off my pursuit of her.

"Mr. Mercier, if you have a moment, it would be an honor to make your acquaintance," says some guy with the overeager eyes and trademark ill-fitting suit of a journalist. He pulls out his phone and starts recording, confirming my suspicions. "Do you mind being on record? I just have a few questions about your future at GHV. There are whispers that soon you'll be promo—"

I weave around him while he's still talking, needing to know for certain if the woman I just spoke to is who I suspect her to be.

Physically, it fits. Those pale green eyes stood out even when she was young. The dark hair. The demure features. But the Lainey I knew was a wallflower, a child who lurked in quiet corners and kept to herself. I can't reconcile my memories of her with the fiercely confident woman I just spoke to.

I keep sight of her in the crowd as she approaches the guest who was giving the gallery's intern a run for her money. Lainey turns to face him with a gentle smile, and even from clear across the room, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt she's Lainey Davenport, all grown up.

Chapter Ten

Lainey

I should already be in bed, but I'm out on my balcony. Again. I'm out here so often lately, sitting on a chair with my legs tucked up against my chest. It's getting too chilly, but I can't seem to make myself move no matter how many gusts of wind threaten to topple me.

In my right hand, I roll an unlit cigarette between my thumb and pointer finger, focusing hard as I do it. I don't know why I have it. I don't have a lighter on me. Short of smelling the nicotine, I can't do anything with the damn thing.

I've never smoked before. Collette smokes. She's perpetually stepping out back during her shifts at the gallery. The other day I bummed this one off her and tried to ignore the look of surprise she gave me as she passed it over. "Little miss goody two shoes likes to smoke?"

"Whatever," I said with a shrug, trying to come off as nonchalant when it was obvious what I was doing: trying to be someone I'm not.

No, I don't smoke. No, I likely won't start. But I *might*.

Tomorrow is going to be a long day. I really should get some sleep, but I can't seem to make myself move. Then, with a stroke of brilliance, I remember the matches I have stuffed in my bedside table from the boutique hotel we stayed at in Paris

last year. I thought the lettering on the box was too cute not to keep for a souvenir. I dig around in my messy bedside drawer until I come up with the tiny pink and white box.

Back out on the balcony, I strike the match three times before it lights. Then a gust of wind kills the flame and I have to do it all over again.

I finally manage though. I light the tip and take the smallest inhale possible to avoid the stereotypical choking episode that usually follows someone's first pull from a cigarette, but it happens anyway.

I'm hacking like it's the 1800s and I've got typhoid fever when a knock sounds at my door.

"Lainey?"

It's Margaret.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Without thinking, I toss the cigarette over the side of the balcony, and then, in a panic, I lean over and watch as it flutters through the air, the tip still glowing orange.

Even though it's late, there are plenty of people out and about, which means I'm not at all surprised it manages to land on a woman's shoulder. She jumps back, startled, then looks up.

I megaphone my hands.

"Sorry!" I whisper-hiss. "It was an accident!"

My bedroom door opens and I whirl around just as Margaret walks in with a tray of tea and a plate of warm chocolate chip cookies. In her early 60s, Margaret wears her white-blond hair in a French twist every single day. There are always reading glasses hanging from a lanyard around her

neck, and she's never worn pants as long as I've known her. Her uniform consists of crisp shirt-dresses that she neatly irons every morning before leaving her room. She has a taste for pomp and circumstance, and her strict adherence to social etiquettes could rival Emily Post. It's why she's been able to keep her position here at my grandmother's house for as long as she has. Two peas in a pod, the pair of them. I think if they had it their way, they'd persuade all of Boston to adopt Regency-era style of dress and social customs. Corsets, calling cards, chaperones. The idea of "Netflix and chill" is utterly lost on them.

She spots me standing out on the balcony and furrows her brows in admonishment.

"Lainey, dear, please come inside and shut the door. There's a noticeable chill in the air."

I do as she says, apologizing as I lock the balcony door behind me.

She carries the tea tray over to the sitting area in my room. It's styled neatly with a coffee table that sits between a reading chair and a loveseat. All the furniture is antique, all chosen by my grandmother. As Margaret places the tray on the table, she frowns and sniffs the air.

Oh no.

"I just blew out a candle a moment ago. Is that what you're smelling?"

Still frowning, she shakes her head. "That must be it."

"It won't linger," I assure her as I reach down to pour myself a cup of tea. It's chamomile. Margaret started making it for me when I was young and first had trouble sleeping. When I was on breaks from St. John's, she'd find me down in the

living room, reading by lamplight, trying to chase away the bleak memories. The tea doesn't always help, but I've come to appreciate the nightly ritual.

“Once you make your cup, come over to the vanity and I'll brush your hair,” she tells me, already headed in that direction.

Margaret has been a fixture in my grandmother's house since before I can remember. Officially, she's my grandmother's lady's maid, though the title doesn't come close to encompassing all of Margaret's duties. In short, she's indispensable.

When I was younger, I used to wonder what was in it for Margaret. Her arrangement with my grandmother seemed so odd to me. Margaret was so involved with our lives that she seemed to have nothing for herself, no family, no children.

Now, I realize there is more at play behind the scenes. Though neither of them would admit it, Margaret and my grandmother are each other's best friends, and more than that, they're lifelong companions. Margaret has a bedroom right beside my grandmother's. They spend their days arm in arm. They've traveled the world together. It's a relationship that works well for them both, and for that, I'm grateful.

After I sit at the vanity with my tea, Margaret unties my low bun and carefully runs the brush through the long strands. I sit patiently and drink, knowing she enjoys these quiet moments as much as I do.

“How was the art show?”

“A success. I sold quite a few paintings.”

She smiles proudly. “Morgan's is lucky to have you.”

I release a caustic chuckle. “Tell my grandmother that. I know she wishes I wouldn't waste my time there.”

Margaret doesn't reply, and I'm not surprised. I know she'll never bite the hand that feeds her. Her loyalty lies with my grandmother, though I like to think she cherishes our bond as well.

"Anyone interesting pop up at the gallery tonight?"

I freeze with my cup of tea midway to my mouth. My wide eyes meet hers in the mirror.

How does she know Emmett Mercier was there? I didn't say a thing to anyone at the gallery. He and I didn't speak again after I walked away from him. He stayed for a little while longer, and perhaps he would have wanted to continue where we left off, but I never gave him the chance. I kept myself busy, glued to Aaron's side for a good portion of the evening, trying to convince myself I was merely trying to do my job when in fact I was taking the coward's way out.

I don't know why our paths crossed tonight. It's not as if it's a common occurrence. I haven't seen Emmett since he left St. John's—actually, that's not really true. I *have* seen him online and in newspapers. Trying to shield myself from news of the Mercier Family and GHV is an impossible task. *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times* always seem to be running a story or posting a photo of them on social media.

He aged exactly as I thought he would, like a vintage wine kept in perfect conditions. I don't know why that upsets me. I don't want him to suffer, though I do hope he's had at least one real heartache along the way, some girl who really put him in his place. I imagined being that girl once, when I was incredibly young and unbearably naive. I can't believe I dreamed about him when we were at St. John's. I was still a child then, but he was so handsome no one could blame me. I

think of the picture I kept under my pillow, of the day everyone found out about it. What a fool.

Margaret runs the brush down the length of my hair again, being patient with me as I smile timidly and shrug. “Just the usual. Why do you ask?”

“I had hopes that perhaps Royce would have attended.”

I deflate with so much relief at the mention of Royce that my shoulders actually sag. I lose two inches of height. I’m glad that’s where her mind was heading. It’s no one’s business that I ran into Emmett today, and I have no plans to share it with my grandmother or Margaret. My grandmother would only use the opportunity to remind me of my future, or worse, she’d get it into her head to cut my hours at Morgan’s altogether to avoid a second encounter.

“He’ll be here tomorrow, won’t he?”

She smiles, though it seems half-hearted. “Yes, he did confirm, though it was your grandmother who arranged the meeting...”

“I don’t mind,” I assure her, trying to discern what she could be playing at.

“So then you’re okay with everything?”

I think of my cigarette down on the sidewalk, the lies I feed myself in the morning. *You’re happy. You’re okay. No life is better than the life you’re living.*

“More than okay,” I say with a big smile. “Why don’t you help me pick out something to wear for the luncheon tomorrow before I go to bed?”

Chapter Eleven

Lainey

Royce Saunders sits on the bench opposite mine, alone. I sit beside my grandmother. We're having afternoon tea in the backyard garden, and the unbearable silence is threatening to send me over the edge. He's only been here twenty minutes and it seems like we've exhausted every line of questioning.

The Red Sox are doing well this season, the rain clouds will part, winter might be a tough one this year, and no, he wouldn't like another cookie.

Royce is in his early forties and bald, though in that handsome way some men can pull off. His facial hair helps to sharpen his otherwise baby face. He dresses stylishly and is incredibly polite. There's a lot to admire about him: his easy smile, his steady demeanor, the kindness he shares equally among anyone. A stranger, a driver, a state official—he treats them all the same.

He comes from a well-established Boston family and his money is *old*, though he doesn't let that stop him from running a successful consulting firm. I'm not sure exactly who he consults. I know it's something to do with technology and politics, though how the two combine I can't be totally sure.

It's embarrassing, I know, to not know what your fiancé does for a living.

My grandmother was the one to set up the match. On my twenty-fifth birthday, in lieu of a gift, she called me in for breakfast in the dining room and explained that she had something she wished to discuss with me.

My betrothal.

At the precise moment she said those heavy words, I was in the process of feeding myself a bite of eggs Benedict. I was startled, as anyone might be, and ended up missing my mouth entirely. Canadian bacon, poached egg, and hollandaise sauce rained down onto her prized 17th-century Persian carpet, and I gasped in horror. There was a big to-do. Three maids were on their hands and knees, combing over that carpet with gloved hands, ensuring they got every last drop (not that it mattered—my grandmother sent it out to be professionally cleaned later that day), and by the time the ordeal was all over, it seemed like our conversation was of little importance. She sat me back down and sighed as if she was sick of having to deal with me for the day.

My grandmother can be like that, and it's not just because of her age. She's an introvert and gets overstimulated easily. She hates crowds and disorder, and you can imagine how fun it was to be a small girl living in her house. My toys had to be cleaned up and neatly organized before I was allowed to come down for dinner. She had this sprawling three-story dollhouse commissioned for my playroom, but I was never allowed to touch it because she said it was too much of a hassle to "put back to rights".

The betrothal already seemed set in stone.

“He’s a fine man,” she told me, staring at the carpet with her sharp brown eyes, looking for residual stains. “His parents have an impeccable reputation. I’ve dug deep and found not even a *speck* of anything untoward about them. Generations you can go back—the lineage holds.”

She expected me to be impressed by this, so I widened my eyes and made a noise of appreciation.

Beyond the mishap with my eggs, my reaction to her announcement of my betrothal was shockingly calm. I’d already known something like this was coming, and I’d had time to make peace with it.

A few weeks prior, I’d overheard my grandmother having a private conversation with Margaret. I’d just returned from a walk—one of those *If I don’t get out of this house right now, I might lose my mind* moments, which have become fairly common. I have days where the balcony doesn’t cut it. My anxiety gets the better of me, and I feel this overwhelming sense of urgency. When that happens, I have no choice but to take myself for a long walk. It helps to get out and explore the neighborhood. I like walking by people and guessing details about their life. I like the endorphins and the exertion and *usually*, by the time I make it back home, all seems right with the world again.

That night, Margaret and my grandmother must not have realized I’d come home, or maybe they assumed I had better sense than to eavesdrop on their conversation because they hadn’t bothered to close the door to my grandmother’s room and they didn’t stop talking as I edged my way closer, listening only because I heard them utter my name as I was about to move past.

I peeked in to see my grandmother sitting at her ornate oversized vanity. It's the only spot in the house that still entralls me. It's always filled to the brim with jewelry carefully displayed, lipsticks lined up in a row, perfumes on silver trays—I can still remember every time I snuck into her room as a child, desperate to try on her jewels, and each of the scoldings that followed.

My grandmother didn't look like herself, at least not the version she likes to present to the world. She sat on her backless vanity chair in a blue cotton robe and slippers. Her shoulders were slumped, her spine curved forward, her white hair frizzy and limp. Her face was washed and pale, every tender wrinkle and age spot visible in her reflection. She suddenly seemed susceptible to life's battles in a way I'd never realized, mortal in a way I was careful to never admit to myself.

“And what will become of her when I'm gone? I'm healthy now, but what about tomorrow? She must marry, and soon.”

“She seems happy here,” Margaret protested.

“She cannot remain here forever.”

“I would care for her.”

“That's not the answer, Margaret. I want her settled with an honorable man, someone to help further dilute that bad blood.”

The bad blood she was referring to comes from my mother, the great villain of my grandmother's life.

To hear her tell it, my father, James Davenport, was going places. He was a graduate of St. John's just like me. He continued his studies at Princeton and graduated with honors.

He was an investment banker and chairman of two non-profits. He was one of the most sought-after bachelors in Boston when one day he wandered into a café for lunch and laid eyes on my mother working behind the counter.

According to my grandmother, he never stood a chance.

It didn't matter that she was the child of Brazilian working-class immigrants or that her childhood was a far cry from the posh milieu my father was accustomed to. My mother had something money can't buy: enchanting beauty.

My grandmother claims my dad was trapped in my mother's web from the start, and the story that follows could bring Lana Del Rey to her knees. My mother played hard to get at first. My father begged for a chance. Once he was granted the first date, he was so eager to impress, he whisked my mother off to Milan on their second. I was conceived only a few short weeks later. A hasty marriage followed even though my grandmother begged my father to reconsider. There were red flags even then, ups and downs that didn't seem sustainable. Their relationship was never peaceful, so it wasn't all that surprising that the addition of a wailing newborn only exacerbated matters. By this point, what was left of their honeymoon phase abruptly ended. Small arguments grew into screaming matches. They butted heads at every opportunity. From what I've been told, my mother felt smothered by my father, and her need for freedom only succeeded in triggering him. He sought control. He wanted the three of us to be happy, to live a life he saw fit. After I was born, he bought a house in Boston, and when that didn't solve their problems, he bought a second house, bigger this time. Still my mother wasn't happy. More gifts, more furniture, more travel. My father would have done anything to feel deserving of this woman he loved so desperately.

Their fights continued to grow nastier, both sides spitting venom. Once, during a particularly rough patch, my mother left my father and me for two weeks and went to stay with her parents. My grandmother assumed that was it, the end, surely, but they soon reconciled and rekindled their romance right where they left off, seemingly happier than ever. A few months later, it all happened again.

Perhaps there was genuine happiness sprinkled into those beginning years. I have blips in my memory of us together at the zoo, laughing in front of the zebras, my father carrying me up on his shoulders while my mother took our picture. Another time, she let me have a sip of soda, the carbonation made me sneeze, and some of the soda came out of my nose. I remember collapsing into a fit of giggles.

Unfortunately, those fleeting memories don't sustain me. They can't eclipse the nightmare of what their relationship eventually devolved into. Cheating, lies, and public scandals—nothing seemed off limits. My mother slept with my father's best friend for a year before he found out. He didn't leave her. Next, it was his business partner. My father grew angry and resentful, but still, he didn't leave. To cope, he started drinking heavily. My grandmother grew more and more concerned, but my parents pushed her away and kept her at arm's length because it was easier than bringing her into the chaos. My mother knew Fay Davenport hated her, and she didn't want to be around my grandmother, which meant my father saw very little of his mother during this time as well.

One terrible vice seemed to lead indirectly into another. The drinking and the cheating and the fighting weren't enough. To win my mother's affections, to keep her interest, my father would spend outrageously, generating immense debt

in pursuit of pleasure. Anything to keep her happy, anything to use as a balm upon the festering wound of dysfunction.

By this point, I was already attending St. John's as an elementary school student, and when I had holidays, I was with my grandmother. We would travel anywhere we could, tour the Louvre, sunbathe in Fiji, safari in South Africa. Their neglect was really a kindness at the end of the day, she's quick to remind me. Allowing my grandmother to step in and raise me when they so clearly weren't up to the task themselves might have been the least selfish thing either of them ever did, and quite frankly, at the time, I didn't realize anything was amiss, not when I was really young. I thought it was normal to be away from my parents most of the time. Most kids at St. John's saw their family sparingly at best. Busy people leading busy lives seemed to be the norm within our elite boarding school world.

Things might have continued on like that forever. The endless cycle of madness would have endured had my mother not died in a car crash, an accident caused by one of her lovers racing through a red light.

After her death, my father hit rock bottom, fell into a drunken chasm and never found his way out. The end for him came from the barrel of a gun.

I was twelve years old when they died.

I can't stand to think about them.

In fact, I try not to, but my grandmother brings them up every now and then as a cautionary reminder. The last time she spoke of them, she took me by the chin and tilted my face so my eyes captured the light streaming in through the windows.

“Your mother was a beauty.” My grandmother sighed.
“And you have too much of her in you.”

Chapter Twelve

Emmett

What do I remember most about Lainey Davenport? Her eyes. Everyone back at St. John's was obsessed with them. They called them haunted and scary because they feared their beauty, feared her. She was cunning, or better yet, astute, like she could strike to the very soul of someone if she paid close enough attention to them. She used to be quiet, shy, young; she seems to be none of those things now. Younger than me still, yes, but a woman, so different than the last time I saw her at St. John's.

It's been a week since the gallery show, and I've pulled up the Morgan Fine Art Gallery website more than once. It's muscle memory, typing in the URL, clicking the *About* page, then *Staff*. Her professional photo is in black and white and doesn't do her justice. Her pale green eyes don't pop like I want them to.

The need to see her again started as a curiosity, and now it's festered into something hungrier, an itch that needs scratching.

Unfortunately, I've been busy; I'm always busy.

Just as my father wanted, I work for GHV. I've seen how he operates. He's a shark. Over thirty years, he's grown GHV

from nothing. Now, we control nearly 50 subsidiary companies that each manage a small number of prestigious brands. Every top French and Italian fashion house, world-famous luxury wine and spirit companies, watches and jewelry...the list is always growing.

In fact, that's why I'm in Boston. Even though nowadays I live primarily in Paris, work takes me everywhere. I'm in town for the next few weeks so I can assist with GHV's acquisition of Leclerc & Co., the American luxury retailer headquartered here. The company sells everything from jewelry to sterling silver, china, crystal, stationery, fragrances, watches, and leather goods. It's also a household name in the United States, and we've had our sights set on it for a while, though the purchase is not coming easy.

Last November, we offered Leclerc & Co. \$16.8 billion for the buyout. The deal was expected to close by July of this year. However, during an audit of the company's financials, our team found that they were paying millions in dividends to shareholders despite sustaining financial losses of over \$40 million in the last year.

The media's been hungry for an update, so last month, GHV issued a statement indicating that the takeover would not proceed and the deal was invalid because of Leclerc's handling of their business during the last year. Subsequently, Leclerc filed suit against us, asking the court to compel the purchase or to assess damages. We planned to countersue, alleging that mismanagement had invalidated the purchase agreement, but we've pumped the brakes because the goal hasn't changed. We still want to acquire Leclerc & Co., but there will have to be new terms and a reduced buyout price. So here I am, trying to get us out of this shit storm.

Beyond that, GHV is also opening a headquarters in Boston. For now, our North American offices are based in New York City, but we're unhappy there for a few reasons. The building's facilities manager is lazy and has let the building go to shit. Our employees have been anxious for a change for a while. We broached the subject of relocating the branch to Boston, and most everyone was on board. Those who would like to stay in New York City will swap to working remotely and can commute to Boston on an as-needed basis.

Boston fits our needs for a multitude of reasons. We were able to purchase a building outright here, centrally located downtown between Boston Common and Post Office Square. Our plan is to renovate it while preserving the historical architecture, which is costly and slow but will be worth it in the end. Alexander is supposed to be spearheading the renovation project, but he's more interested in other activities, as evidenced by the party I'm currently walking in on.

His apartment is a penthouse overlooking Boston. He sits pretty up on the top floor, not a worry in the world. The life of a second-born son...

You'd think I'd envy him, but it's the opposite. I like the weight I carry on my shoulders. Responsibility suits me. Alexander has too much free time, a perfect example of idle hands being the devil's playthings. I know he's using again, chasing women, avoiding my calls.

The party is worse than I expected. He's let in half the city. I get the impression he might be performing a social experiment: leave the door open and see what oddities wander in. At this very moment, someone is fucking in his bedroom. I know it. If it were me, I'd pull the fire alarm and clear this

place out. He doesn't know these people. If I asked one of them Alexander's last name, they'd fumble for a response.

I slice through groups of partiers, ignoring everyone. I don't feel like wasting my time with them, not when I have an objective. I've told myself I'm here tonight to talk to Alexander, but there's a nagging hope in the back of my mind.

Lainey could be here.

It's more than possible. There will be other St. John's alumni in attendance, friends I've half-heartedly kept up with since boarding school, some more than others. I search through crowded room after crowded room, hunting for dark hair and green eyes. I trick myself into seeing her a thousand times. A head of hair a shade too light. Another not dark enough. A woman two inches too short.

When I spot two friends from St. John's, I feel my first pang of hope because one of them is Collette. I know she works with Lainey at Morgan's; I saw her listed under the staff tab on the gallery's website beside Lainey. How convenient.

She and Harrison are in a sitting room, having carved out a quiet place among the chaos. Harrison's out on the patio smoking and Collette looks like she's already a joint in, so to save myself the excruciating task of talking to them stone-cold sober, I offer a short wave then head toward the kitchen to make myself a drink.

Unfortunately, that's where I find my brother. He's making out with a girl, acting as if he's about to take her there against the cabinets.

Thoroughly disturbed by the sight, I head to the bar in the corner.

“This has to be against fire code,” a gruff voice chides, and I don’t bother turning around to confirm it’s my old friend Jonathan.

He’s in Boston now, a partner in an architecture firm that specializes in historical preservation. He’s not the only ghost from my past to re-enter my life as of late. It seems everyone has convened in Boston for the time being. Even Emelia, the half-sister I used to despise so much in my youth, is in the city, working at Jonathan’s firm. I’ve come to see she’s not the monster I made her out to be. She’s even friends with Alexander. I spotted her here tonight at the party. I could have gone over to talk to her, but brokering peace with my past will have to wait.

More determined than ever, I start to root through Alexander’s bar cabinets. I need a cup that will hold a decent shot of bourbon.

“No, c’mon, it’s a small group,” Alexander argues.

The music in the living room hits an all-time high, contradicting him.

“Right, maybe I should rein it in a bit.”

So maybe he’s not completely past saving...

“Your neighbors have probably already called to report a noise complaint,” Jonathan warns.

I turn in time to see my brother groan and push away from the girl he’s so caught up with, hurrying into the living room to turn down the music. He meets my gaze as he passes by, and I do nothing but stare. I might as well be a parent trying to convey that I’m not mad, just disappointed.

“What are you, like a dad?” Alexander’s girl asks Jonathan, clearly annoyed.

And that does it. It's one thing too far, and I can't help but bark out a heavy laugh.

Jonathan turns, notices me, and then in three long strides, he's stealing the bottle of bourbon out of my hand so he can pour himself a shot.

I arch a sardonic brow. "You're late. I've had to endure this party for the last half hour on my own."

He's unbothered as he hands the bottle back to me. "You could leave."

He's right, I could. I hate shit like this.

"There's someone I'm waiting on."

He looks at me curiously, waiting for me to elaborate, but I don't feel like it.

"C'mon," I say, nodding toward the hall. "Collette and Harrison are here."

Once we both have a drink in hand, I lead him toward the sitting room where neither of them have budged. Collette's chair sits right on the edge between the sitting room and the balcony, and she has it tipped on its back legs so she's half outside. Her head is tilted up toward the night sky. I want to ask her about Lainey, but it feels too direct, too obvious.

Harrison's standing behind her chair, working on lighting a joint when he notices us walk into the room.

"The king has arrived!" he says, aiming a dramatic bow at me.

"I've been here half an hour, asshole. I already said hi to you."

Harrison shrugs lazily. “Well then, Jonathan, that bow was for you. Interested?”

He holds out his rolled joint, but Jonathan shakes his head.

He doesn’t even bother offering it to me. I’m not against pot; I just haven’t done it in years and want my wits about me tonight.

Collette takes the joint from Harrison and inhales a short drag before waggling her fingers in greeting at Jonathan and me. She exhales the smoke in a long steady stream then tips her head back and resumes her pondering. I’m almost curious what she’s thinking about.

I take a seat on a couch facing the unlit fireplace, suddenly wishing I had a cigar, something to take the edge off this nervous energy. Maybe I shouldn’t have turned down the joint. My foot is bouncing. My gaze keeps gravitating toward the door as if Lainey could walk by at any time.

I feel fifteen again, anxious and—strangely—hopeful.

I’m not paying attention to the conversation. Collette is rambling about the sky and how pretty it is and how she can see the stars. I don’t care about any of it and my patience has worn thin enough that I finally just ask what I’ve been dying to know.

“Where’s your friend?”

“Who?”

“Elaine.”

That’s Lainey’s real name, and I’ve never once called her by it. I do so now because it’s a subtle way of putting a little bit of distance between us, like I don’t really care about the answer to my question. I wonder if I’m fooling anyone.

She shrugs. “Who knows. She’s impossible to pin down.”

Harrison speaks up. “I haven’t seen that girl in forever. Is she in Boston now?”

“Elaine?” Jonathan asks, completely lost.

He never knew her.

“Lainey Davenport,” Collette answers, rolling her eyes. “She was at St. John’s while we were there, but she’s like six years younger than us, which means you definitely wouldn’t have known her, Jonathan.”

“How do you know her then?” he asks me.

I don’t answer. I sip my drink and stare into the dark fireplace, trying to keep this burning ache in my chest from showing on my face.

When the silence drags on too long, Collette answers for me.

“She’s cool. She was friends with my little sister. I didn’t know her well back then, but she and I have gotten closer now that we both work at Morgan’s.”

“Lainey was hard to miss,” Harrison interjects.

My fingers tighten reflexively around my bourbon glass. “I’d argue the exact opposite.”

Harrison laughs. “Are we talking about the same girl?” He mimes an hourglass figure.

That’s when it hits me that Harrison has no idea who he’s talking about. Like the idiot he is, he has her confused for someone else. Lainey never had an hourglass figure, and certainly not when she was barely thirteen.

Collette doesn't care that he's wrong—she still groans in disgust. “She was a kid, sicko.”

Completely unbothered, Harrison goes right back to puffing on his joint, and I'm left with the same questions as before.

I want to ask Collette more about Lainey, but I hold my tongue and let my bourbon sink in while my friends continue to talk. I have no interest in joining in. I have a single-track mind when I get ahold of something that interests me. It works well in my line of business, but it can be overwhelming too. I've always been like this, my brain constantly whirring. It's why I like to swim. More than any other activity, swimming has the capacity to quiet my mind. If I go long enough and hard enough in a pool or a lake, like I did back at St. John's, exhaustion never fails to drown out the noise.

It's almost funny to look back at that time in my life and realize very little has changed since then. Sure, I've grown up in a lot of ways. I've put my nose to the grindstone for over twelve years, and I have the accolades and accomplishments to show for it. The stench of nepotism no longer clings to me the way it once did when I was younger.

And yet, at my core, the same issue that vexed me then vexes me now.

There's not a man on earth more tightly bound by expectations than I am. I never was able to escape that feeling even when my passion for pleasing my father morphed into passion for growing GHV. I love the company outside of him, but still, there is no doubt I am chained to it in ways other men aren't. I've learned to live with it, to compensate for it in a multitude of unhealthy ways.

In any area of my life where I'm allowed freedom, I go overboard.

Take relationships, for instance: commitment makes my skin crawl. The idea of someone owning my time outside of the office is enough to make me want to delete every female contact from my phone. I'll be damned if anyone other than my fucking father is going to make demands of me.

I also travel a lot. I enjoy the life of a jet-setter. I keep a home in Paris, another in London, one in New York, and now here, in Boston. I only arrived in the city three weeks ago, but in that time I've worked with a broker to purchase a turn-key property downtown, walking distance from GHV's future headquarters. Unfortunately, it didn't come furnished. Or rather, it did, but the furniture didn't suit me. I had everything removed, and I'm working with a team from Pierce Waterhouse to hopefully make it livable within the next month. Oh sure, they told me lead times were well over six months for the products they were trying to source for me, but I don't live in a world where I have to wait for a single thing. Anything I want, money can buy. So, a few weeks it is. Until then, I'm in the penthouse at the Mandarin Oriental. It's not ideal, but it gets the job done. They have a decent lap pool and gym, and so far, the service has been top-notch.

So it's interesting, in some way, that Lainey has been able to capture my attention at all. The very fact that I've been taking time out of my schedule to look into her gallery, to come here tonight on the off chance she would be here is completely out of line. Sex is sex, and I've not been a good boy in the last twelve years since I left St. John's, but I also don't know what a crush feels like. The hallmarks of longing and infatuation are utterly lost on me. I used to make fun of

my father's assistant, Wilson, for acting like a cyborg, and now here I am, halfway there myself.

I'm musing over all of this and sipping my bourbon while the party continues on without me. It's not until Collette comes to sit on the couch that I realize Jonathan left to go hunt down Emelia. It seems my old friend has a crush. Harrison, meanwhile, is passed out on a chair in the corner. Collette kicks her feet up to rest them on the coffee table in front of her and starts scrolling through her phone.

Here's my moment, and I don't let it pass me up.

"So you're friends with Lainey but you don't invite her to things like this?"

She laughs, and for a split second I think I've revealed my entire deck of cards. I was too obvious—it's clear how curious I am about her.

Then Collette shakes her head, lays her phone down, and looks over at me like I'm crazy. "Absolutely not. The girl is a porcelain doll—you know, a pretty thing you look at but don't touch. She wouldn't be caught dead here. She wouldn't be anywhere outside of the gallery, and she's not even there all the time, just Tuesday and Thursday afternoons for like four hours. Besides that, she's kept under lock and key by that old granny of hers. It's fucking weird, if you ask me. In some ways she still acts like she's a kid."

"She's younger than us...maybe you don't know her friend group? Maybe she's too shy to tell you what she gets up to on the weekends."

She weighs this option before ultimately shaking her head.

"Doubt it. I've asked her stuff before, like trying to figure out what she's into, if she parties or goes out, and it's clear she

has no idea how the world works.” She sees my deep-set frown and tries to ease up a bit, holding out her hand. “I feel bad. Truly, it’s not that strange. Just...she’s nice, but I don’t know...something’s off with her.”

God, my heart breaks hearing that.

Poor Lainey.

I think of how sad that thirteen-year-old girl would be if she realized even when she grows up, people will still misunderstand her and think she’s odd.

I know better though.

And now, I know exactly when and how I’ll be able to see her again thanks to Collette.

Chapter Thirteen

Emmett

I have one hoop to jump through before I can go see Lainey at Morgan Fine Art Gallery this afternoon: a lunch meeting with Papa.

There was no getting around it. He arrived in Boston yesterday and will only be here for one night before he continues his travels down to Florida for the Formula 1 Miami Grand Prix this weekend. GHV has been a longtime sponsor of the Mercedes team. He enjoys a close friendship with Toto Wolff and never passes up the opportunity to watch the races from Mercedes' paddock. I wonder what he would say if he knew I was a die-hard Scuderia Ferrari fan.

He's waiting for me at the restaurant in a private room in the back. Wilson sits beside him, the two of them hard at work. When I enter, they don't stop on my account.

The bread basket in front of them goes untouched as Wilson relays an email to my father about the mid-month numbers from our Southeast Asia market. We're keeping careful watch on it because GHV's fashion group opened twenty new stores there earlier in the year, ten in Singapore alone.

"As we expected, the region's large population and growing purchasing power present quite a lucrative

opportunity for GHV,” Wilson declares. “Revenue in the luxury goods market amounted to \$5.1 billion in just the first half of this month.”

My father nods at me and points to the seat across from him as he asks, “What topped the list?”

“Watches and jewelry,” I answer before Wilson can.

I read the report in the car on my way over.

I reach out for a piece of bread, still warm, and drop it onto my plate before adding, “That category made up nearly forty-two percent of total revenue, followed by fashion at twenty-eight percent, cosmetics and fragrance at sixteen. Leather goods made up the rest. Is there butter?”

A waiter materializes behind me, placing a chilled dish of butter down near my plate.

“Sir, could I get you a drink?”

“He’ll have a bourbon neat,” my father says, waving the waiter away with an air of impatience.

“I’ll take a beer, actually. A stout or a porter, whichever you have is fine.”

The waiter bows. “Of course.”

My father’s hard eyes assess me from across the table. He hates that I contradicted him in public, no matter that it was only in front of Wilson and some twenty-year-old kid paying his way through college by working at Menton. Yes, my father’s only just left Paris and for lunch he’s chosen a French restaurant. God forbid he eats a cheeseburger.

His gaze roves over my attire and I’m sure he’s looking for something out of place to comment on, but he won’t find it. In some ways I feel bad for him. An aging lion sitting across

from his son, knowing his days on Pride Rock are numbered. I'm not planning to oust him from the company or have him murdered—this isn't *The Godfather*—but even without my assistance, time marches on. The gray hairs at his temples and the wrinkles starting to appear at the corners of his eyes are proof of that.

“We're doing the tasting menu,” he says, trying to assert dominance over me any way he can.

I don't have the heart to argue about food.

“Sounds good. Now why are we here?”

Wilson's typing away on his laptop. Likely he's been instructed to take meeting minutes.

For all I know, he's documenting every detail.

12:36 PM Emmett slathers an alarming amount of butter onto the right side of his bread.

12:36 PM Emmett takes a bite of the bread, ingesting every ounce of the butter he applied.

12:37 PM Emmett goes back for more.

12:38 PM Emmett gives me a dirty look.

“Before the end of the week, news outlets will catch wind of a change that's been made within our family's holding company. I wanted you to be alerted first.”

How gracious of him.

I put down my bread since it appears we'll actually be talking about something interesting.

“As you're well aware, my aim is to have you and Alexander run the company after I step down, though don't get excited—that's still a few years away.”

I respond with a short laugh. “I appreciate the reassurance that you haven’t called this lunch to share news that you’re on your deathbed, but just to clarify, I’m not chomping at the bit to take your place.”

The battle of succession within the Mercier family is a story the media likes to drum up on slow news days, but it couldn’t be further from the truth. I have plenty of issues with my father, but they don’t include the way he runs GHV. I’m fully aware that he’s a powerhouse in our industry, and most days I’m still in awe of him.

He nods, seeming obliged to believe me.

“To protect our ownership stake, the Mercier family holding company will be turned into a joint-stock partnership. The majority of the share capital will be held by you. The remaining forty-nine percent will be held by Alexander, and for now, I will remain the managing general partner.”

None of this is all that shocking to me. He’s been grooming me to take my position at the helm of GHV since I was born. We’ve talked about this joint-stock partnership on multiple occasions, though now that it’s happening, it feels as if it will come with strings.

He straightens his already straight salad fork—ensuring it’s exactly aligned with his lunch plate—before continuing, “It’s my intention that the Mercier family will control and run GHV ad infinitum.”

“Of course. You have my word that should anything happen to you, I’ll continue to run the company, following your best practices and standards.”

“That’s no longer enough. I intend on safeguarding GHV’s future beyond you.”

I nearly smirk. “Trying to play master of the universe now?”

“I’m going to try my damned hardest, yes,” he says assertively.

“Which means what exactly?”

I half expect him to say he’s planning to clone himself. That seems more realistic than his actual answer.

“I think it’s beyond time for you to produce a legitimate heir. Preferably more than one.”

I laugh incredulously. His demand is utterly absurd.

“Have I missed something amusing?” he asks with a biting tone, looking briefly to Wilson for backup.

Smartly, Wilson keeps his mouth shut.

I lean back in my chair, far too cavalier for his taste, I’m sure. “I’m sorry to say, but you hold no jurisdiction over my life beyond work.”

He concedes this with a shrug then steepled his fingers on top of the table. “You should take my wishes as a strong suggestion for now. Perhaps in the future, I won’t be so lenient.”

“Is that a threat?”

I was wrong earlier—maybe this *is The Godfather*.

“To be certain,” my father confirms boldly just as the first course of the tasting menu is swept into the room on silver trays. No matter that I’ve suddenly lost my appetite.

I'm in a foul mood when my driver pulls up in front of Morgan Fine Art Gallery, so much so that I don't get out right away. I stare through the backseat window with a deep-set frown, taking in the gallery. It's not very inviting, though that's intentional. Part of the psychology of these contemporary galleries is in their design. They're often composed of bare rooms with white walls. They're meant to scare would-be patrons away, to create an elitist threshold most people don't dare cross.

"Would you like me to circle the block?" my driver asks, likely aware of the tension emanating off me like great blooms of smoke.

"It's fine. Park close. I have no idea how long this will take."

I push the door open and step out of the car, buttoning my suit jacket as I approach the gallery. The door is locked until a security guard grants me entry with a press of a button. I nod to him in thanks as I walk deeper into the space, my shoes echoing on the concrete.

There's a low hum of classical music playing, but beyond that, utter silence. No one is manning the white reception desk.

From a side room, Lainey appears, dressed in a pair of tailored black pants and a soft silk blouse the color of cream. Her long hair is down and pin straight, tucked behind one ear as she looks at a small ledger, ferociously flipping back and forth between pages. "I'm sorry, I don't see an appointment on the books for—"

Then she looks up and sees it's me, and her sentence stalls.

"Oh."

Her cheeks flush with color. Pink and enchanting. Her worried eyes flit to the desk then back to me.

“Are you here to see Collette? She just went to lunch.”

Her gaze drifts to the front windows, as if she’s hoping her coworker will suddenly reappear.

“If I were here to see Collette, I would’ve been sure to come when she wasn’t at lunch.”

My answer makes her frown.

Clearly, I haven’t completely cooled from my discussion with my father.

“Are you here to peruse then?” She’s flustered as she closes her ledger and grips it tightly against her chest. “We don’t have anything new since the show on Friday, but I could pull from our other artists if you’d like.”

There’s a long beat of silence in which I simply look at her, absorbing the sheer existence of eyes the color of sage, and then the answer tumbles out of me.

“To be honest, Lainey, I’m not sure why I’m here.”

I sound utterly defeated, but she doesn’t let that stop the corner of her soft mouth from tipping up.

“Oh dear. If you’re lost, I’m sure you have the Google Maps app on your phone. Or I could draw you a simple map of Boston?” she teases.

I can’t help my grin from spreading.

I approach her gently, aware of her hummingbird heart and her tendency to flee. “You didn’t let me answer your question the other night. I do remember you.”

Her brows furrow. “Well to be fair, it took you a minute.”

“You’ve changed.”

I want to let my gaze trace along the lines of her body, but I don’t.

“I’m older,” she says with a confident lift of her chin.

“Still young compared to me.”

She smiles. “Yes, only now I don’t seem to mind.”

“And what else is different?”

She takes a step back and sweeps her hand around the room. “Oh, now I hide out in art galleries instead of libraries.”

“Not often though. I’ve been told you’re only here a few days a week.”

She lays a hand on her chest. “Talking about me around town? Should I feel honored?”

I step toward her, trying to reclaim the space between us. “What do you do with the rest of your time? When you aren’t here?”

“Oh, what does any woman do when she’s unmarried and childless? You can’t imagine the amount of attention someone in my position dedicates to her wardrobe—shopping, fittings, alterations, all of it.”

I don’t look impressed with her teasing. It seems she’s insistent on making this a joke.

“What else, Lainey?”

“I have tea on most days, and often I’m out and about in Boston, attending some lecture or soirée.”

“And at night? Do you see friends?”

“How perfectly annoying of you to assume I have friends.”

“You’re too interesting not to be an infatuation for someone.”

“Now there’s a compliment I’ll cherish forever. Thank you.”

“*Lainey*,” I say, sounding insistent, like I’m a headmaster and she’s an errant student.

She leans in, her eyes alight with mischief. “I don’t see why I’m in the hot seat. Let’s turn the tables. What do *you* like to do with your time now that you no longer get to torment the entire female population of St. John’s?”

“I work.”

She rolls her eyes. “And outside of that?”

“I see friends.”

“People from St. John’s? I guess that’s how you knew my work schedule...”

I don’t verify that for her. There’s no point. If she’s not going to be truthful with her answers, why should I?

She huffs and steps back, extending her arm and inviting me further into the gallery.

“Well since you’re here...why don’t we look at some art? I’ll show you my favorites and tell you which to buy. You’ll be a good boy and do as I say.”

I have the sudden urge to kiss her smart mouth, to tip the scales and remind her of all her past infatuations with me. This is the girl who kept my picture under her pillow, the fragile girl who grew up.

She waves me on. “There’s a David Hockney in this side room that we had to fight to secure from the consigner. He was

a longtime client of Larry Gagosian, but we won him over in the end. You'd be surprised how much sway these big branded galleries have."

"Hockney is fine. Do you have any works by Jean-Michel Basquiat?"

She stops walking and turns back to me. "Say it again."

"What?"

"His name. Everyone butchers the pronunciation, but it rolls right off your French tongue."

"Jean-Michel Basquiat," I say again, leaning into my buried accent.

Her eyes roll back as if she's about to come, then she mimes a chef's kiss and continues leading me through the space.

"We don't have any Basquiats. They rarely change hands these days."

"You'll let me know if you hear of any coming up for sale?"

"Of course. Now, come look."

She walks me through to the side room, which has a set of recessed double doors that require her to scan a small key fob before they sweep open. The room is expansive but bare. There are four white walls and four paintings, each one spaced out on its own so there can be no confusion about each of their respective importance.

Lainey's an expert in her field. There's not a fact about the four pieces that she doesn't know off the top of her head: price, provenance, comparable works, and details about the artist's creative process. I didn't come here today to purchase

art or even to learn about it, but I can't seem to interrupt her. I'm too interested in what she has to say.

We finally come to stand in front of the Hockney she wanted me to see. It's a landscape made of vibrant, saturated colors entitled *Garrowby Hill*. Its composition is reminiscent of Van Gogh and Matisse, and she tells me a different version of the same painting is owned by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

"Though I prefer this one."

She's eagerly watching me take it in, leaning slightly forward on the balls of her feet to be nearer to me. It's clear she wants me to like it as much as she does, and I find I do enjoy the painting, but I'm mostly just enjoying her.

"I like it," I say with a simple nod.

She deflates. "But you don't love it."

I almost apologize for how sad she looks, and she must see some bit of remorse on my otherwise hard features because she waves her hand.

"No, no, it's fine. I'd rather you were perfectly honest with me. That way I can cultivate a taste for what you like. You had me fooled the other night at the exhibition, I think. You acted as if you didn't care what piece your designers chose so long as it was expensive. Quite a macho move, buying art like that. I think all the women were fanning themselves."

"It was a little overdone. I'm a bit embarrassed about that, actually. I got carried away trying to get a pretty girl's attention."

She laughs. "You're kidding." Then she leans in, hoping for some salacious piece of gossip. "Who? Was it one of the designers? Because I did think that redhead was gorgeous."

I merely stand there with my hands tucked into my pockets and peer down at her, spellbound by her innocence.

Her eyes go round with shock when clarity sets in. She opens her mouth, closes it, half-steps back, looks to me as if about to say something, then finally walks away, toward the painting across the room. It's like she wants to pretend the last few seconds never happened, wipe them totally clean.

I stay rooted to my spot, giving her time to get her bearings. I don't know why I said that. It's stating the obvious. She's stunning, yes, but I don't think that needed to be acknowledged out loud and in such an overtly flirtatious way. I didn't come here today in pursuit of her, at least not romantically.

I sigh and start to make my way toward her. There's a shift in the air.

Though her back is to me, she's fully aware of my presence. Her posture is rigid and tense.

I almost open my mouth to apologize and put us back to rights. When I reach her, I start to do just that, but she peels her attention away from the painting on the wall that she's occupied herself with and speaks before I can.

"You were angry earlier, when you first arrived, weren't you?"

The shift in topic surprises me. "Oh? What gave me away?"

"That curt reply about Collette was a bright red flag, though I didn't need it. You walked in here looking the same as you did back at St. John's, always carrying your feelings around. Right here," she says, touching my brow gently. "There was always so much tension."

I relax my features, and she drops her hand back by her side. Her fleeting touch lingers like tiny pinpricks on my face.

“Care to tell me why you were upset? Does it have to do with work? Or something else?” She leans in and whispers, “I’m good at keeping secrets, remember?”

Her words feel like a spell, a sensation of déjà vu.

I stop pretending to inspect the artwork in front of me and turn to face her head on, suddenly wanting her of all people to know the truth. “I just came from lunch with my father. Tolerable though our meals together usually are, today was different. He’s made it clear he wants me to get married. In fact, he’s demanding it.”

After a brief pause, a laugh bubbles out of her and she slaps a hand over her mouth.

She peels it partly away while wearing a look of remorse. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh. Just...our lives are so different and yet we always seem to be waging similar wars. I’m as good as married myself. My grandmother saw to my betrothal just the other day. Soon, I’ll be a missus.”

I frown at her jokey demeanor. “You’re kidding.”

She shakes her head.

“You don’t sound nearly as concerned as you should be by the prospect.”

She drops her hand and then presents a perfectly demure smile as if to say, *What can I do?*

“I’m nothing if not dutiful.”

How can she so willingly throw her life away? How can she allow her grandmother to control her fate?

“I’ll never marry. I see no point to it.”

Unimpressed, she notes, “A cynic—how rare. And I suppose you think love is a sham? A marketing ploy made up by Hallmark and Russel Stover?”

I shake my head vehemently. “Nothing like that. I don’t think of love at all. I leave it to others to enjoy. If it’s a farce, let it be theirs. I want nothing to do with it.”

“So you’ll defy your father?”

“Of course. His request is absurd.”

Her eyebrows rise and fall quickly. “Well you’ll have to let me know how that goes.”

“You could do it with me.”

She smiles wistfully. “I could...”

“But you won’t,” I determine, sounding dejected.

“You don’t have to look at me like that, with all that pity. I’m fine with my life. Happy, even. And I support you in your rebellion. Fight the good fight, Emmett. I’ll wholeheartedly cheer you on—from afar, that is. Are you staying in Boston long?”

“Longer than expected.”

“Oh.”

She doesn’t look too happy about the news.

“Eager to be rid of me?”

She swallows, and I watch every delicate muscle move in her neck.

“No. Of course not. I see no harm in the two of us being friends. I’m off the market, and you are...” She has to think it

over for a moment before smiling. “Never going to be *on* the market. It’s perfect. Now, let’s look at some art, shall we?”

I extend my arm for her to take, she places her hand lightly in the crook of my elbow, and then we walk back into the main gallery, two friends.

Chapter Fourteen

Lainey

Emmett and I might have agreed on a friendship, but after his visit to the gallery, I don't see him for two weeks. I hate that I know it's been two weeks. In fact, it's been a little *over* two weeks if I count to the exact day. I've been trying not to. There's a certain ease to life if you're careful not to open any tempting doors or fall too deeply into hypothetical thoughts. Since graduating from college and moving in with my grandmother, I've been careful to tame the wildness inside me. I don't want to be anything like my mother, which means I should listen to my grandmother, let her guide me through life, keep things simple and comfortable.

After Emmett's visit, my life continued on as if he weren't in Boston. One night, I joined a group of forced acquaintances for an early dinner; I worked my usual shifts at Morgan's; I volunteered at the YMCA, teaching art classes to children; I slipped into a designer dress and accompanied my grandmother to the Boston Ballet. We watched *My Obsession*, a collection of four ballets that explore the devotion and passion of lovers. I could barely sit still as I watched the dancers move on stage, their sinewy muscles so provocatively on display in their nude-colored costumes. I'm almost surprised my grandmother allowed me to stay through the

entire performance. I could tell she hated it, that prim and proper look of disapproval likely to stay put for a full twenty-four hours.

I, however, loved it. I would have sat through it all over again as soon as it finished. More, more, more. I stood with the rest of the audience to give a round of applause, and after, as guests started to trail toward the theater exits, I looked down from the box we were perched in and froze. Emmett was there in the crowd, walking with a blonde woman. She looked pretty in her fitted navy dress. Her long curly hair tumbled down her back. They seemed, if not officially a couple, definitely headed in that direction. He dropped his hand to the small of her back to lead her through the sea of people, and I fought against my throat closing tight, emotion fighting to surface.

My grandmother was oblivious to my sighting. “We should go. I have no plans to stay for the reception. Whomever is allowing these choreographers to come in and display such overtly crass—”

I ignored her and leaned over the side of the balcony to keep sight of Emmett until the very last second. It afforded me a perfect view of his smile aimed at the blonde woman by his side, those prominent dimples meant for someone else.

Look up, I begged in my head.

He disappeared through the lobby doors, and my hands slipped off the railing as I turned and let the suited attendant lead my grandmother and me out of her reserved box. I walked through the opera crowd dutifully by her side and slid into the car waiting out by the curb. The heavy door slammed shut behind us.

In the last few weeks, Royce has been away on work. I should miss him, I think, but I'll see him soon enough, in Italy, in fact. We're traveling to a sprawling villa on the western shore of Lake Como to celebrate the 60th birthday of Victor Sainsbury, my grandmother's good friend. He's a well-connected Manhattanite who seems to know anyone and everyone. He sits on the board at MoMA, served as president of Christie's for fifteen years, and is universally known as the most prominent contemporary art collector in the world.

From talking with my grandmother, I know the guest list for the week-long celebration will be modest in number. There won't be anyone as tacky as a Hollywood celebrity or a social media influencer. No one will be posing for selfies or posting to their feeds. This is about discrete power. Royalty, moguls, the upper crust *of the upper crust*.

I obviously don't belong, but here I am, in the back of a horse-drawn carriage, sitting across from my grandmother. One of the wheels hits a divot in the road and we sway deeply to the right. I fear we might tip over, which is why I yelp and grab ahold of my seat.

My grandmother doesn't bat an eyelash as we trudge on.

I sigh and release my death grip. "It's a little theatrical, don't you think?"

She inspects the plush blue velvet interior with unadulterated lust in her eyes. "It's marvelous, straight out of the 1800s. Every detail is perfection."

"How did Mr. Sainsbury manage to get his hands on so many antique carriages?"

"He commissioned them. It was my idea, actually. It took over two years to create the small fleet that will be used for the

party, and once our week here is over, they'll go up for auction at Christie's London. One has already pre-sold to the National Gallery."

The carriages are merely the last in a long line of transportation we've used within the last twelve hours. A private plane took us from Boston to Milan, where a hired car was waiting to drive us to Como. There, we paused for breakfast before continuing our journey to the Swiss-facing side of Lake Como. At our destination, we were stopped at a large gate and met by the fleet of carriages. A host of matching attendants in dark blue damask-patterned suits hurried to collect our luggage and offer us refreshment. I turned down the glass of champagne, and as we roll over yet another divot along the path, I'm glad I did. My dress would not have survived.

Finally, the carriage slows to a stop, and I peer out of the door's curtain-covered window a second before an attendant opens it. A string of Italian follows, and though I understand some of it, I leave it up to my grandmother to answer him. She's fluent in French and Italian, and, if pressed, can speak a good bit of German too. I took years of foreign languages at St. John's—and aced them, by the way—but it's all evaporated now.

An attendant extends a gloved hand to assist me down from the carriage, and when I have a solid footing on the gravel, I finally look up.

A gasp nearly escapes me as I take in the most picturesque view I've ever seen.

Before me, in the distance, is the grand three-story Villa Balbiano with its tan stucco façade. Dark olive green shutters frame each window. A stone archway beckons guests to enter,

but to get to it, we first have to walk past lily-covered ponds and a long stretch of gardens. There are impeccably trimmed topiaries and towering Cyprus trees. Hedges soar upward, casting shade on our path. Beyond the villa, there's the lake, and across the lake, a mountain range eventually gives way to a cloudless blue sky.

Without having stepped foot inside of it, I already know the villa will be the most romantic place I've ever visited. It's a good thing I'm here with my grandmother as my date...

As soon as we enter, we spot our host. Victor is directing an attendant who's carrying a floral arrangement the size of a modest car when he spots my grandmother and me. Immediately, his face lights up with excitement.

"Fay Davenport! My most coveted guest," Victor says, rushing forward to meet us. "I'm so happy you two made it."

He's wearing an Italian cotton Riviera polo, white chinos, and light blue suede yacht loafers. His salt and pepper hair is curly and cut short, and his clear-framed glasses accent his handsome, deeply tanned face. Even though it's late October, it looks like he's been sunbathing in Italy straight through summer.

He air-kisses my grandmother in flamboyant fashion then steps back and turns to me. He isn't shy about giving me a once-over, clearly appreciating my belted Dior maxi dress.

"Look at you! My god, you're more beautiful every time I see you. I can't wait to watch the men fawn all over you this week. If you're not careful, you might end up a princess. You do realize the crown prince of—"

My grandmother clears her throat firmly, cutting him off.

"That's all been taken care of, Victor."

His eyes alight with mischief. “Has it? Our dear Elaine is off the market?”

My grandmother nods tersely. “Engaged as of a few weeks ago.”

“And who’s the lucky man?”

He looks between us, but it’s my grandmother who replies, “It’s not yet been announced.”

He tosses his hands up in protest. “Oh come on, surely you can tell me. I would never tell a soul.”

My grandmother’s single arched brow tells him all he needs to know regarding her opinion of his ability to keep secrets.

“Fine, don’t tell me. It’s not as if I won’t find out anyway. Will he be here this week?”

She gives him a single reluctant nod, which only excites him more.

“This is absolutely *delicious*. Oh, I can’t wait for dinner tonight.” He points a finger at me and narrows his clear blue eyes. “I’ll be watching you like a hawk.”

“Wonderful,” my grandmother clips. “Now, may we see our room, or have you left your manners back in the States?”

He barks out a laugh. “God, you can be so acerbic sometimes. It’s what I love most about you. Come, come. I’ll show you to your rooms then I’ll ask one of the servants to give you a tour of the villa and the grounds. Have you been here before?”

“No, but I already know I prefer Villa Ponti,” my grandmother says with a note of disapproval.

He barely conceals his eye roll. I love it. Very few people stand up to my grandmother and live to tell the tale. On the contrary, in this situation, she seems to appreciate that he gives her a challenge.

“Of course. Villa Ponti is lovely. Unfortunately, the McConaugheys are there this week, and I didn’t feel like turning the lovely Matthew out onto the streets. No, *this* palatial villa will have to do, I’m afraid.” He winks at me conspiratorially before taking my grandmother’s hand, resting it on his crooked elbow and escorting us through the main hall. “The villa is an obvious jewel. It’s the largest private residence on Lake Como, and it’s filled to the brim with antiquity pieces, some of which date back to the original owner, Cardinal Tolomeo Gallio. They also acquired quite a few spectacular pieces to help fill the halls, some of which I helped them source while I was still with Christie’s.” He turns back to me. “There’s a 17th-century fresco painted by the Recchi brothers that you two will love. I’ll show you later. For now, come upstairs. I’ve put you two on the second floor, in a suite overlooking the lake.”

A suite? As in just one?

I barely stifle the urge to groan. I didn’t realize my grandmother and I would be sharing a room for the week we’re here.

Victor must sense our unease with the arrangements. “Don’t worry, the suite is large, and you’ll actually have your own small room and bed, Lainey. It’s just that you’ll need to access it through your grandmother’s room. Odd, I know, but these old villas were built for different times. I suspect it was once used as a nursery.”

“It’s more than enough,” I assure him, guaranteeing an approving nod from my grandmother.

I know better than to complain about the accommodations. He could have stuck me out in the backyard with a threadbare sleeping bag and I would have smiled and thanked him profusely. My grandmother didn’t drill good manners into me for nothing.

“Though the guest list is exclusive, with forty-five people, I had to be strategic with room placements. Rest assured, you two have an en suite bathroom and a private butler who’s been assigned to your needs. Ah, there he is with your luggage. I’m sure he’ll have it put away for you in no time. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I hear more guests arriving, and I need to play dutiful host.”

He gives us each a departing air kiss before heading for the stairs.

Inside our room, I’m pleasantly surprised. Our accommodations are small, but they aren’t meager. My grandmother is pleased by all the antique furnishings, and I’m pleased to find that, just as Victor promised, there is a separate bedroom just off the main one. Inside, my bed is small, a twin, maybe, but I’ll gladly take it. There’s a window and heavy drapes, along with a small chest of drawers. All the other furniture is back in the main bedroom where my grandmother is standing talking to the butler.

He introduces himself as Mr. Moretti. He’s a small middle-aged Italian man in the same blue damask suit as the other attendants we’ve seen. He’s been working hard on unpacking our luggage and is almost done, in fact.

As he works, he regales us with information about the villa. Even with his heavy Italian accent, his English is

impeccably polished.

“I’d like to know about the grounds,” my grandmother says, walking over to peer out the expansive window.

“Of course.” He continues working on hanging our clothes as he talks. “The lakefront property stretches two miles from end to end. There are extensive gardens, a swimming pool, a private pier, and a boathouse. A lovely walking path will lead you around the entire perimeter of the property, and if physical activity isn’t what you desire, there’s a wonderful sitting area near the back porch that’s quite shady in the afternoon. If the weather cooperates, we will dine outdoors for breakfast and lunch. Dinner will be served in the formal dining room that abuts the ballroom.”

Having finished his task, he closes the closet doors and turns to us with a precise stance, neatly lacing his gloved hands together.

“I’ve taken the liberty of arranging the clothes from your trunks based on occasion, most casual ascending to most formal. I’ll have your costumes for the masquerade party steamed. I did also notice a missing sequin on the young lady’s dress—I’ve already taken it to the washroom. If it’s acceptable, I’ll mend it.”

My grandmother turns and surveys him. “Yes please. Mr. Moretti, you said? You’ve made our introduction to Villa Balbiano very pleasant. We shouldn’t need anything until later. I like to have a Fabiola in the early evenings when I’m in Italy.”

“Of course. Would you like a sweet vermouth or dry?”

“Dry. And be sure the cocktail glass is chilled.”

He bows respectfully then turns to me.

“And for you?”

I smile. “Nothing, thank you. Perhaps tomorrow I’ll have an Aperol Spritz, but I worry my jet lag will catch up to me too quickly if I have a drink before dinner.”

“Of course. If there’s anything else, ring for me and I’ll be right up.”

I thank him on his way out then join my grandmother at the window. We survey the view in silence for a long stretch, and I can barely believe a place like this exists. I’ve been to Italy more than a handful of times, but my travels here usually take me to the great museums and architectural marvels. Lake Como is slightly out of the way, and I know much less about the region than I do, say, Venice or Rome.

“Thank you for bringing me.”

My grandmother reaches out to take my hand, clasping it between both of hers.

“I can’t imagine being here with anyone else.”

“My late grandfather?”

I feel her shudder. “Definitely not him.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“I miss Margaret. She would have loved to be here with us.”

“Yes, I agree. We’ll have to bring her home a whole slew of treats.” She releases my hand and turns back toward the room. “What are your plans for the afternoon? Our travel took more out of me than I care to admit. I need to rest if I intend on eating my dinner rather than face-planting onto it.”

I laugh.

“I should rest too, but I’d much rather go for a walk to see the grounds.”

She’s already heading toward the closet where her favorite robe beckons. “Go. Enjoy. If you see Royce, say hello for me.” My grandmother already confirmed he would be here; we talked about it while we were packing. “I see no reason not to announce the betrothal at the masquerade party,” she’d said. “Oh sure, Victor will cry that I’ve stolen his spotlight, but only for a moment. Then he’ll realize what an honor it is to have played host to young love. His name will be mentioned in every article written about the engagement. In the end, he’ll thank me for it.”

I slip out of our room and make my way out into the second-story hallway. I didn’t have a real chance to take the villa in when we first arrived, but I’ll save a tour for later. After being cooped up in an airplane, car, and, oh yes, a carriage, I just want to be outside. While not totally practical, my strappy Italian leather sandals are well made and should be fine for a quick trip around the trail Mr. Moretti mentioned.

I pass butlers and attendants fluttering through the house carrying trays of tea and bouquets of flowers and folded linens in their arms. One man lugs a huge Louis Vuitton trunk down the hall, a bead of sweat collecting on his brow. I feel so bad I offer him a hand.

He smiles and shakes his head. “*No, signora.*”

I continue outside, through the back doors that open out onto a sprawling porch. To one side, there’s a fire pit and a collection of chairs. In the center stretches a long dining table with seating enough for twenty or more. There’s a charcuterie board set out on it, drawing a crowd of Victor’s guests. They

sit and relax, eat and drink. I recognize most of the faces. I could even conjure up their names if pressed.

Royce is among them. He wears an easygoing smile while he listens to a redhaired man tell the group a story.

I wish I had the confidence to waltz over and join them, though I don't see how it would be possible without somehow rudely interrupting. My cheeks flame just considering the thought of drawing everyone's attention as I clumsily draw a chair back from the table. No thank you.

I turn away, surveying the backyard, trying to find an entry to the trail. I spot it just as I see Royce rise from the table out of the corner of my eye.

I've been noticed it seems.

I watch him make his way over to me, concentrating particularly hard on myself. What do my arms look like, what does my hair look like, is my smile as tight as it feels? Do I seem relaxed and happy to see him?

"There you are. I've been wondering when you would arrive."

He gently touches my arm so he can lean in to kiss my cheek, and I go absolutely rigid.

"Royce, hello."

He smiles broadly.

"Did you just get here?"

"Barely a half hour ago. I came outside to take a walk."

I point toward the trail, and he nods. "Could I join you?"

It strikes me as an odd request, which I know is silly considering what we are to each other, but I've never been

alone with Royce before. My grandmother is always at home when he comes by for a visit, and she takes her job as dutiful chaperone very seriously.

Even so, there's no reason we can't go on a walk together. In fact, it would be nice.

"All right. Yes."

He gestures for me to lead then falls in step beside me.

We meet the trail where it dead-ends at the pier and then continue on, hugging the shoreline as we walk. The beauty of the landscape is hard to ignore. Lush mountains surround us on all sides. The deep blue lake looks so serene. The only interruption is an occasional speedboat slicing across the surface.

"Stunning, isn't it?" he asks.

I nod, and I realize I've gone too long without saying something. I didn't intend on having company during my walk, and it seems like a shame to have to waste this view on a conversation. A good companionable silence would be nice. Or better yet, solitude.

I shake away the depressing thought and turn to him with a smile.

"How was your flight over?" he asks.

"Fine, thank you. And yours?"

"Uneventful."

The yawning pause that follows makes my stomach squeeze tight with nerves.

"And have you already settled in?"

“Yes. I’m staying in a guest house on the property, down closer to the main road.” He points further up the path.

“Oh. I didn’t realize there was a guest house.”

“I think there are a dozen of us staying there for the week.”

All right.

My brain goes absolutely mute. I can’t come up with anything. *His flight!* Then I recall that we just discussed that. I nearly laugh at the absurdity of having absolutely nothing to say, but I don’t think a wild unsolicited laugh would help me get out of this awkward situation.

Another speedboat races past, and with a stroke of genius, I ask him if he’s been to Italy before.

“No.”

One word, and no question in return.

If not for the fact that he invited himself on this walk, I would assume he didn’t want to be here.

Our feet crunch the gravel as we follow the path away from the lake, up along a line of hedges. My skin prickles at the absolute silence that blankets us. Is he thinking of how badly this walk is going, or is his mind on something else?

Again, I can’t seem to decide where my hands belong. Clasped at my back? Wrapped around my waist? Hanging loose and limp at my sides?

It’s unbearable.

We make it up the hedge line, and I suddenly stop. Royce does too, looking back at me expectantly.

“You know what? I just realized I promised my grandmother I’d help her finish unpacking.”

Never mind that this is a total lie.

Royce nods. "Of course. I can escort you back to the villa."

Dear god no.

"It's all right. You continue your walk. It's such a nice day, I wouldn't want to ruin it for you."

His brows furrow as if he's slightly disappointed.

"I'll come retrieve you and your grandmother for dinner then."

"Sounds good."

One more tight smile, then I offer him a weird reverential bow like I'm one of the servants up in the villa before I turn and flee.

Chapter Fifteen

Lainey

Later that evening, I'm sitting in my dressing robe on the chaise lounge at the foot of my grandmother's bed, watching her get ready.

She's already in her dinner dress, a rich dark green caftan she's paired with absolutely massive emeralds dangling from her ears. The stones tug on her earlobes, only emphasizing the carat weight. She's studying her tubes of lipsticks, having arranged them just as neatly as she does at home.

"When you were engaged to my grandfather, were the two of you good friends?" I ask.

All afternoon I've been mulling over my walk—*or sort-of walk*—with Royce. It's obvious that something feels off, but I've been trying to pinpoint what exactly is bothering me about it. I thought I'd accepted the betrothal for what it is, so what does it matter if he and I can hold a conversation or not? So what if I'm not overly comfortable in his presence? It makes no difference.

"Your grandfather was never a nice man, even less so when he'd had a bad day at the office."

She lifts a gold tube of Yves Saint Laurent lipstick. It's a dark berry shade I always love on her. She holds it up, and I

nod my approval. She uncaps it and leans toward the mirror to swipe it on.

“So the two of you didn’t get along? Not even in the beginning?”

Her assessing eyes meet mine in the mirror. “It wasn’t a love match, if that’s what you’re hunting for.”

“So you married him for money?”

She pauses her lipstick application. “*Elaine Evangeline Davenport.*”

I look down at the floor, embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“I married your grandfather because it was my duty. My mother made the match, and I went along with it because I knew it was my responsibility.”

“And did you ever lament not having a choice in the matter?”

I think of her relationship with Margaret, of how different her life might have been had she been allowed to follow her heart.

“Believe it or not, no. I hold no regrets. People view marriage through rose-colored glasses these days. Life is rarely as perfect as it seems in storybooks. Be glad I chose Royce for you and not Mr. Wentworth.”

My jaw drops.

“Mr. Wentworth is nearly seventy years old!”

She rolls her eyes. “Exactly. Now finish dressing. I want to ensure your hair lays nicely once we take it down from those rollers.”

By the time I'm finished applying my makeup and brushing out my curls, there's still a half hour before we're expected to be at dinner.

My grandmother, acutely aware of social etiquettes, refuses to let us go down to the dining room early.

I could stay up here and read, but I've already done so much reading this afternoon. After leaving Royce on the trail, I came back up and holed up in my room, careful not to wake my grandmother from her nap as I passed by.

"Could I go down to finish my walk? I didn't make it far earlier."

She looks toward the window and frowns. "The sun has set."

"I know, but I'm curious to see what the grounds look like in the moonlight."

I can tell she wants to say no, but she relents. "Fine. But don't be late. There's a five-minute window in which it's appropriate to arrive for the meal."

I'm mouthing the words as she continues, having heard her speak them so many times.

"Never arrive early. Aim to be precisely on time, though five minutes late will do as well. However, *ten* minutes late and you run the risk of offending your host."

"I understand," I assure her as I lean in to kiss her cheek.

She rests her hand on my hair, keeping me close to her for longer than necessary.

"You look lovely, my dear. That color suits you."

We're both wearing green for the evening, though my long dress is much lighter than hers, nearly the same shade as my eyes. It's cinched at my chest and waist, and the structured skirt flares only slightly at my hips, creating an hourglass illusion. The neckline in front is demure, but it dips low in the back so that my soft curls tickle my skin as I walk down the staircase, toward the gardens that lead to the main road in the distance.

I'm taking this route on purpose. I'm assuming guests will stay clustered on the lake side of the property, enjoying a pre-dinner drink, gossiping and mingling. I'll have to endure time with them all soon enough. For now, I walk slowly with my arms wrapped tightly across my chest, staving off the slight chill in the air. It's darker out here than I expected. The glow of the villa, the lights of distant houses along the lakeshore, and the sliver of moonlight are all I have to guide my way.

I pass a twin set of fountains and a fork in the path where a small sign in Italian points the way toward the guest house where Royce and the others are staying. I stroll past it, continuing on the main trail, slipping deeper into the mazelike hedges.

It's obvious someone has taken great care with the garden, both in design and upkeep. There are little hidden gems around every corner: a butterfly and hummingbird sanctuary with overgrown wildflowers, copper birdbaths, and patinaed statues tucked in secret nooks.

Every now and then, laughter from the villa filters out into the quiet night, but other than that, my walk is dead silent until the crunch of gravel up ahead draws my attention.

I pause and listen for it again, searching for the source.

The ominous crunching continues, the gait of the person approaching slow and steady. A strange trickle of fear skates down the back of my neck as I realize I might have gone too far, too near the main road. I do know how to get back to the villa, I think. I turned at a triangular-shaped hedge a few yards back. I search for it now over my shoulder, but it's too dark to make out.

My heart starts to race as I whip back around. There's nowhere to go. With tall neat hedges on both sides of the path, I can only go forward or back, and something tells me I shouldn't run.

Slowly, through the overwhelming blackness, a tall figure walks forward as if born from the night.

The distance between us melts away, and I stay frozen in place as Emmett's distinctly handsome features take shape in the moonlight. Cut cheekbones, a finely chiseled jaw, eerily dark eyes. He's wearing a black suit and shirt, open at the neck. His hair is neatly combed back. There's no softness to him.

His gaze is on me, and I have no idea how long ago he spotted me, but he doesn't seem nearly as shocked as I feel. Even knowing it's him, my heart hasn't calmed.

He walks right to me, stopping within reach.

"Lainey."

He breathes life into my name.

"You look like you've just seen a ghost," he says, lifting my chin, studying my features.

It's impossible to keep from trembling at his touch. My fear is written all over my face. It's the power of the dark,

overriding common sense like this. Why did I feel like I was being hunted? Why did I almost run?

“You scared me,” I admit, my voice coming out so low it’s barely a whisper.

His gaze drops to my lips, and a fissure of awareness tightens my stomach. There’s a dreamlike quality to the moment, as if none of this is real, as if I summoned Emmett and he came for me.

To prove it to myself, I reach out and press my hand against his chest, just above his beating heart. His hard muscle flexes for a brief second, but then I feel the steady *thump, thump, thump* rhythm I was searching for.

Even now that I know he’s real, I don’t pull my hand away.

“Why are you out here?” I ask.

“I just arrived and wanted to stretch my legs instead of taking one of those carriages. Why are you out here?”

“I needed fresh air.”

His gaze flits briefly over my shoulder. “You’re pretty far from the villa.”

“I didn’t realize.”

Finally, he releases my chin and steps back, taking me in from head to toe. My hand falls back at my side, and I wonder what he can see in the darkness. I’d pay every dime to my name to know what he thinks of me.

“I had no idea you’d be here.”

He tucks his hands into his pockets. “My father and Victor are close. When my father couldn’t make it for the celebration, I cleared my schedule to attend in his place.”

“What a small world we live in. Tiny, it seems. I saw you at the ballet earlier this week.”

His brows hitch with interest. “You were there?”

“Perched high up in a box, hidden away. You wouldn’t have seen me.”

“But you saw me.”

My cheeks flush. “I was standing up to applaud the dancers and I noticed you down in the crowd with your date. The two of you were hard to miss.”

He nods coolly. “Miranda works at GHV. She’s a friend of sorts.”

I tilt my head to the side, wanting more. “A friend who accompanies you to the ballet is a good friend indeed,” I goad.

He fails to take the bait.

“And who were you with?”

I wish I could say someone handsome and dangerous and bad for me in every way.

“My grandmother,” I reply, trying not to feel self-conscious.

“You two are close,” he notes.

“Extremely.”

“Then I look forward to meeting her.”

“You two haven’t met?”

“Not officially, though I do think she’s an acquaintance of my father’s.”

I hum. “I’m sensing a pattern here.”

He nods, understanding. “We can’t escape each other, it seems. It’s getting late. Were you going to head up to dinner soon? I’ll escort you.”

I pivot on my heels, and he comes up beside me. I think he’s going to extend his elbow for me to take, but instead, he presses his hand to the small of my back in the same way he did for his date at the ballet. I wanted to trade places with her then, and it feels heady to be experiencing it now. His firm grip of possession on my back is enough to sear through the dress layer between us. His pinky rests barely an inch above my tailbone, and the placement feels intimate rather than friendly. We continue up the path, and his hand slides slowly around the outside of my hip so he can gather me closer to him. I realize why a moment later when I narrowly miss stepping on a short branch that must have fallen from one of the swaying Cyprus trees.

“Careful,” he says, tightening his hold on me.

There’s a heaviness to his hand. I’ll remember the size of it later when I’m in my room. I’ll place my hand where his is now and marvel at the fact that he could capture nearly half my waist in his palm.

He catches my shiver and asks if I’m cold.

I am. I shouldn’t have come out walking in a slip of a dress, but I refuse his jacket.

“Are you sure?”

I’m too worried about appearances. In fact, I step slightly out of his reach so that he’s forced to drop his hand. We’ll be approaching the villa at any moment. What a shame.

I turn to survey him, trying to soak in as much as I can while I have him so close. His profile is devastating, though

it's always been that way. I used to love to study him back at St. John's.

"You know, you should have taken the carriages," I tell him. "I've never experienced anything like it. It was like something straight out of a Jane Austen novel. My grandmother was salivating at the historical accuracy."

He smiles. "Charming though it sounds, it's been a long day of travel, and I wasn't eager to extend it. I would have walked straight from the airport in Milan if I'd had better shoes," he teases.

"I felt the same. It's why I was out for a walk. I got a little carried away though, and I should have headed back earlier. My grandmother warned me about being on time and now, look, I'll be the last one to arrive."

"You'll be with me. You can use my arrival as a distraction and slip in unnoticed if you'd like."

"True. I'm good at that," I murmur.

"Going unnoticed?"

I don't reply. I didn't intend for him to hear the remark, and I definitely don't want to dissect it. He of all people should understand the type of person I am, how good I am at sneaking under the radar, nothing more than a blip to most everyone.

I still for a moment as I hear something in the distance, the sound of someone shouting, I think.

There it is again.

Emmett frowns and turns to me. "Did you hear that?"

"It sounds like they're calling—"

“LAINY!”

“*LAINY!*” Another voice joins in.

The blood drains from my face. *Oh god.* The chances of me going unnoticed are exactly zero now. My grandmother has organized a search party on my behalf. How mortifying.

I start to run toward the villa. “I’m here! Enough! There’s no need to keep shouting!”

I don’t miss Emmett’s chuckle as he hurries alongside me.

“I suppose it’s too late to create a diversion. I still could try if you want me to.”

I hate that he finds this amusing.

“LAIN—”

“I’m here! Stop acting as if I’ve been kidnapped! *I’m right here!*”

With a groan, I break free of the tall hedges and stumble out into the clearing in front of the villa only to be greeted by the sight of every single guest standing on the front path, their eyes on me. There’re even a few servants too, some of them with flashlights and flares.

I stare at them, and they stare at me.

And then Emmett walks out of the hedges behind me, perfectly, awfully timed.

“Well this is the kind of reception I’ll expect at every party now, Victor,” Emmett says wryly. “There was no need for you all to come out and greet me like this.”

There are a few muffled laughs from the crowd, but not many.

My grandmother is at the front of the pack, staring daggers at me. If it wouldn't embarrass us both further, I have no doubt she'd love to reprimand me right here in front of everyone.

To her left, Royce stands with a flashlight in his hand, wearing an unreadable expression. Relief, perhaps, that I'm okay and the search can be called off, but there's something else lurking below the surface as he shifts his gaze to Emmett.

I understand how this looks. I'm panting and flushed from hustling the last few yards. I'm sure my hair is a mess by now too. I'm obviously very late for dinner, and everyone will assume I've been out here with Emmett this whole time. To most of the guests, that won't matter beyond the fact that I've slightly inconvenienced them and interrupted their evening, but to a select few, it will seem extremely odd.

"We found the damsel in distress! Now everyone to the dining room!" Victor shouts, starting to shoo everyone back inside. "The night is young!"

The search party disbands to follow him back inside the villa. I drop my gaze to the gravel, trying to keep my embarrassment from bringing tears to my eyes. Then, with heavy feet, I start to follow behind them.

My grandmother and Royce both wait for me.

Royce steps forward, gallantly taking my hand to help me up the few stairs.

"You told me you would let me take you down for dinner. I was waiting for you."

I cringe with guilt. "I'm so sorry. I forgot. I didn't—"

"If you wanted to go for a walk, as you told your grandmother you did, I could have gone with you. I know you were probably disappointed our walk got cut short earlier."

I merely nod, unsure of what to say other than a profuse apology, which I issue not once, but twice. Then I withdraw my hand from his, overly aware of Emmett walking behind us. I'm glad he's smart enough not to butt in. He won't help this situation.

My grandmother stays silent as she walks beside me. I can't even bear to look at her. I know she's ashamed of me for creating a spectacle, and though it wasn't my intention, that's not what she wants to hear right now. She wants me to fix this, to return to the dutiful granddaughter she's raised me to be.

I don't say another thing as we walk on. Royce tells me all about how worried everyone was, how he was the one to gather the staff and the rest of the party guests when it started to get late and I still hadn't returned from the gardens. The guilt only layers over itself as he continues, its combined weight threatening to crush me as I take my designated seat at the dining table, blessedly far away from Royce, my grandmother, and Emmett. Royce is down on the far side, and Emmett has been placed directly across from my grandmother, at a position of honor beside Victor himself. I'm beside strangers who seem perfectly content to pretend I'm not even there. They continue a conversation they must have started elsewhere, something about mineral rights in the Arabian Peninsula, and I keep my head down, my eyes on the folded napkin in my lap until the first course is served.

It's a caviar and crème fraîche tartlet.

"I'll be honest, I can never tell the difference. Is this a canapé or an hors d'oeuvre?" someone asks down the table.

"Is there a difference?" another replies.

I can hear my grandmother's throat clear from a mile away.

“Appetizers eaten with the fingers are canapés,” she answers with an air of reproach. “Appetizers eaten at the table with a knife and fork are hors d’oeuvres.”

As if on cue, half the table grabs for their salad fork.

“However, *this* is a canapé,” she continues. “The tartlet acts as the utensil, and it’s best to leave your salad fork where it lies, to be used during a future course.”

The choreography continues as dinner guests immediately scramble to return their forks to their correct position on the table. The spectacle is almost enough to make me smile, but then my grandmother’s cold gaze pins me and I recenter my attention down onto my plate.

Everyone begins eating, and there’s a hush in the air until Emmett speaks up.

“As you must realize, *hors d’oeuvres* is French,” he tells my grandmother, though the whole table is listening in. “It translates literally to ‘outside the work’ or ‘outside of the masterpiece’.”

“That’s lovely,” a woman near him says.

I hadn’t noticed her until that moment, and I have to lean forward to get a better look at her. She’s a vivacious brunette with cropped hair and a wide, red-lipped smile. Her eyes are set flirtatiously on Emmett as he continues, “I’ve heard the practice originated in Russia, where small snacks of fish, caviar, and meats were common on long travels.”

Everyone at the table finds this interesting *except* for my grandmother, who seems insistent on holding on to her tight-lipped expression.

The conversation slowly grows, voices filtering in and out. I’m wholly apart from it all. A waiter comes around to fill our

wine glasses, and I greedily accept, wishing it were possible to ask for the entire bottle. While the waiter pours, I let my gaze slip to Emmett. I'm not the only one paying attention to him. He draws us all in, eclipsing even the most illustrious guests. *Crown prince who?*

Though it's a break from proper etiquette, I thank the waiter for the wine just as our second course is brought out, a classic French mushroom soup plated beautifully.

Down the way, across the table, Royce talks to the man at his side. He hasn't looked up at me once.

It's interesting to pick apart the seating arrangement. Victor's done nothing by accident. He's placed himself at the helm, acting as our dinner party's fearless leader, and made sure to keep the most important guests close at hand. My grandmother and Emmett are at his side, and beside Emmett is the crown prince of Malaysia. He's a diminutive man closer to my grandmother's age than to mine.

I carefully tip my spoon away from me as I ladle small bites of soup and continue my assessment. My seat in the middle of the table seems slightly out of order. I'm truly no one, but my grandmother's presence looms like an umbrella over me, and I suppose that's why I'm deemed more worthy than I am.

"Did you enjoy your walk through the gardens, Elaine?"

Victor's pointed question stretches across the room, and my spoon freezes in my soup.

I'm aware of everyone's curious stares, the redness creeping up my neck.

"Yes. Thank you."

My voice is so faint I'd be surprised if anyone heard it.

“You gave us all a real scare.”

The soft clinking of silverware against china is the only sound in the entire dining room.

The moment takes me back to my time at St. John’s, when I was all too often the butt of some joke or game, and rather than stand up for myself and deliver a stinging remark, I’d shy away from confrontation.

“She was—” Emmett begins, attempting to come to my aid.

“Victor, the soup is delicious,” my grandmother says, cutting him off and drawing the attention away from me. “Where was your chef able to source the mushrooms this time of year?”

Later that night, after the longest dinner of my life, I hold my breath as I follow my grandmother into our shared bedroom. I’ve worried about this moment all evening, the first chance for her to speak with me in private about all the ways in which I’ve disappointed her. I wring my hands as I watch her walk toward her closet. Usually, at home, Margaret would help her undress after a formal event, but I go to her now, helping her unzip her dress and hang it back up. She’s silent as she gets into her nightgown, and then I do the same. My stomach is in knots. Most of my food went untouched at dinner, and I know I’ll be starving in the morning.

I put on my pajamas and go into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face. My grandmother does as well, at the sink alongside mine, and when she’s done, she walks over, kisses my hair, and tells me good night.

Chapter Sixteen

Emmett

I wake in the morning well before the sun has risen over Lake Como. Jet lag should work against me, but I travel so often my body has learned to trudge through. Victor has given me a room on the third floor of the villa overlooking the lake and mountains. I sit at a desk in front of the picture window for two hours, chipping away at emails, correspondence, and a to-do list best tackled in the peace and quiet of the early hours, before the rest of the houseguests wake up.

Legal sent me a revised document for the Leclerc & Co. contract they'd like me to review by the end of the day. My father has already given his input. I read through it in my room, watching the sunrise, before I change and head down for a swim. Though the lake beckons, I choose the lap pool. As expected, I'm the only one crazy enough to be out here so early, and the water is ice cold as I slip in. After a slow warm-up, I swim laps until my arms ache and my chest screams for reprieve.

I feel more myself as I head back upstairs so I can shower and catch the tail end of breakfast.

It's already a full house when I arrive in the breakfast room, and I've barely taken my seat after visiting the buffet

before I'm surrounded by guests I'm barely acquainted with. In fact, I'm lifting a fork laden with zucchini frittata to my mouth when a hand shoots in front of my face.

“Will Johansson. It's a pleasure to see you again.”

I lift my annoyed gaze to him and let his hand dangle there between us.

His confidence wanes. “We met last year at the Notre Dame fundraiser, though you might not remember me...”

I don't.

There's already someone speaking over him, introducing themselves too. “Archer Glines. It's an honor to make your acquaintance. Our fathers attended École Polytechnique together. I've heard some of the stories. The way I hear it, the two of them were extremely close.”

They weren't.

“Florence Carmichael. *Lady* Florence Carmichael, actually. My father is Viscount Carmichael. I think you might know him?”

Oh for God's sake.

It continues on like this so that by the time I've endured over a dozen introductions, my food has gone cold. I settle for a French pâtisserie and a cup of coffee and take my unread *Le Figaro* with me on my way out.

I loop around the entire villa before I find Lainey resting on a cushioned lounge chair down near the water's edge. She's wearing a black two-piece set composed of a long-sleeved cropped blouse and high-waisted trousers with a sliver of her waist peeking through intentionally. Light tan sandals twist and tie around her slender ankles. Toss a bag at her hip and she

could be a model for one of our brands, especially with Lake Como in the background. Our customers would bankrupt themselves trying to emulate the same effortless elegance.

I claim ownership of the lounge beside her by tossing down my newspaper.

She doesn't bat an eye. Her attention stays rigidly set on her book.

"You've been avoiding me."

She was in the breakfast room when I arrived, eating beside Victor and her grandmother.

"I haven't."

"The moment I walked in for breakfast, you stood up with your half-eaten plate and left."

She doesn't look up. "Pure coincidence. I wouldn't read into it."

"Last night after dinner, you hurried out of the dining room before I could catch you."

"My grandmother was waiting for me."

She flips a page in her book as if it's even remotely possible that she's still reading while we talk. I know later she'll have to turn back, wondering where the hell she actually left off.

"You won't look me in the eye, even now."

"Because I'm trying to read," she says, exasperated as she lifts her hardback to wave it at me.

"*Lainey.*"

She sighs and sets it down, looking up at me with an unamused expression.

“I narrowly escaped disaster last night, and I’ve learned my lesson. We should just stay away from each other.”

Indignation burns in my chest. “Oh really? You think I’m a bad influence?”

“Clearly.”

“Why is it you can say that so confidently to me, but last night at dinner, you were quiet as a mouse?”

“We’ve gone over this before—I’m shy.”

“I can’t believe that. When it’s just you and me, you’re the exact opposite.”

She shrugs one shoulder. “So take it as a compliment and move on. Don’t you have someone else you can go bother?”

Ignoring her, I ask, “What book is that?”

“*Ten Ways to Deal with Difficult People.*”

“You’re joking.”

She rolls her eyes and lifts the book as her reply: *No Country for Old Men* by Cormac McCarthy.

A favorite of mine.

“Have you read *The Road*?”

She gives me a pointed look as if to say, *Are you really asking me that?*

I take a seat on the lounge chair beside her and unfold my French newspaper. I’m making a point. She doesn’t need to worry; I can mind my business. Never mind that we’re almost elbow to elbow with the lounge chairs pushed so closely together. I can smell her shampoo on the gentle breeze. I’m attuned to her every subtle shift.

“Did you really have to sit right beside me like this? There are plenty of lounge chairs over there. And you know what?” She twists around and shields her eyes from the sun as if to study something. “I think I even see some beautiful women sunbathing by the pool. Oh, gosh, look at that—they need someone to help them apply sunblock. If only there were a person for the job...”

“I’m sure they’ll manage,” I say, wetting my thumb so I can easily flip through to the *économie* section of the newspaper.

She feigns a worried gasp. “Oh dear, now one of them has completely lost her bikini top. She’s looking everywhere for it. She *really* needs help.”

My only reply is the flutter of my newspaper as I turn to another page.

She sighs in defeat and turns back toward the lake. At first, she sits there with her book turned upside down on her lap. She isn’t quite ready to throw in the towel.

“To be clear, I’m not a bad influence,” I tell her, my focus still on my paper. “I didn’t drag you out into the garden last night like some deviant. *You found me.*”

She huffs annoyed. “Yes, sure. I stumbled upon you innocently enough, but when everyone saw us run out of the gardens together, they all assumed the same thing.”

“Which was what exactly?”

“Don’t be obtuse.”

My devilish grin is impossible to suppress. “I’d like to hear you say it.”

She closes her book and leans toward me. “You’re not good for a lady’s reputation. For *my* reputation.”

“Why?”

“Because of who you are...a billionaire playboy with nothing to lose. I’d rather not look like I’m this week’s flavor.”

“I could take offense to that.”

“But you won’t,” she responds dryly.

No, I won’t. I’m not easily offended. I hold myself in too high of regard to care what other people think of me.

“For the record, I’m hardly a playboy.”

She sighs as if she almost pities me. “I know you aren’t all over gossip magazines or anything. In comparison to other men like you, you’re pretty tame. You were discreet even during your St. John’s days.”

“I had no idea you kept such careful watch over me.”

She doesn’t even flush as she responds matter-of-factly, “Yes, you did.”

At that, I laugh. I love her willingness to meet me head to head. This fiery side of her is so damn intriguing, even more so because she keeps it so well hidden.

She continues, “The world sees things in black and white, unfortunately. They have their assumptions about you and about me, and it’s futile to try to fight against it.”

“Well damn the world. What did your fiancé have to say about last night? Surely his opinion is all that matters.”

My question snuffs the spark from her eyes.

She turns toward the water and leans back against her lounge chair, having decided to ignore my inquiry.

“It’s Royce, isn’t it?”

A simple nod is all I get.

Royce Saunders is exactly the type of man I like to avoid. He’s perfectly average in every arena that counts: intellect, wit, business savvy. He comes from a well-established pedigree and acts like that should be sufficient in and of itself, never mind having an actual personality.

“Why him?”

Her gaze narrows on the water. “You’ll have to ask my grandmother that.”

“How long have you known him?”

“We first met at a dinner party a year or two ago.”

“So the betrothal has been a long time coming?”

Her green eyes pierce me when she whips her head back in my direction. “Why does it matter?”

“Because I’m trying to figure out how it’s possible for someone to care so little about their life. If my father strapped me to a lifetime of suffering alongside the female equivalent of *Royce Saunders*, I’d do everything in my power to fight against it.”

I can see my comment stings. Her shoulders stiffen, her back straightens.

“Oh yes, what a lovely life you’ll have growing old by yourself, no children or partner by your side, nothing of value to account for beyond that week’s business deal.”

“I never said I don’t want children.”

Her eyebrow arches tauntingly. “Never mind the children’s mother?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.”

She tosses her hands up. “You see how utterly annoying it is trying to take advice from a man like you?”

She rises from her lounge chair, but I reach out and capture her wrist before she can storm off. I feel desperate to keep her here.

“You’re right. I’m being obtuse. I want to hear straight from your lips why you’re marrying Royce.” I give her wrist a little shake. “Tell me.”

There’s a determined set to her jaw when she replies, “There is nothing to tell. There’s not some big secret, no blackmail or coercion. I want to, so I am. Now leave it alone.”

At that, she wrenches herself free and walks away, her book left forgotten on her chair.

Chapter Seventeen

Lainey

Later that morning, I take a guided tour of the villa with my grandmother and a few others. We stroll from room to room, learning about the artwork and the interiors. Then we go to lunch, which turns out to be incredibly dull. My grandmother sits among her friends. Royce seems caught up in conversation with a gentleman from Russia, and Emmett is so thickly surrounded by worshipping fans that I couldn't fight my way through the throng if I wanted to. I'm bitter about it through the whole meal, scraping my food around the fine bone china until it finally feels appropriate for me to stand and leave, having finished two bites of a goat cheese and cucumber sandwich and nothing else.

I don't notice Royce following after me until he calls my name. My initial reaction is slight annoyance, but I turn and try a smile on for size as he hurries to catch me.

"I was going to see if perhaps we could finish that walk we started yesterday?"

My manners kick in before I even have to consider them. "Of course. I'd love to."

It feels so eerily similar to yesterday, the crunching of the gravel marking every awkward step, only this time I try harder

to come up with topics of conversation we can discuss. I want to make this feel natural. I want to be walking alongside a friend, and to do that, we have to get past this beginning phase. After a few failed attempts to find mutual footing, I bring up the book I'm reading, and Royce's face lights up.

"I love McCarthy's writing, though I haven't read that one yet."

"Then I'll lend it to you when I'm finished. I'm almost done."

And just like that, we've begun to bridge the gap between us. I feel infinitely better, already imagining how happy my grandmother will be when I tell her about my afternoon.

Then, we turn the corner back toward the house and I come face to face with Emmett walking alongside Marie Shaw.

I've met her before, back in the States. She's a soda heiress. Two years older than me, she's slightly more than an acquaintance but not quite a friend. She's classically beautiful, feminine and sweet. You could even say angelic with the sun beating down on her pale blonde hair oh so perfectly. The few times we've found ourselves in conversation, she's barely uttered a word, not because she's shy, but because she hasn't deemed me worthy of the effort. She seems to have found her voice now though as she looks up at Emmett with shining eyes. It's like he single-handedly hung the moon. I watch—barely suppressing a gag—as she drops her hand to his forearm, leaning into him to laugh, and I just don't think *anything* could be that funny. What, is he a stand-up comedian now? Please.

"—should be fun."

The tail end of Royce's sentence stuns me back to reality. He's been going on about something and I've totally missed it. In fact, I've slowed my pace so that he's positioned slightly in front of me. Emmett's gaze catches mine, followed by a familiar swooping feeling in my stomach. It feels like the brief pause at the peak of a rollercoaster just before it suddenly pitches forward. It's so visceral that I look down as the path narrows. We have no choice but to shift to one side so Emmett and Marie can pass, and with that comes customary greetings.

"Royce."

"Emmett."

They nod to one another, and then it's my turn to look at Marie and offer some kind of pleasantries.

"Hello Marie."

"Elaine."

Her tight smile says it all. She's already looking ahead along the path, resenting the interruption. In fact, she drops her hand back onto Emmett's arm as if to say, *Shall we?*

I look to Emmett, but his gaze is straight ahead. If he wants to say something more, I can't tell.

Fine.

I'm the one who moves away first, slipping into a sour mood as I continue past them, wondering what Emmett's angle is in going on a walk with Marie. Does she know that he never intends to marry? That she's barking up the wrong tree? Or maybe Marie is different. Maybe she's tempting enough to persuade him to change his stance, as solid as it may seem. What a bitter thought. Surely he would choose someone better than Marie.

Or perhaps I'm wrong. Marriage might not be what's on her mind. I doubt any unattached female at this week's party would hesitate before throwing themselves at the opportunity to have Emmett for a night or two. What a story that would be. I'm sure they'd love to tell their friends. *Oh yes, he and I were together for a brief affair...*

"Are you all right?" Royce asks, picking up his pace to catch up to me.

I've been intentionally racing away, trying to put as much distance between me and Emmett as possible. If it wouldn't seem so damn weird, I'd break out into a run. I suddenly have a font of energy I need to burn off.

"Yes, actually—" I suddenly stop and turn to face him. "There's no need to walk me all the way back up to my room. I know the way." I was trying to make a teasing remark, but it actually comes out borderline bitchy. I cringe and try for an easier tone as I continue, "I just mean, it's okay if you'd like to go join your friends or..." I have no idea what else he'd like to do. What does he enjoy? "I'll see you again, later at the pier."

This evening Victor has hired a yacht to whisk us all around the lake while we enjoy a sunset dinner. I'm sure it will be magical.

Before Royce can protest, I lean in to kiss his cheek, and he goes totally rigid. I don't have time to read into it though because I'm already turning and heading up the stairs back toward the villa. I want to go straight back to my room and shut the door. I want to hole up, want to pretend nothing is wrong and this tight ball of anxiety in my stomach is nothing more than a stomachache from too little lunch.

When I return, the book I left down on the lounge chair this morning is on the bed in my small room. A cream note

rests on top. I've never seen Emmett's handwriting before. Slightly slanted black ink, sharp and neat.

I won't bring it up again.

It's an apology of sorts, or at least a surrender.

I can't afford to hold a grudge. It's only the second day here in Italy, and without Emmett, I'm left with only the company of my grandmother. Sure, there's Royce and the other party guests, but Emmett is a friend, as strange as it seems, and I can't stand the idea of keeping him at arm's length. I tried that this morning down by the lake, and it lasted all of five seconds. All he had to do was swoop in and, with a bit of charm, I gave him exactly what he wanted: my attention.

I'm inclined to believe he's bored of the topic of Royce and me together, already having moved on. His walk with Marie proves that.

An evening on the lake calls for something special: a midnight blue silk mini dress that ripples like water when I walk. It has thin straps and a V-neckline that means I'll have to be careful all night, no sudden movements, no bending over, or everyone will get more than an eyeful of cleavage. My only jewelry is a heavy sapphire that rests at the hollow of my neck, hanging on a delicate choker. I feel beautiful as I walk alongside my grandmother down toward the pier. On the gravel path, I take her hand in mine just in case. I don't want her to lose her footing.

"You were smart to rest this afternoon," she tells me. "It's going to be a long night, and I'd think Royce would be eager to have you at his side all evening. You look enchanting."

Guests loom ahead of us, gathered at the pier, waiting their turn to board the three-story vessel. On the upper deck, uniformed crew members wait in a straight line, one offering champagne, another offering signature cocktails. At the tail end, the captain introduces himself and beckons us on board. His good looks aren't lost on my grandmother, who takes an extra minute to ask about the size of the boat, something I know she absolutely does *not* care about.

“This should be a wonderful cruise,” she concludes as we continue on. I swear there's even a rosy tinge to her cheeks.

We take our champagne up to the top deck and find ourselves in the epicenter of the action. Linen-covered tables are overflowing with food. Bartenders man their stations, ensuring every guest has a fresh cocktail in hand. Soft music plays and people mill about. My grandmother is spotted right away, and we're swept into conversation. I lose track of it, though, when Emmett arrives.

He's wearing a dark blue suit, sans tie. Formal, and yet he wears his clothes like they're an extension of his body, as comfortable to him as a pair of pajamas would be. He declines a glass of champagne and keeps moving. I can't peel my gaze off him as he slips further into the party. A man stops him and shakes his hand, introducing himself with an eagerness that isn't lost on Emmett. He's polite though, well-mannered enough to give the man a few minutes of his time before stepping away. I'd love to know if he has a destination in mind. Maybe he's trying to get to one of the bartenders, but he's waylaid again, this time by Marie.

I'm suddenly overwhelmed by the amount of people on the deck. It's hard to not feel exhausted by the constant socializing that takes place during parties like this. I'm so used to my

grandmother's quiet house, the mundane normalcy of my day-to-day life. Sure, I attend galas and ballets and dinners, but nothing like this. From sunup until sundown, I've been surrounded by people.

I break off from the group and slip around the side of the deck, curious about the areas of the yacht I haven't seen. I don't have to go far to find a bit of peace and quiet, but it doesn't last. I'm barely halfway done with my glass of champagne when Victor rounds the corner, spots me leaning against the rail, and hurries over, not even bothering to mask his look of delicious triumph.

"The jig is up, I'm afraid. I saw you with your man earlier. I feel like a congratulations is in order. You've managed to ensnare the most eligible man of the weekend. Hell, the whole of the European continent, actually."

Apparently, he's as excited about my betrothal as my grandmother is. I wonder what he knows of Royce's family.

I smile. "I'm happy you approve."

He scoffs. "Approve? *Wholeheartedly*, my dear. In fact, I'll do whatever I can to expedite the wedding. Have it here if you must—just get a ring on that man's finger *now*."

I can't help but laugh. "I'm not worried about him fleeing our engagement if that's what you mean."

He waves away my worry. "Of course not. With a face like yours, he'll be hoisting you over his shoulder and rushing you to the altar himself." He shakes his head, a warm smile on his face. "I'm so happy for the two of you. What a pair. The gossip pages will be hungry for every salacious detail. I think a full-page spread in *Vogue* is in your near future. I won't even

have to put in a good word with Anna. She'll be coming to you."

I'm not sure how to reply to his effusive support. I didn't realize he had such a high opinion of Royce.

"And his father," he continues. "Does he approve?"

Royce's father? I hadn't even considered it.

"Oh...I think so?"

"Don't worry. Frédéric can be brusque at times, and that's putting it politely. I can't imagine he's been all that welcoming, but he must be pleased with the match. I can't think of a better pairing myself."

I hold out my hand, doing a poor job of masking my confusion. "I'm sorry, you've lost me. *Frédéric?*"

"Frédéric Mercier." He laughs. "*Your future father-in-law...how much champagne have you had, dear? Should I bring you some water?*"

"No." I force out a laugh, though it comes out slightly quivering. I'm trying to play this whole exchange off and doing a terrible job of it. "I'm fine. I just..."

I have no idea how to put this to rights, how to explain to him that I'm not engaged to Emmett and, furthermore, I'm not sure what gave him that idea.

"Janice!" Victor suddenly exclaims, waving to a party guest behind me. "Where do you think you're off to? Don't you dare disappear on me. I'm going to have the crew bring us up a round of espresso martinis!"

I use his distraction as an opportunity to slide past him and hurry down the railing toward the back of the yacht. Before, I had no plans to rejoin the party. Now, there's no way I will.

How many others suspect what Victor has just shared with me? Is it because of last night or our conversation earlier today by the pool? Have I missed something?

Surely Victor is only grasping at straws. Emmett has spent more time with Marie than he has with me, not to mention Royce was the one to lead my search party before dinner last night. Did Victor not take that into account?

My mind works overtime trying to determine some elusive fix to this problem. Already, I feel anxiety twisting my stomach. I go back into the boat and find myself in a quiet sitting room. I take a seat on a couch, wringing my hands.

I don't know how long I sit there, spiraling, before I've exhausted myself. I heave a deep sigh and decide it's enough. While worrying, there's nothing I can do about the situation right now. I might as well distract myself. I've never been on a yacht this size, and though I'm not sure what the rules are for events like this, I decide it can't hurt to do a bit of exploring.

Soon, I've given myself a tour of the second level, and then I slip down one floor below, peering into the spacious cabins. I'm not disturbing anything, careful to keep things exactly like I found them.

Here is what I've observed so far: it's astounding, really, to see how much bad design a person can cram into a multi-million-dollar vessel. It's like the owner hired four interior designers to give suggestions and then decided, *What the hell? Let's do it all.* Every bathroom is decorated using a different color scheme. Black marble, white marble, gold marble—the sky's the limit. Some bathrooms incorporate all three. The last one was actually wall-to-wall turquoise with pink tile floors and black hardware. The one before it was a dark brown with red accents. There's no cohesion, no overall stylistic design.

It's...a madhouse, and I'm fully invested in discovering what oddity I'll stumble upon next. I've just taken hold of the handle of a door that I think leads to another cabin, maybe a bunkroom for children, when Emmett's voice scares the life out of me.

"Are you allowed to be down here?" he taunts.

I whirl around as I slap a hand to my chest. It feels like my heart is going to beat right out of me.

He smiles, registering my reaction with a shake of his head.

"You're going to get in trouble," he adds.

It's silly. I won't. I'm an adult doing nothing wrong, but his threat still hits the mark. I redden like I've just been caught breaking rules by St. John's headmaster.

"I was just looking around," I explain as he continues down the hall toward me.

"You were snooping," he argues.

I lift my chin. "It's not illegal."

When he reaches me, he peers around my shoulder, his chest nearly brushing mine. "Have you found anything interesting?"

I open my mouth to tell him yes, but then I realize yet again, we've found ourselves in dangerous territory.

"You should go back up to the party."

There, I've acted exactly as I should.

It's Emmett who doesn't listen, Emmett whose eyes narrow as he steps closer.

"Why?" he presses.

I search for a response beyond divulging Victor's suspicion about us. I don't know why I go mute rather than admitting the truth of our situation. Perhaps I'm worried about how he would respond to the rumor; a barking laugh could feel as searing as a knife. Deeper than that though is a heavy reluctance to continue to push Emmett away. I put up a good fight this morning, acting as if I wanted nothing to do with him, but it was just that: *acting*.

The truth is, I want him here. Maybe that's why I slinked away from the party in the first place, so he could find me, though I'm careful to not delve deeper into that thought.

In the end, I settle on something bland.

"Because it's inappropriate for us to be down here alone together."

There.

He looks less than concerned about propriety. "You're already bending the rules...now, tell me what you've found. Judging by the upper deck, I'm sure it's insane. The whole place is filled with ancient relics."

This is the moment I might come to regret later. Rather than making one last-ditch effort to resist him, I give in.

"There's a bathtub that looks like it could be made of solid gold."

His eyes alight with mischief. "Can't be. It'd weigh too much."

"I swear it. Come look."

I lead him back to the main suite's bathroom, and he stands beside me as we stare down at the truly heinous tub. It's Liberace's dream.

“It *could* be,” he says, tilting his head in wonder.

“See?”

“How many people do you think could fit inside it? It looks huge.”

“Get in and we’ll test it,” I say, already stepping in, mindful of my short hemline. If he catches a glimpse of something he shouldn’t as I climb over the lip of the tub, he has the good sense not to let me know.

I take a seat and stretch my long legs out before me then look up at him expectantly. He hasn’t moved.

“What?” My question is full of mock innocence.

“I was wrong about the size. You barely fit.”

“Not true. We’ll both fit, easily.”

“I don’t think you realize how tall I am.”

“I do.” Then I reach out for his hand. “Now come on. Don’t be such a chicken.”

He rolls his eyes but still allows me to tug him into the tub. There’s no clumsy climbing on his part. He steps in deftly then lowers himself down and takes a seat across from me. At first, we’re crammed, and I’m worried he’ll gloat about being right. Then he takes my ankles in hand and lifts them up so he can settle down beneath them. Finally, he rests my legs up on top of his.

We’re draped all over one another.

It’s so incredibly intimate and inappropriate, and worse, I don’t realize it until it’s too late. What seemed fun and silly now just feels like a tacky attempt to try to get close to him.

I'm no better than the tittering fan club that's surrounded him all day.

"Comfortable?" he asks.

I can do nothing but nod and tug down my dress in a futile attempt to cover more of my legs. I can't squeeze my thighs together tightly enough, not with his hold on my ankles.

As if he realizes exactly what I'm thinking—how on edge I already am—he begins to slowly slide his hands up my calves. I know he doesn't mean to send a cascade of shivers down my spine, but they're there and I'm sure he realizes it.

"Should we add water?" he teases.

My eyes widen with alarm. "Don't you dare."

His mischievous smirk makes me suddenly aware of the deep ache in my lower belly. We're so out of place here. His designer suit looks so strange in the gold bathtub.

"Don't tempt me like that. I'm not the saint you think I am."

"Oh please. You wouldn't hurt a fly. You returned my book to me, handwritten note and all."

"And what thanks did I get for it?"

"What kind of thanks do you want?"

The match strikes so suddenly that we both go mute.

Teasing banter gave way to sexual innuendo so seamlessly that I can only sit with red cheeks, praying he'll change the subject and soon.

Instead, his brown eyes hold such sincerity as he ups the stakes once again.

"What are you willing to give?"

I have no answer. If I open my mouth, it will only get me in trouble. The things I want to say right now are things I'm unfamiliar with. Uncharted territory is putting it lightly. I'm playing with fire, and Emmett hasn't released my legs, his grip so firm it almost gives the impression that he wouldn't let go of me even if I wanted him to. It's like he has me trapped and, innocent prey that I am, I didn't even realize it until *this* moment.

A prying question spills out of me. "What were you doing with Marie this afternoon?"

His gaze hardens. "The same thing you were doing with Royce—taking a walk."

"You seem to have a type."

His arched brow is an invitation to continue.

"Blonde."

He smiles and looks down as if appreciating some private joke.

"Have I nailed it?"

His dark eyes peer up from beneath his brows teasingly. "Close..."

"I'll keep going then, see if I can't pin it down exactly." I start ticking off attributes on my fingers. "The women are on the tall side. Impeccable dressers. Well educated and from the right families. I'd imagine they all speak at least two languages, have five to ten years of experience working some fancy job...and they're all proficient in Excel."

He laughs. "What a sexual creature you've painted."

I get hung up on the word sexual even though I know he's only teasing.

“You make it sound like I’m all over town with a different woman every night. The last girlfriend I had was three years ago.”

“Three years ago? Are you *that* picky? Or does it have to do with your commitment phobia?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Ah yes. No time for sex when you’re plotting world domination.”

“I never said that...”

He runs his hand gently around and behind my leg, teasing the back of my knee until I squirm.

“Stop,” I tell him, gripping the back of his hands to try to force them away.

He grins like a conqueror then leans back, getting comfortable again. His hands stay where they are, touching me in a way that feels so deliciously wrong.

“I wonder what your next girlfriend will be like...” I muse, picking up the thread of our conversation. “Obviously she’d have to be incredibly wonderful to deserve you.”

He knows I’m trying to goad him, but he leans into it. “Yes, exactly. She has to intrigue me and seduce me, and on occasion, even outwit me. I want a partner, not a plaything.”

“I’ll be sure to alert the press so women can start queuing now.”

Sick of my teasing, he retaliates by tugging on my legs so I slip further down into the bath. My dress hikes up to show the tops of my thighs and the faintest peek of my panties.

“*Emmett.*”

He ignores my warning. “Is this payback for this morning? Your way of turning the tables on me?”

I smile, letting him think that. It’s easier than admitting the real truth: that I feel unbearably jealous over the hypothetical woman who will earn his attention. Marie or Miranda or any other woman down the line—I’ll hate them all.

“Since you seem so eager to know, Marie found me as I was leaving the villa after lunch and asked me to take her down to the pond. I tried to beg off, but she insisted. It was a twenty-minute walk that felt like it dragged on for ten hours. There, you see how easy it is to be honest? Now you try.”

I swallow, unsure of what he means.

“I’ve been honest.”

His expression says, *Have you?*

“Ask me a question then...”

“Has Royce ever kissed you?”

“On the cheek, all the time.”

Said cheeks burn red hot.

He waits, making me squirm.

I look away. I’m not as strong as him. I can’t deliver the truth while meeting his gaze.

“No.”

It’s a faint admission, and my embarrassment bleeds into real annoyance. I see no point in shying away now. I turn back to boldly face him.

“Do you want the real truth? I’ve been kissed by men but never with passion and never in a way that’s made me want to race to do it again. I’m boring and sheltered compared to the

glitterati you surround yourself with, and I'm not eager to change that. I like my life."

To punctuate the end of my tirade, there's a long whistle followed by a colossal BOOM that makes me jump. Another BOOM swiftly follows as a fireworks show begins. I'm sure Victor's planned the whole thing to a T, gathering everyone to a special spot up on deck. I feel bad that we're missing it. Hopefully it's not obvious we're not there.

There's another long whistle and the sound of sparks crackling outside. We don't speak. We stare at one another, both of us doing a lazy perusal as if we not only grant permission for the intrusion but welcome it. From this close, I can spy the subtle details in his eyes, the slightly lighter brown that rings his pupils before it turns to an almost inky black. I study his mouth, the delectable curve of his upper lip and the taunting fullness of his bottom lip. I take in his closely shaven jaw and the way the muscle ticks there as he swallows. I'm an artist studying her living subject, trying to determine how it's possible for a person to make me feel as much as he does.

He doesn't look happy as he takes me in. He's troubled by something. Maybe it's the wrongness of the situation. The fun has seeped out of us, and now we're just two exposed souls. Outside, the fireworks continue, a cascade of explosions.

Having had enough, Emmett lets go of my legs and starts to extricate himself from the tub. He reaches for my hand, but I've already taken ahold of the side to lift myself out. Not wanting to be rude, I shift my weight to take his offered hand instead. It all happens so fast then: I accidentally lose my footing before I have his hand, gripping anything I can find, which happens to be the faucet knob. It twists easily, as it's

meant to, and suddenly cold water splashes out onto my lower back and legs.

I squeal and hurry to turn it off, but it's too late. The damage is done, the back of my dress completely soaked. That's what I get for playing in a bathtub.

Emmett curses under his breath and impatiently grabs for me, swiftly lifting me up and out like I'm filled with feathers instead of bones. On the marble floor, I drip water, too stunned to be much of any help. He's the one who finds a towel to dry me off. He's the one to turn me around to assess the damage. He sighs heavily and shrugs out of his jacket.

“No—”

The protest isn't even fully formed before his warning gaze meets mine.

“It's cold out and I won't allow you to stand on deck shivering.”

His commanding tone is so unlike anything I'm used to. This is the man who was just tickling the backs of my knees in the bathtub...

“People will wonder.”

“And you'll tell them nothing. It's no one's business. You're hardly the first person in history to borrow a jacket.”

And with that, the argument is over. Emmett has won.

He confirms I'm comfortable and dry *enough*, and with a nod, we start to head back toward the party neither of us seems all that eager to rejoin. He keeps me in front of him with a comforting hand on my shoulder, and then as we ascend the narrow staircase to the main floor, he shifts it down onto my lower back.

The moment we're at the top, he pulls away, and I'm left to make do with the warmth of his borrowed jacket. I love the weight of it. The heady scent of cedarwood and geranium feels luxurious—a scent I'd want to linger, a candle I'd burn all night. The hem is an inch longer than my dress on the bottom. If I stopped to button it all the way up, it'd look like I was wearing nothing at all underneath, and when I peer over at Emmett, it's like he's just had the same thought.

I brace myself for the impending awkwardness of seeing party guests again, but the main salon is empty. As suspected, everyone is gathered on the deck watching the fireworks show, save for a few crew members positioned near the bar and the sliding doors. Expertly trained in the art of being discreet, they act as if they don't even see us. The sliding door sweeps open and a spray of fireworks lights up the sky. A few people exclaim in excitement, but my gaze is fixed on Victor, who hovers near the back of the group, turned away from the gathered crowd. He watched us walk through the salon, maybe even caught our ascent up the stairs, and his impish wink makes me sick to my stomach.

Chapter Eighteen

Lainey

We've gone too far, that's for certain. Whatever Emmett's aim in pursuing a friendship with me, we've crossed a boundary I've been careful to protect. There's no way people haven't noticed us together. Last night on the yacht, wearing his suit jacket felt like I was wearing his varsity letters. I might as well have had his promise ring twinkling on my ring finger. My grandmother wasn't pleased.

I'm careful the next day. I avoid him, totally. I eat breakfast tucked between Florence Carmichael and my grandmother. I accept an invitation to go out in a speedboat with Royce and a few others, and then I slip away from dinner quickly while most everyone else moves on to the sitting room for late-night drinks. I don't look at Emmett once the entire day. It's my sole mission to take account of where he stands in a room and avoid that area like the plague.

I'm exhausted by the time night falls, but I can't sleep. I lie on top of my blankets with the window open, the soft autumn breeze rustling the drapes.

My grandmother went to bed ages ago, and when I stand up and go over to listen at the door, I hear the sound of her soft snoring.

This room gives me the odd feeling of being trapped, just like my room in Boston. Only here, I have no balcony. I can barely pace. From wall to wall, it's only a few strides.

I move over to the window and stare down at the twinkling lights in the distance, at the serene water, and at the lone figure sitting on the edge of the pier.

Emmett.

I'm wearing a pale pink slip as a nightgown, but I worry if I take the time to change, he'll already be gone.

I don't even bother with shoes.

I rush over and take the doorknob in hand, carefully turning until I feel the latch give way. A faint creak spikes my blood with panic, but my grandmother sleeps on, undisturbed.

On tiptoe, I sneak past. It's exhilarating and silly. I shouldn't be made to feel like a deviant teenager just because I want to go out for a nighttime stroll, and yet I can't shake the feeling. I peer over at my grandmother's sleeping figure once more before I carefully open the door that leads out into the hall, and then I slip out.

Not everyone is sleeping. Voices carry from downstairs; the night's festivities haven't ended. I race down the central staircase, holding on to the banister as I scurry along the cold marble floor, and then I make a break for the door that leads to the backyard.

I'm aware that I could be watched. Quite a few of the villa's bedrooms have views of the lake and pier and gardens, but I suspect everyone who isn't drinking down in the sitting room is already asleep. Except for Emmett.

My bare feet are quiet on the grass as I curve around the topiaries and the gravel path, then I follow the slope of the

yard down toward the pier. He's sitting in his bathing suit, one knee bent up so he can rest his elbow on top of it.

"If you're trying to scare me, it won't work. I heard you coming a mile away."

I freeze.

He turns slowly over his shoulder, lazily dragging his gaze down my short nightgown and bare legs.

"How'd you know it was me?"

"No one else would dare to bother me at this time of night."

"If it's a bother, I can go..."

His sincere gaze captures mine.

"Don't make me ask you to stay. I will, and it won't make either of us feel good."

He turns back to the water. I hesitate for only a moment before I pad on bare feet until I make it to the end of the pier, right beside him. I bend down and take a seat, draping my legs over the edge of the wood so my feet dip into the cold water, barely up to my ankles.

"So you stay away all day just to visit me at night?" he asks, knocking his foot against mine under the water's surface.

"I couldn't sleep."

"I never can."

I kick my feet back and forth in the water, watching the ripples.

"Were you going to go for a swim?"

“I was thinking about it. I’ve been doing laps in the pool this week, but I can never resist the temptation of swimming in open water.”

“You’re not trying to cross the whole thing, are you?”

He laughs softly. “You don’t need to worry about that. It’s too far. Though I did used to swim across the lake back at St. John’s.”

I know, I want to say.

Instead, I merely nod.

Then he pushes to stand. “Get in with me.”

An incredulous laugh spills out of me. “Absolutely not. It’s freezing.”

“Hardly.”

“This is a deep glacial lake.”

He looks unimpressed, but I don’t care.

“Have your swim. I’ll stay right here.”

“What an appropriate metaphor, you always sitting right on the edge of life, never quite brave enough to enjoy it.”

I bristle at his assessment, aware of how close he is to hitting the bull’s-eye.

“Save the reverse psychology. It won’t work on me.”

“Have you ever gone swimming at night?”

“No, and I’m doing perfectly fine, thank you.”

“What about skinny-dipping?”

My eyes widen. “*No!* Because unlike you, I don’t succumb to peer pressure.”

“You’re such a bad actress, you really shouldn’t bother trying. I see you, remember? The quiet girl who sneaked out into the woods to spy on my friends and me. You want to misbehave so badly...why don’t you give it a try?”

A dark blooming need starts to build inside me, but I resist with everything I have, trying to lighten the mood with my reply.

“Because I know how skinny-dipping would end. You’d take one look at my naked body and pass out from the sheer pleasure of it. It’d be a pain trying to call for an ambulance out here in the middle of nowhere.”

It’s one of life’s simple pleasures watching Emmett’s smile unfurl across his handsome face.

“I could push you in.”

“I’d never forgive you,” I say with mock seriousness.

He rolls his eyes.

“Fine. Then sit there and sulk.”

And with that, he takes aim and completes a smooth dive into the water, transitioning easily into his measured strokes. I’m catapulted back in time; watching him from the pier, I could be thirteen again, spying on a young Emmett as he tries to swim his anger away. I’m not surprised he still does this, the laps, the unending search for peace at the end of a long day. Just like him, I haven’t solved my problems either.

The methodic strokes are as mesmerizing as they always were. I swirl my toes in the water as I watch him disappearing into the distance. Worry edges in as he starts to grow smaller, but if teenage Emmett with his boyhood body could swim the length of St. John’s lake twice over, the Emmett I know now,

with his menacing height and broad shoulders and hardened muscles, can manage just fine out on Lake Como.

Eventually, he gets too far for me to watch, and I've given up on worrying he'll be mowed down by some boat racing past. If he wants to put his life at risk, it's his prerogative.

As for me, I want to lie back on the wooden pier and look up at the night sky to see what constellations I can discern from out here. It's not as dark as I'd prefer it, but we're far enough from major cities that I can see much more of the night sky than I usually can back in Boston. I've never been camping, but I imagine this is what it would feel like, alone in the middle of nowhere. I trace the stars with my eyes, trying to draw upon long-dormant names of stars I might have known when I was younger. Orion, Ursa Major, Cassiopeia...the only one I can make out for certain is the Big Dipper, and that doesn't feel like much of an accomplishment.

I'm busy staring up when I hear Emmett's distant strokes slicing through the water, growing louder on his return journey. I don't bother sitting up as he approaches. He thought I would be here sulking with loneliness, and I'm determined to show him I'm not.

Look, see? I completely forgot about you.

He finishes his swim and I feel the pier bow slightly under his weight as he grabs ahold of it. I can't help but surrender to the swoop of excitement as he hoists himself up like a creature from the depths. He's breathing hard, and when I look down, he's sitting back on his heels, staring at me as he tries to slow his racing heart. His hair is slicked back and wet, inky black. The peaks of his cheekbones look severe in the moonlight. I meet his gaze head-on, accepting whatever challenge he's laying at my feet. A wickedness sets in, the devil in him

responding to my unwillingness to bow to him. He pushes forward onto his hands and knees, like a tiger at my feet. He crawls forward, coming over me slowly as water drips down onto my nightgown...down onto my skin. A cold drop hits my clavicle and rolls along the center of my chest, disappearing into my nightgown, and Emmett watches it, hovering over me with his midnight eyes. His breathing is still heavy from exertion.

Goose bumps bloom across my skin as a breeze rolls over us.

I shift, putting forth the most feeble effort imaginable to get out from underneath him. "You're getting me wet."

He smiles, enjoying the double entendre. "Isn't that the point, *petite souris*? Since you weren't going to get in, I had to bring the lake to you."

He's sopping, which means now *I'm* sopping.

A water drop hits the peak of my left breast, and my lips part. Everywhere, the fabric begins to stick to my skin, going transparent from the wetness.

Despite the chill in the air, a deep warmth settles over me, the kind of heat that needs kindling if I want it to grow.

I could lift my hand and touch him.

He could touch me.

I'm caged in between him and the wooden pier. There's nowhere to go unless I want to push him off, and I don't. I would never tell him no if only he'd ask.

Impatience gnaws at me as I curl my fingers, my nails biting into the wood.

He holds perfectly still, taking me in with such astute eyes that I feel like he's seeing it all, down to the marrow in my bones.

Another drop of water falls just below my mouth, and I arch up instinctively, yearning for something he seems unwilling to give me. I crave him with a vengeance that feels so consuming I shake with the exhaustion of trying to fend it off. My chin tilts up, and, trying to save myself from the overwhelming need and the embarrassment licking at my skin, I let my eyes flutter closed.

But without that sense, everything only grows headier: the sweet scent of the night on him, the warmth radiating from his body, the sound of his steady breaths as he lowers himself down further, his exhale passing over my lips like a soft caress.

I almost say his name. I almost beg him with a throaty moan.

But he knows. Emmett waits for me to gather courage, and when I finally open my eyes again, he bends down, tilts his head...hovers there for a brief agonizing moment...and then rewards me with a kiss.

I'm arrested in place as his mouth slants over mine, a chaste peck quickly dissolving into more. I'm mostly to blame. I respond to his kiss with a hunger I don't recognize. My hand slides up and around his neck, and I take it deeper. I peel my back up off the pier to press our bodies together. For a brief moment, I'm the one dragging us further past the point of no return. But then his bare chest meets mine and he pushes me back down as his mouth presses possessively into mine.

He kisses with a skill I've never experienced, but then, he knows that.

I divulged to him just yesterday that I've never kissed someone passionately and now he seems intent on fixing that, on giving me a kiss that will ruin me from this day forward. If I'm ever asked about my first kiss, my first *real* kiss, it will be this moment on the pier that I'll remember. What an arrogant bastard to brand himself on my memory like that, to ensure that he'll always linger in the periphery of my fantasies.

He props his elbows on either side of my head and his wet body pins me down. A moan escapes me, but I'm too lost to care about restraining my need. He obviously feels the same. The weight of his desire presses against my thigh, impossible to ignore as he shifts over me, pressing onto one arm. Our kiss deepens, our lips parting in unison, his tongue sweeping across mine. Fire builds inside me, taking my oxygen and my good sense.

Up until this point, he's kept his hands off me, but he lifts himself just enough to allow his free hand to slide between our bodies. His warm palm elicits a swarm of butterflies as it covers the side of my stomach before teasing upward, drawing the wet silk of my nightgown up with it. Higher he goes until his fingers brush the underside of my breast. He feels the pleasure rack through me and does it again, running the back of his finger up over the peak of my breast, tantalizingly slow and then back down, toying with me as he goes.

Cool air hits the tops of my thighs now that my nightgown is tugged even higher. I'm about to spread my legs in invitation, to see where this dark night will take me, when peals of laughter carry over the quiet breeze. I flinch. It could be nothing, just the group in the sitting room having had too much to drink back at the villa, but it feels like we've been caught, like if I open my eyes, I'll find them all standing at the foot of the pier, watching us.

Panicked, I turn and slide out from beneath Emmett. Rough wood scratches at my thigh and upper arm as I try to get away as fast as I can. I scramble to stand up, already covering myself with my arms, already regretting my stupidity as I keep my head bowed and hurry back. If Emmett calls out after me, I'm not dumb enough to listen.

Chapter Nineteen

Emmett

Rain pelts the windows of the villa, the summer storm that was looming over us all morning finally delivering on its promise. Without access to the outdoors, everyone's convened in the main living room where it's guest's choice among all of the activities. There are board games and card games and afternoon tea trays being passed around. Victor plays charades with a lively group.

I came down late after wrapping up two conference calls for work. Lainey was already sitting on the far side of the room, reading a book beside her grandmother, who's embroidering a handkerchief. She didn't look up as I walked in, not even when Will called my name from across the room to ask if I'd join him in a game of poker.

She hasn't looked up at me since. She seems intent on ignoring my existence.

It's nothing new. She's been playing hot and cold all week. For the most part, she's been determined to keep me at arm's length, though when her guard is down, or perhaps when she forgets she doesn't want to stay away, she caves. Last night is a testament to that.

I didn't expect her to come down and join me before my swim. Her visit on the pier caught me off guard, and kissing

her was never my goal. She was lying there like some offering from the gods, a temptress I had to taste.

I'd apologize for taking advantage of the situation if only she'd look at me.

This game of avoidance grows boring. I'm not accustomed to having to chase after people's attention.

I could catch her when she's alone, bend down and whisper against the shell of her ear, remind her that she kissed me back, that *she* came to *me* last night, but it would do no good. She seems to have made up her mind. Our kiss was the final nail in my coffin, and it's for the best.

I shouldn't have toyed with her. She's meant for someone else, and that's made perfectly clear to me when Royce takes the open seat beside me at the poker table.

"What are we playing?" he asks, looking across at Moretti, one of Victor's butlers, who's acting as our dealer.

"Five-card draw."

"Good. Deal me in for the next round." He raps his knuckles on the table then looks at me. "I haven't talked to you much this week, Emmett. How's your visit been?"

I can't be sure if his voice holds a slight edge or if I'm only imagining it.

"Fine. And yours?"

"Oh, nothing to complain about. Italy is Italy."

Will breaks off into a conversation with the man on his right and Royce seizes the moment, clearing his throat before angling slightly toward me.

“I’ve seen you with Elaine throughout the week. I didn’t realize you two were such good friends.”

Moretti starts dealing cards clockwise to each of the four players, keeping them face down. I watch him intently, ignoring Royce so that he’s forced to shift in his seat and try again, this time more directly.

“I’d like to know the nature of your relationship with her.”

“You’ve just said it. We’re friends.”

He leans in, either to try to intimidate me or to keep our conversation private. “Don’t play me for a fool.”

Unfortunately, it’s rather easy to do.

I peer down the bridge of my nose at him. “What would you like to ask me, Royce? And be clear.”

Moretti finishes dealing, and after the first round of bets are placed, he begins the draw phase. We all pick up our hands, and I only discard two cards before I stand pat.

Royce was waiting patiently for me to finish and now hurries to tell me, “I had hopes that Elaine and I would wed.”

“So then...wed.” By now, my tone is acerbic.

“I would like to. She’s well-behaved and kind. Dutiful, too. I like that about her. She’ll make a very good wife.”

Or a very good German Shepherd.

It’s hard to tell the difference from his description.

“I’m trying to ascertain where this conversation will lead...”

He scoffs and leans away. “It’s an advantageous match for the both of us.”

He sounds as if he's trying to convince himself of something, and if he's hoping I'll thump him on the back and congratulate him on his wonderful idea to follow through on this betrothal, he's sorely mistaken.

“Is it? I find the entire concept archaic.”

He clearly takes offense. “I won't be dragging her to the altar if that's what you're worried about.” His gaze lifts over my shoulder as he looks toward Lainey sitting across the room. His brows tug together in indecision. “At least...I hope not.”

Another round of betting begins and the game continues, but it doesn't matter. I can't get our conversation out of my head the rest of the day. I'm not sure who I feel sorrier for, Royce, who seems to want someone who holds absolutely no interest in him, or Lainey, who seems incapable of getting herself out of a situation that will undoubtedly make her miserable in the end.

Later that evening, rather than head down to the dining hall, I choose to take dinner in my room so I can catch up on work I've missed throughout the week. I'm grateful to be leaving Italy the day after tomorrow. Every project has been on hold while I've been away, and I hate the feeling of being behind. Emails have been pouring in, I have close to a hundred unread text messages on my phone, and I feel the burn of all the fires that will need putting out upon my return to Boston.

I work until late into the night, and then when the house grows quiet and all the guests seem to have gone to bed, I stand, stretch my aching back, and change into my swimsuit so I can head down to the lake.

I don't expect Lainey to join me again after what happened last night, but there's always hope. I'd like to apologize to her,

or at least check in to see how she's feeling.

This thing between us has grown complicated. Our forced proximity this week was unusual for a friendship like ours, and perhaps the kiss would have never happened had we not been in Italy.

I'm not clear on what my motives are with her. If Royce had truly pressed me for the nature of my relationship with Lainey, I wouldn't have been able to give him a solid answer. The truth is, she intrigues me, and it's been so long since I've experienced that feeling about someone that I can't help but want to act on it, selfish though it may be.

I walk down to the pier and sit in the same spot from last night, and I wait.

Lainey doesn't come.

Chapter Twenty

Lainey

Tonight happens to be Halloween, which is why Victor's planned a masquerade ball to finish out the week of festivities. Of course, no one is actually going to come in costume. Everyone will be dressed in couture and relying on their masks to form the bulk of their disguise.

My custom Dior dress is held up by a fitted corset overlaid with soft silk, so tight I feel like I can't take a deep breath. The skirt flutters to the ground, made of nearly transparent layers of tulle, each one adorned with ethereal sequined stars, so subtle you'd have to bring the fabric right up to your face to be able to make out the pattern. It's the dress of an angel, and my slim silvery-white mask furthers the effect. It was made by an artisan at Dior who used embroidered stars to form a cat's-eye mask so delicate I'm scared to touch it once it's been tied in place.

The party is in full swing when I approach the top of the stairs that lead dramatically down into the villa's ballroom. Waiters flank both sides, dressed in their trademark dark blue damask-patterned suits, though for tonight, they've added coordinating masks as well. One of them hurries toward me as I stop on the landing and look down at the crowd.

There's power in anonymity. I don't doubt the guests will place me soon enough, but for this first moment, in this dress and mask, I don't fail to capture their attention. They're enthralled, and I like it—the cool caress of eyes on me as I take the offered hand of the attendant and walk slowly down the stairs.

For once, I'm not alongside my grandmother. She arrived earlier, the guest of honor on Victor's arm. I was still getting the finishing touches done to my hair and makeup when she left our shared rooms. She preferred it this way.

“That way you'll make a real entrance.”

I lift my gaze and take in the crowd at the bottom of the stairs.

Every guest gathered there is staring up at me. People who've largely ignored me all week now seem unable to look away, to even blink.

It's Victor who whirls into action, taking me from the attendant, spinning me around so that I'm forced to turn and show him every angle of my dress.

“You've done it, my dear. You've managed to capture the essence of an angel. Your grandmother told me about this dress and dear God, it does not disappoint. Turn just once more for me. *Stu-nning*.” He leans in for a double air kiss on my cheeks. “You've managed to make every other person in this room look like they pulled an outfit off the rack at Macy's. Who is this? Valentino?”

“Dior.”

“Of course. Maria never misses. I'll have to congratulate her on another showstopper. Would you like champagne?”

“Please.”

“Good. Come with me and I’ll parade you through the party so everyone can get an eyeful before that handsome fiancé of yours steals you away for the rest of the evening.”

“Oh, I—”

I’m not given the opportunity to correct his misunderstanding about the man I’m *actually* betrothed to because he’s found a group of people he’d like to chat with, and instead of loosening his grip on me so I can slink away, he keeps a firm hand on my arm.

“Have you all *seen* this dress?” he asks, thrusting me into the limelight.

They ooh and ahh, performing for Victor more than me.

“Lainey, it’s gorgeous,” Florence says. “Who designed it?”

Victor swoops in and answers her before I can.

“It needs to be sent to Dior’s archive after tonight!” another person comments.

“I’m sure that’s already been arranged,” Victor says with an air of impatience.

“How long did it take them to create this?”

“I—I’m not sure.”

“Weeks, I’ll bet,” the woman beside me says, picking up the top layer of tulle near my hip to inspect the embroidery. “This is all hand done. Wow. How were you able to secure a custom fitting like this?”

Victor swats at her hand until she drops the material. “Darling, if you have to ask, you can’t afford it.” The cliché line is delivered in a mockingly slow drawl, and the circle of people laugh.

Everyone except for me because while they were fawning over my dress, I was staring up at Emmett on the second-story landing. His arrival brings with it a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. He stands at the top stair, wearing a classically tailored tuxedo over a black dress shirt. Even from a distance, I can see his black mask is inscribed with swirls of silver leaf. Without meaning to, we've dressed like polar opposites. Light and dark. Good and evil.

His eyes sweep the crowd, and unlike when I stood in his spot, surveying everyone with equal measure, he seems to be on the hunt for someone right up until his gaze settles on me. My heart plummets in my chest as he slowly begins his descent down the stairs, never taking his eyes off me. With every breath, my chest strains against my corset. My hand instinctively comes to press against my stomach, where a tight knot has already formed.

There is such a thing as a man who was born to wear a tuxedo...a man whose presence feels like a demigod has deigned to come down and pay a visit to his loyal subjects...a man who seems to control the hearts of every person in this room, including mine.

I almost resent him. Almost.

I see what he's trying to do. He cuts through the crowd, winding a path directly toward me, and though I feel the surge of excitement at having his attention so clearly aimed at me, I know I can't stand here and let this play out.

Though I haven't seen them yet, I know Royce and my grandmother are here. Emmett and I have misbehaved all week, and I won't allow us to continue. Going down to the pier was my mistake, but outside of that, my hands are *mostly* clean, and I'd like to keep it that way.

“I’m going to get more champagne,” I tell the group, though it’s useless. Like me, they’ve turned to watch the devil stroll into the room, their breaths bated, their lips parted in wonder.

What a fool we all are for a man who wants nothing more than to play us like pawns.

My exit was a sham—I don’t need more champagne. I still have a mostly filled glass, but as I turn my back on Emmett, I down it in one swift swallow and pass it off to a nearby waiter.

“Another?” the man asks gently.

I accept a new glass with a shaky hand and swallow down another long sip. I’m tempted to drink the whole thing, but I’d be left with nothing but a headache.

Even though the ballroom is crowded, it feels like I can’t put nearly enough people between Emmett and me. I look for my grandmother, but I don’t see her. I should have asked Victor where she was when I had the chance.

Without her, my options are limited. I feel like a sitting duck.

I find Royce across the ballroom and I smile, relieved at the idea of standing at his side all evening, playing my part. I’m about to take my first step toward him when I register that he hasn’t smiled back. His expression is hard and unfamiliar, so unlike the gentle man I’ve grown used to.

Then he turns toward the woman at his side—Marie, I realize—and I’m forgotten.

I swallow past the tight emotion in my throat. Though I’m not upstairs in my small room, I can’t shake the feeling of being trapped. Just at my back, two arched doors lead to a

small veranda overlooking the backyard gardens, and I quickly make my escape, glad for the fresh air, slight chill and all.

I want to give Royce the benefit of the doubt. In my mask, he might not have recognized me. Though, let's be honest, I'm hardly wearing a costume. Unless he's half-blind, he would have been able to easily place my features. Emmett had no trouble...

Maybe he's just in a bad mood, or maybe he was deep in conversation with Marie.

Maybe...

I squeeze my eyes closed and try to cap my worry. It won't do me any good to stand out here, twisting worst-case scenarios in my head. If something is wrong, Royce will let me know. We are hopefully friends enough for that, at least.

Sweeping orchestral music begins to play in the ballroom, a familiar Chopin piece. My grandmother used to play it years ago, when a dance instructor came to teach me to waltz. The beauty of the song makes me nostalgic for a time I never existed in, a Regency-era ball where I'd only have to contend with a duke in need of a fortune rather than a devil in need of entertainment.

I sip slowly on my champagne, leaning onto the stone balustrade and taking in the view I'll be leaving behind in the morning. There are towns across the lake, nestled at the foot of the mountains. From here, they look impossibly tiny, snow globe cities. It's hard to imagine there are real people living there.

The warm light of the villa's ballroom spills out onto the veranda, and when a black shadow falls over me, I know it's Emmett even before he comes to stand beside me.

I take stock of the things I've grown familiar with, the sheer size of him beside me, the enveloping force of him. I hold out as long as possible, keeping my gaze on the moonlit lake, until his magnetic pull wins out.

I tip my head gently in his direction and find I'm no less affected by the sight of him now than I was all those years ago at St. John's. It's a pity I can't seem to form a resistance against him.

"Tomorrow, we leave," he muses.

I hum in reply.

He turns toward me, leaning his forearm on the balustrade.

"Will you miss it here?"

"Would you believe me if I said no?"

Italy has been wonderful. Italy never disappoints, but I'm eager to return to Boston.

"You're too stunning to be standing out here on your own. It's a waste. Come dance with me."

"No."

"Should I beg?"

I almost smile at the thought. "You wouldn't know how."

"True. It would be a first—but I get the sense you'd like that."

I suddenly feel so exhausted by our games, by the pseudo friendship he seems insistent on perpetuating when we both know it's not real. The two of us could never just be friends.

I shoot him a suspicious glare. "What is it that you want, Emmett?"

His brows knit together. “I’ve been trying to determine if I should apologize about the other night.”

“I’d rather we didn’t discuss it at all.”

“How can I resist when it gives you such a pretty flush, right here.”

The back of his knuckle grazes my cheek, and I don’t have the strength to pull away. Still, I manage a feeble “Don’t.”

“Fine. The apology wouldn’t have been sincere anyway. I’m not sorry for kissing you.”

“Ms. Davenport.”

I turn at the sound of my name and find Mr. Moretti standing at the doorway of the ballroom. Unlike the other attendants, he isn’t masked.

“I’m sorry for the interruption. Your grandmother sent me to fetch you. She’d like a word.”

“Of course,” I say, picking up my tulle skirt so I can hurry to join him.

I look back at Emmett only once before I make it to the door, and I find his easygoing expression has been wiped clean, replaced with terse annoyance. I don’t have time to delve into it. Whatever it is my grandmother needs, I don’t want to keep her waiting. A gnawing worry has already set in. I let Mr. Moretti lead me through the ballroom and then out into the hall. Through a heavy antique door, we enter a small, dark library.

My grandmother sits in her gown on a couch facing the doorway. Her hands are folded primly in her lap, and she nods in thanks to Mr. Moretti before he steps back and closes the door behind him.

“I—is everything okay?” I ask, taking in her appearance, hoping beyond hope that she isn’t about to tell me bad news about her health.

She looks ghostly white in this setting, the lamplight doing little to convince me she is fine and well. Her absence from the ballroom heralds bad news, I know it.

“I thought it best to tell you right away. Royce has called off the betrothal.”

Her statement absorbs into my bloodstream slowly, and all the while, I hold perfectly still, unsure of which emotion I should reveal, the agony of disappointment or the immensity of relief?

“And after your foolish behavior with Emmett this week, I’m hardly surprised.”

She spits out the word *foolish* so that it wounds me. Still, I work to give nothing away beyond my arms coming up to wrap protectively around me.

Whatever punishment she’s about to dole out, I’ll accept it with my shoulders back and my chin held high.

“Fortunately for you, I’ve already found a solution that I find far more appealing.”

Her gaze shifts over my right shoulder, and I realize for the first time since arriving in the room that I’m not alone with my grandmother. I look back and feel dread constrict my chest.

Frédéric Mercier has come to join us in Italy.

Chapter Twenty-One

Emmett

It's not long after Lainey leaves before Moretti comes back for me. I've been out on the veranda, checking emails on my phone, confirming my travel itinerary for tomorrow. He clears his throat behind me.

“Sir, your presence has been requested in the library.”

When I don't immediately hop to it, he adds, “Mr. Mercier seems rather impatient.”

Well then, we don't want to keep him waiting.

If Papa has flown all the way to Italy and requested an audience with me, I have no doubt it's for something important. I know it doesn't pertain to work. My phone would have been lighting up with calls if there was an emergency at GHV, some issue with the Leclerc takeover, perhaps, but it hasn't, which means this is personal.

My mind immediately jumps to Alexander. I haven't heard from him since I've been in Italy, which isn't unusual for us—we aren't the type to talk every day—but there have been incidents in the past, issues with drugs and alcohol. I've had a few calls in the middle of the night, friends worried for him. It hasn't happened in years, and I thought those days might be behind us, but I'm already following Moretti, letting him lead

me toward the library while I run through the proper steps in my mind.

I'm so deep down the wormhole of worry over Alexander that I don't think to consider other possibilities. It's why I'm caught off guard when I arrive in the dimly lit library to find that my father isn't alone. It hadn't even occurred to me that there would be others here waiting for me.

I stop dead in my tracks, only two steps into the room as I survey the three of them: my father, Fay Davenport, and Lainey.

My hackles immediately go up.

“What is this?”

Ignoring my question, my father dismisses Moretti with a curt nod. “Thank you, that will be all.”

The door creaks shut behind me, and an ominous silence fills the room.

I stay where I am, staring down my father, trying to ascertain what could possibly be happening. My father stands confidently before me wearing a terse expression, obviously leading the charge. On the couch behind him, Fay Davenport could be a queen with her posture so severely perfect and her gaze so fiercely omnipotent. Lainey sits next to her, sandwiched between her grandmother's hip and the arm of the couch. Her attention is down on her hands.

Uneasiness fills me.

“It's obvious I'm the last to know something, so what is it? Why are we all here?”

It's clear to me now that this has nothing to do with Alexander.

My father's dark eyes narrow in annoyance. He doesn't appreciate my tone, but I don't appreciate being out of the loop, so we're even.

He steps toward me, one of his hands tucked casually in the pocket of his tuxedo pants. The other runs down the center of his button-down, ensuring it's perfectly in place.

"It's been a long time since I've had to clean up one of your messes. Fortunately for you, I was already planning to attend tonight's party on a stopover from Sweden."

I let him continue, hoping he'll spit out the rest. And quickly.

His jaw hardens. "The way I've heard it, you've been playing with something that doesn't belong to you. Elaine was engaged."

Jesus Christ, is that what this is about?

I throw up my arms. This is ludicrous.

"Engaged? *Hardly.*"

"Your assessment of the situation holds no weight," he spits. "The fact is she was betrothed, and now that arrangement has been called off because of you and your flagrant disregard for this young girl's future."

"Because of *me*?" I laugh, short and caustic. "You're kidding me. The betrothal was a sham from the beginning. The two of them hardly know each other. It would have dissolved naturally in a month or two, if it even lasted that long." I swipe my hand through the air in front of me. "I played no part in any of it. But quite frankly, if it is done, I say good riddance. They're both better off for it."

“Enough!” my father roars, sick of my tirade. “You won’t shirk your responsibility in the matter. I’ve heard it straight from the horse’s mouth.”

Whose mouth? Lainey or her grandmother?

I’m aware of my temper starting to rise, of my pounding heart that’s about to get the better of me.

“I’m on trial then, is it?”

He’s laid out the accusations, so what is it that he wants?

He steps aside to give me a better view of the two women behind him. “Fay Davenport has made it clear that she’s seeking restitution.”

Realization is a heavy anvil, nearly knocking me off my feet.

I take a step back and point between them. “I see what you two are trying to do, but it won’t pass. Lainey won’t—”

“Elaine has already agreed,” he says, cutting me off with a markedly bored tone. “Beyond that, your fate has been sealed. We’ll place engagement announcements in *The New York Times* and *Le Figaro*, and soon.”

“I’ll call the newspapers and refute the engagement.”

My father doesn’t even have the decency to look worried. It’s his friend who owns both papers. Hell, my father has a small stake in each of them as well. He could make a quick call to ensure the story reads how he’d like it to. He likely already has.

What a billionaire madman wants, he gets.

“I won’t go through with this.”

No one says a word, not even Lainey. I finally look at her, to try to glean how she's feeling about all of this, but she won't meet my gaze. Her eyes are now on the floor. She seems unbearably small, stuffed in this room with three lions. Fay rests a protective hand on her knee as if to shield her from my fury.

“Lainey.”

My pleading voice does nothing to persuade her to look up.

“Tell them this is ridiculous. Tell them you won't go through with it either.”

She still doesn't look up, so focused on wringing her hands atop her lap.

My father, having had enough, gives a final, heavy sigh.

“You'll do as you've always done, Emmett. You'll represent the Mercier family with dignity and pride. Whatever protest you're plotting, whatever outlandish acts you think might get you out of this...they're futile. In six months' time, the two of you will be wed, and that's that.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Emmett

The rain from Italy follows us back to Boston. In the two weeks since my return, the streets have been a sloshy mess. Rain clouds blot out the sun, and a deep chill has set in over the city. I largely exist as if my life hasn't changed since my last night in Italy. With unwavering determination, I focus on work. There are no petulant tantrums or shows of defiance. In fact, I'm on my way to meet my father at the future site of GHV's headquarters in Boston.

We've spoken multiple times since Italy and I can tell he's waiting for an outburst from me, but he won't get it.

My car pulls up to the curb outside the building. Just inside the lobby, through the rain-splattered windows, I can see my father waiting with his assistant. The plan for today is to take a few minutes to walk the building since he hasn't had a chance to see it in person yet, and then we'll meet with a lead architect and engineer from Banks and Barclay to understand the full scope of the project and the timeline we're up against.

My driver whips my door open, a large black umbrella already in place above my head. I take it, thank him, and head toward the building.

Other than a few raindrops on my shoes, I'm bone-dry when I walk into the building and join my father and Wilson.

They stand side by side while Wilson shows my father something on his phone.

He shakes his head, his focus still on whatever Wilson is showing him as he speaks. “We need to reschedule the meeting.” Then he looks up and asks me tersely, “*Pourquoi es-tu en tardif?*”

To which I reply, “*Pluie.*” Though I’m not late. I’m precisely on time.

I won’t give in to his needling. He wants a fight, but I get more satisfaction out of denying him the pleasure.

“*Le bâtiment est assez ancien.*”

I almost laugh and reply in French, “Historical architecture always is.”

“And have you gathered an estimate for what it will cost to renovate this?”

“You act as if you haven’t donated millions of euros to the restoration of Notre Dame. You of all people should appreciate this building for what it could be.”

“I’m more worried about it turning into a money pit. Alexander is supposed to be overseeing this project. Where is he?” He looks out onto the street expectantly.

“He won’t be here. I’ve taken over for him. I’d rather spearhead it myself.”

He nods but doesn’t say anything more.

“Should we walk the first floor? I’ve been told to avoid the elevators, but the stairs are just there. Once we finish down here, we can go up and look at the second story as well.”

Wilson immediately prepares himself to take notes, falling in step behind us.

As we walk and I point out features of the building to my father, he asks me about various work updates, starting with a dinner I attended last night then moving on to last month's numbers from one of our jewelry brands. The topics stay neutral until he brings up the betrothal.

"I've been assured the engagement announcements will run tomorrow morning. Fay Davenport is pleased."

"I don't see the rush."

After all, I won't be going through with it.

"Heirs don't grow on trees, Emmett."

"Should I amuse you by confirming that I will not, under any circumstances, entertain this charade?"

"You will," he says calmly.

"Or what? My position in the company? My trust? Gone?"

"Don't be so dramatic. You act as if I'm putting you up against real hardship. I was there in Italy, remember? I saw the girl. She's beautiful, agreeable, and more than you could ask for in a wife. Refined, intelligent, or so I hear, and she comes from good stock. She's everything I had in mind for you."

"Et comment devrais-je la baiser?"

And how should I fuck her?

He stops walking. "Excuse me?"

"You seem to have a hand in everything else, so tell me."

"You'll hold your tongue. I expect you to be grateful for what I've given you."

“I won’t do it.”

“You will,” he says, spitting venom.

Then, my father’s phone rings, and Wilson clears his throat before performing the uncomfortable task of reminding us that the architects will arrive soon. Just like that, it’s business as usual once again. I’m sure my father falsely assumes I’m capitulating to his demands. I’m not.

The next morning, I wake up to a media firestorm as my father makes good on his promise to share news of the engagement. First the story breaks in the London *Times* and *Le Figaro*, then *The New York Times*. From there, it’s unstoppable. Every major outlet runs wild with the news.

It’s Pandora’s box.

My father’s team releases a congratulatory confirmation statement later in the morning.

Fay Davenport follows suit.

In terms of getting myself out of this debacle, there is no option I haven’t considered. If I go rogue and try to use a blog or independent media company to share my side of the story and refute the announcement, it will look like there is a break in rank at GHV. The board will hate it and the stockholders will see it as an act of rebellion. Stock prices will falter as a result. I’m not willing to go down that road. Public arguments do nothing but discredit our unity within the company and weaken our position in the global market.

This is a private matter, and we’ll handle it accordingly.

By lunch, flowers and gifts and congratulatory messages have flooded in. My suite at the Mandarin Oriental smells like a florist shop. The cloying scent is enough to make me sick.

“Take it all,” I tell the bellman I rang for. “If there’s anything you’d like for yourself, it’s yours. Donate the rest to Boston Children’s.”

“Right away, sir.”

I have no doubt Lainey is receiving all the same gifts and well wishes I am, only I imagine her grandmother is probably reading every note aloud with a look of sublime satisfaction on her face.

My stomach twists at the thought of Lainey. We haven’t seen each other or spoken since Italy, though neither one of us has reached out to try to remedy that. The more time I’ve had to consider the situation from all angles, the more my anger with her grows.

It’s hard to extricate her from the epicenter of this mess. She might not have specifically instigated the betrothal (though even that I can’t be certain of), but at the very least, she’s complicit in it, and I can’t look past that.

She more than anyone should understand what it feels like to be pressed beneath someone’s thumb. I’ve made it clear to her that I won’t marry despite my father’s demands. She knows how long I’ve battled to carve my own path in life. She could have spoken up and come to my defense. If she was unwilling to go through with the engagement, my father wouldn’t have forced her. She had the power to end it all right then and there.

Instead, here we are, two weeks since leaving Italy, betrothed in the eyes of the world, and tonight I’ll have to see her at the St. John’s Alumni Fundraiser in New York City. I doubt it will be pretty.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lainey

I feel stuck, flattened beneath my grandmother's expectations. The discussion in the library in Italy transpired so quickly. *Emmett and Lainey will wed*. The solution to everyone's problems was formed so suddenly, it's like my grandmother and Frédéric had it pre-orchestrated all along. Never mind that *Emmett and Lainey* haven't agreed. That detail is of no consequence to them.

I've replayed that night a thousand times over. I've fantasized about handling things differently. I assumed I'd remedy things as soon as I returned to Boston. Back at my grandmother's house, I helped Margaret unpack my clothes and showed her all the little souvenirs I bought for her, the olive oil and pasta and flaky cookies we tore the plastic open on right away. After, I took a hot shower, and as I wrapped myself in my robe, I tried to build up the courage to go talk to my grandmother.

A real talk, not the idle chitchat we've been playing at. Oh did I like the cheese they served on the plane? Was the villa everything I thought it would be? Where should we go the next time we're overseas?

I towel-dried my hair then wiped the steam from the mirror, and my reflection stopped me dead in my tracks. The

courage I'd been building went up in a puff of smoke. The woman staring back at me had red-rimmed eyes and limp hair and a coward's posture.

On the flight home, I might have considered going to the extreme, bucking my grandmother's demands of me and walking away from everything I've ever known. But for what? Freedom?

What does an animal born in captivity know of freedom?

I turned off my bathroom light and walked toward my bed, all too eager to bury myself beneath the sheets.

The courage I lost that night never returns. The days start to pass, and I find myself right back where I was before Italy. Life becomes a familiar hamster wheel as I dress in the clothes Margaret picks for me and go to work at Morgan Fine Art Gallery or attend a charity luncheon or accompany my grandmother on a shopping trip or to one of her clubs.

All the while, I carry a tight ball of anxiety with me everywhere I go. My appetite disappears. I sleep so little at night it's hard to hide the evidence in the morning.

The guilt gnaws at me constantly. Not only did I upset my grandmother in Italy, I showed her a side of myself I'm always so careful to suppress. The woman who flirted with Emmett in the bathtub, who sneaked out to visit him on the pier, who was late to dinner and disrespectful to her host—she's not someone my grandmother would be proud of.

I feel terrible about my ruined betrothal to Royce. Had things only worked out between us, if I could only go back and fix my bad behavior, act differently, behave like I've been taught to...I wouldn't be feeling as if my life is falling to pieces.

I don't want to go against my grandmother's wishes. I want to make her happy and do the exact right thing, always. Now, I'm doing everything she's asked, and yet somehow, I still feel like I'm failing. I need advice, but I have no one to turn to, and that sad realization emphasizes the fact that I have never felt so utterly alone in all my life.

For sanity's sake, I keep thoughts of Emmett on the periphery of my mind, as far from reach as possible. Every now and then, a sweeping feeling takes hold from either end of the spectrum: anger at him for playing with fire or pity over the fact that he's been dragged into this. Though, one thing is for certain: I can't completely absolve him of guilt. He questioned me, taunted me, flirted with me until ultimately, he got what he wanted. He lit the match, and we all burned.

While the days pass, I hear no further bits of information about the betrothal. I'm too nervous to bring it up to my grandmother, and she doesn't broach the subject with me either. I'm almost delusional enough to think the problem will solve itself until two weeks after the trip to Lake Como, when Margaret and I are packing for the St. John's Alumni Fundraiser. My grandmother comes in to survey what we've picked so far. She smooths the material of a Versace skirt. "Choose something especially pretty to wear for the event as it'll be the first time you're presented alongside your fiancé."

Her words are a punch to my stomach, but when I look up, expecting more, she merely nods and turns back to the hallway.

I travel to New York City on my own. If I had friends from school, we could all meet up for a weekend in the city, brunches and shopping trips and blowouts galore. My grandmother would likely love to join me, but after Italy, she's

in need of rest. It was briefly discussed whether Margaret should come, but I pushed back, insisting I'd be all right.

I come to regret that decision.

The news of my betrothal to Emmett breaks the morning of the fundraiser. I'm sitting in my suite on the 32nd floor of the Baccarat Hotel, flipping through channels, trying to find something tolerable to watch while I eat my breakfast, when I suddenly see my face blown up on the TV screen. At first, I write it off as some personalized feature of the hotel, like a "Good morning, Lainey!" message...then that barely formed theory flies out the window as I register the rest of the screen and *The Today Show* cast.

They all sit huddled around a table, discussing me as casually as they would someone famous.

"Look at her style. It's impeccable. Her makeup and hair." Hoda points to the scrolling images of me in the corner of the screen. They're from various events over the years, photos I honestly didn't even know existed. "I think she's reminiscent of a bygone era. She's not like most socialites we see these days, so in your face with their extravagant lifestyles. I'm shocked she doesn't have more of a social media following."

Savannah nods. "Our team couldn't find anything beyond a few fan accounts."

Carson chimes in then. "So what do we know? She and Emmett went to the same boarding school in upstate New York—which, by the way, is incredibly hard to get into. I think just to get on the waitlist, you have to be the heir to a throne or come from major money."

He brushes his thumb over the tip of his index and middle finger like he's rubbing dollar bills together.

“Of course.” Savannah laughs. “It’s just like William and Kate meeting at the University of St. Andrews.”

“The comparisons don’t end there. Much like William, Emmett has always been in the spotlight. We all certainly know his name,” Hoda adds.

“But only as it pertains to his father’s company,” Savannah argues. “He does press every now and then, but he never seems to be in the news for personal reasons. I’ve never seen him in the tabloids or gossip magazines.”

“So what do we all think? A good match?” Hoda asks the group.

Al claps. “Excellent match.”

“But they’re never together!” Carson argues. “Their teams haven’t released a single photo of them *as a couple*.”

“So what?” Hoda asks. “Privacy is important to them, and I respect that.”

The other cast members agree, speculating that it was actually a carefully thought-out plan on our parts. We’re praised for protecting our fledgling relationship for so long before going public. Any women Emmett has had at his side or on his arm at recent events are written off as mere diversions. They speculate about what our children will look like, where we’ll live, if I will still work. Then they shift into a segment with a fashion correspondent from L.A. whose sole job is to guess which designer I’ll use for my wedding dress.

I flip the channel and find another discussion on MSNBC detailing Emmett’s net worth (a figure that seems absolutely unimaginable) and whether or not it would be prudent for us to have a prenup.

Suddenly, I've hit my limit. I switch off the TV with a shaking hand.

The suite plunges into silence.

My gaze drifts to the table where room service arranged my breakfast earlier. A *New York Times* rests beside my carafe of coffee. I push off the bed and hurry over, whipping open the newspaper and tossing sections away—Business, Sports, Arts, Science—and at first, I'm relieved to find nothing. Then I realize I missed it back on the front page. Not right at the top, but down beneath the fold.

Emmett Mercier, heir to the luxury conglomerate GHV, to wed Boston society darling Elaine Davenport in what will surely be an extravagant, star-studded affair.

I don't read the rest. I let the newspaper slip from my fingers and flutter to the ground as panic grips me. Does my grandmother know about all of this? Of course. Yes, she would have had a hand in it. I'm sure she pre-approved every photo I just saw on TV.

Does Emmett?

Was he warned of the announcements today or is he finding out the same way I am?

"I won't go through with this."

He made that abundantly clear to his father, so a part of me thought perhaps he would succeed, thought even without my influence, the betrothal would die a swift death.

But here we are, engaged in the public eye and yet strangers behind closed doors. We could have been friends. We *were* friends of sorts, though I realize now there might be no coming back from this. Emmett never intended to marry, at least not on his father's terms, and the very fact that *I'm* the

person his father is forcing upon him must feel like a sour betrayal. Never mind about our teasing and flirting and kissing—that was before, in another life. I have no doubt he wants nothing to do with me now.

Directly before me, a black Carolina Herrera gown hangs pristinely on the closet door. It's magnificent. It has a strapless neckline and crisp vertical seams running down the bodice that create a figure-flattering taper at the waist. Then it transforms with slight pleats into a dramatic ball gown that will float with every step I take at the St. John's Alumni Fundraiser.

Oh god.

The sinking dread I've been contending with since Italy is back with a vengeance. The breakfast I thought I would be able to force down now seems like a herculean task, but I still try. There's no way around it. I have a long day ahead of me.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Emmett

““O kay, I give up trying to guess. What’s going on?” my brother asks.

I don’t pay him any attention. It’s easy enough to ignore him while we stand side by side at the fundraiser.

“Earth to Asshole. Come in, Asshole.”

I almost laugh. Clearly, Alexander has endured enough of my gruff mood in the last half hour.

I turn to him with a harsh glare. “Are you really asking me what’s wrong?”

He balks. “What? Jesus, I just got to New York this afternoon—how have I already messed up? Or wait...is this work shit? Did I miss some email? Forget to Zoom in on a conference call? Is it really *that* big of a deal?”

The fact that he’s having to ask me this pinpoints my exact frustration. He’s the irresponsible one. He should be in my position, shackled to a future he doesn’t want.

“Don’t you have Google Alerts set for the family?”

He looks disgusted by the idea. “No. Why would I want to do that? My phone would be dinging every five seconds.”

He takes a sip of his drink as I casually reply, “Yes, well, it would save me the trouble of having to let you know I’m engaged.”

He chokes and then starts to hack. I glower at him as I wipe away the few drops of his spittle that managed to land on my tuxedo jacket.

“You’re fucking kidding, right?”

I don’t answer.

“Did you... I’m sorry.” He shakes his head, his eyes taking on a newfound focus. “Have you been dating someone and I didn’t know about it?” He doesn’t even let me answer his first question before he’s on to his second and third. “Wait, who is it? Does Father know?”

“He arranged the entire thing,” I say with a bitterly twisted smile.

His eyes widen in horror. “What?”

“Oh yes. You thought he was going to allow me to choose my wife? No. That’s apparently been done for me. I’d watch your back—you’re likely next.”

“Fuck no.”

I chuckle. “Yes, that’s what I said too.”

“Tell him you won’t go through with it. Tell him it’s bullshit.”

“Do you honestly think I haven’t tried that?”

“Fuck,” he murmurs under his breath as he tugs his hand through his hair, pulling at the ends. “And who is it? Do you even know the girl?”

“It’s Lainey Davenport.”

His eyes widen in shock. “You’re kidding! Does she know?!”

“Of course. She helped orchestrate it with her grandmother.”

“*Lainey?*” He shakes his head in disbelief.

“Yes, yes. The shy quiet mouse from St. John’s is actually whip-smart and cunning. What a shock.”

“Will she be here tonight?”

“She’s already arrived.”

She got here before me. I walked into the packed ballroom and spotted her right away. For once she wasn’t playing the wallflower act. She was entertaining a group of people, all eyes on her as she spoke.

I’ve kept a careful watch on her. She hasn’t looked at me once, but I’ve had her location pegged this entire time. Now, she’s only a few tables away, talking to a man I don’t recognize.

Her rich dark hair is swept up off her neck, though a few tempting strands spill out of her up-do. She wears nothing around her neck and only small diamond studs in her ears. I’m all too aware of the allure of her décolletage, the subtle shadows beneath her collarbones, the small hint of cleavage, erring on the daring side, especially for her. She has a small emerald ring on her right hand and her left ring finger is bare, as it will remain.

I take her in with fresh eyes, casting aside her beauty as a mere mask for her true nature.

Alexander sees me staring, swears under his breath, and walks away with a shake of his head. It’s only a matter of

seconds before Miranda takes his spot. I haven't seen her in weeks and don't particularly want company, but she comes bearing a gift. The Jack and Coke she offers me is a welcome sight.

"So that's her?" she asks, nodding toward Lainey.

I don't answer.

If she knows to ask, she must have seen the news reports today. She doesn't need my confirmation.

"It's a sham, isn't it? A pretend engagement?"

I sigh heavily, not wanting to go down this road. Though Miranda and I are just friends, she's accompanied me to a few recent events, the ballet included. She knows damn well I haven't been carrying on a secret love affair with Lainey like the media has suggested.

Still, she presses for more.

"She's smaller in real life," she notes. "Childlike."

I almost roll my eyes. "Don't let her size fool you."

She hums. "Beautiful, though. The photos I've seen hardly do her justice. I guess your father could have done worse in that respect. Maybe you should thank him."

"It was intentional on his part. I'm sure he wants pretty grandchildren. He's not one to leave something like that up to chance."

Miranda laughs. "Oh, look at her. She's really enjoying herself. So lovely. Maybe you should go say hi."

I tip back most of the contents of my drink, already in need of another.

Miranda watches me and shakes her head. “Oof, you’re really angry with her. Does she know?”

I turn my back on Lainey and peer down at Miranda. “Why are you here? Did you sneak in?”

She’s not an alumnus of St. John’s.

She winks. “Maybe.”

Then Harrison crashes our conversation holding a plate overflowing with shrimp. He tosses a clumsy arm over Miranda’s shoulders. “There’s my hot date.”

She barely restrains herself. “*Harrison*, you’re about to spill cocktail sauce all over my dress,” she whines, elbowing him in the side.

He laughs and lets her pull away. “Aw, don’t be like that.”

Interesting. I know full well that Miranda isn’t interested in Harrison. Her tastes are a little more refined than that. She’s made it clear for the last few years that she’d accept a date if only I’d ask, but I won’t.

Miranda is pretty and sophisticated and much like every other woman I’ve ever met. There is nothing necessarily bad about her, but nothing quite so memorable either. Or perhaps I’m being harsh because I’m in a foul mood. I look over at Lainey again, helpless to stop myself. I want to know what she’s calculating, how she can possibly stand there with such a wide smile on her face and play it off like she’s not the most evil person in the room.

She takes a small sip of her champagne, her lips barely touching the edge. The man she’s standing with watches her with rapt attention, no doubt imagining her lips wrapping around something else entirely.

“What’s got Emmett’s panties in a wad?” Harrison asks.

I don’t bother answering. I walk away, cutting a path around tables until I’m in Lainey’s line of sight. She sees me over her companion’s shoulder, and I watch her swallow down a gulp as if suddenly nervous.

Oh no, Lainey. No sense in playing meek on me now.

“And I find the Old Master auctions far more interesting than the evening sales, but they’re obviously much less frequent. Have you managed to attend—”

“I’d like a word with my fiancée,” I say, cutting the man off.

His sentence dies as he turns toward me with a look of wide-eyed confusion.

“Excuse me, I’m—”

“*Go. Away.*” I bite out the words as I lean toward him ever so slightly, just so there can be no mistaking my tone.

He blinks, blinks, blinks like a fucking idiot before he finally gets it. He stammers a quick goodbye to Lainey and then he’s gone.

I stand before her and take her in, completely unable to look past my anger. For what it’s worth, she meets my glowering with bold confidence and a defiant set to her demure features.

“You look stunning.” Though it doesn’t sound like a compliment.

Her expression hardens. “Did you scare that man away just to tell me that?”

“Of course not. Don’t you think we should talk, sweetheart?”

“Don’t call me that.”

The edge of my lips tips up. I’m enjoying this already.

“What pet name would you like then? *Petite souris*?”

A flicker of pain is chased away by fury. She takes a step toward me so she has to look up to meet my eyes.

“If you intend to embarrass me here, in public, I won’t allow it. Save your childish games for somewhere else.”

“Not here? All right. Where should I take you?” My voice drips with cruel innuendo.

She’s had enough. She tries to cut past me, but my hand catches her arm, forcing her to stay put. I tsk in a mocking French way, and I know for certain if we weren’t in public, her palm would have already made contact with my cheek. She’s flushed with anger, and it’s only fitting that now we’re even.

My grip doesn’t loosen on her arm. I’m not yet convinced she won’t flee if given the chance.

“I’m assuming you saw the news today. Did they include everything you hoped they would?”

Her jaw clenches.

“Those were lovely photos your grandmother provided. Did you two pick them together? Carefully deciding which ones would paint you in the best light? Everyone seems to have fallen in love with you already. We’re the pairing of the year, it seems.”

My tone drips with sarcasm, and yet still, her expression softens. “Is it really so bad?”

The fragility in her voice is enough to enrage me.

“Don’t,” I warn.

“I-I’m sorry.”

Her big green eyes start to well with sadness.

I don’t know why she’s upset. She has everything she wants. Except me.

I won’t allow it.

I finally let go of her, wishing I could cast her away altogether and be done with it. “Save your apologies, Lainey. I don’t want them.”

Her gaze turns pleading. “I’m as helpless in all of this as you are.”

“You aren’t,” I snap.

“What have I done that’s so wrong?” she cries. “How have you managed to spin this to make *me* the villain? I won’t go against my grandmother’s wishes, Emmett. I’m merely doing as she asks of me. Don’t you understand?”

“*Don’t I understand?*” My temper is threatening to do me in. “Who better understands your situation than me? You think you’re the only one having to bend to a dictator? Try growing up with my father.”

She has nothing to say to that, and so we stand there, breathing heavily, our gazes locked in a silent standoff. I can feel my temper rising like a great wave. I’m so close to surrendering to this anger once and for all.

Lainey doesn’t flee. She has no good sense at all. If she did, she never would have betrayed me like this in the first place.

I tuck my hands into my pockets and take a step back, placing a purposeful distance between us. “So then we’ve reached an impasse.”

“I suppose so,” she says, briefly looking out into the crowd as if trying to keep herself from getting more emotional.

“You know I was wrong about you, Lainey. The courage I thought I saw in you...it doesn’t exist.”

She chuckles sadly under her breath, but there’s an unyielding hardness to it, *to her*, as she looks back at me with rage.

“Oh, really? *I’m* the weak one? I’m standing up to you right now, aren’t I? I’m holding my ground when you seem intent on intimidating me, punishing me as if you’re judge, jury, and executioner.” She steps forward and presses her finger hard against my chest as she continues with unrestrained fury. “I’ve worked my entire life to pay for my mother’s mistakes, to remind my grandmother of the good inside me. I won’t mess this up. If you’re set on getting out of the engagement, get out of it—but stop blaming me. You’re delusional if you think you don’t deserve this punishment as much as I do. You toyed with me in Italy knowing full well it would push Royce away. Do you think people are playthings? Did you think there would be no consequences? I don’t feel bad for you, Emmett.”

“This entire thing is a sham.”

She shrugs, unbothered by the notion.

“Then let it be,” she challenges. “You’re French—act like it. Surround yourself with a bevy of blondes like the one I just saw you with and forget I exist.”

“With pleasure.”

Her mouth opens in shock as if I've finally succeeded in deeply wounding her.

Fuck.

I almost reach out to take ahold of her again. I lift my hand, but she's turning away, moving back into the crowd, leaving me like I'm not her husband-to-be, like she doesn't belong to me. There's no way to see past my anger. I can't get out of my own way. She's in cahoots with my father and her grandmother, and that betrayal cuts deep. She's chosen her side and I'll choose mine.

War is a bloody thing, Lainey. I hope you're prepared.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lainey

Though last night was unbearable, I refuse to let Emmett continue to wreak havoc on my life. I want some semblance of normalcy, so I decide to push my flight back to Boston until later Sunday evening. There's a Jeff Koons retrospective at the Whitney, put together by Scott Rothkopf, a curator I greatly admire. I've been wanting to view the show, and now seems as good a time as any.

Before I head out into the city, I slip into a tan cashmere dress that coordinates with a duster of the same material. An Hermès belt cinches my waist and pulls the whole look together. I wonder if I can make it to the Guggenheim today as well. I've seen their permanent collection a hundred times, but I can never resist the temptation to view Picasso's *Woman with Yellow Hair*. The painting depicts Marie-Thérèse, one of Picasso's lovers. When they met, Picasso was already married and Marie-Thérèse was only seventeen years old. They concealed their intense love affair, but its earliest years are documented in Picasso's work. In fact, five paintings from 1927 incorporate the monogram "MT" and "MTP" as part of their compositions, cryptically announcing the entry of Marie-Thérèse into the artist's life.

The piece is wonderful, and the story behind his muse is so complicated and gritty. It's easy for people to stand in front of

a painting and think the colors are blended well and the subject matter is satisfying, but I want the behind-the-scenes stories, the *why* of it all.

Spending my day in front of art sounds like a perfect distraction. I'm proud of myself for going through the motions even though deep down, I'm a mess.

I'm about to grab my purse and head out into the city when a heavy fist knocks on the door.

I frown, trying to remember if I called down to room service for anything. They've already come to remove my breakfast tray. It could be housekeeping wanting to check in on me, but when I peer through the peephole on the door, I spot an older man in a three-piece suit flanked by armed guards on either side.

My eyes widen in alarm as I step back from the door quickly.

Then they knock again.

"Ms. Davenport. Might we have a moment of your time before you depart the hotel?"

My first instinct is to lock the door, but then I press up against the peephole again and see the Leclerc & Co. emblem on his suit jacket pocket and the metal briefcase he cradles against his chest as if he's protecting a newborn baby.

Foolish though it might be, I crack the door open to peer out at them.

The distinguished man in the suit beams.

"Ah! Madam, please pardon the intrusion. I know this is rather unusual..." He waggles the suitcase to emphasize the

absurdity of the situation. “I am Eugene Brooks, one of the creative directors at Leclerc & Co. jewelers. Surely, you’ve—”

The guard behind him forcefully clears his throat, and Eugene jumps slightly. He checks left and right before leaning in closer and lowering his voice. “Ah, may we come in? It’s much safer to explain the purpose of my visit while inside your suite.”

My eyes fall to the heavy briefcase, but still, I don’t move to let him enter.

Sensing my reluctance, he passes off the briefcase to one of the guards with clear instructions to hold on to it carefully. Then he extracts a pristine business card from his wallet and holds it out for me.

I inspect it as if looking for some kind of counterfeiting measures, but it hardly proves anything, as if criminals wouldn’t have access to paper this luxurious. Big deal?

I peer back up, and Eugene smiles gently. Then against my better judgment, I unlock the door and open it wide for them.

It’s stupid of me to allow them in. I’ve watched all the crime shows on Netflix. I’m well aware that this could be some elaborate ruse to kidnap me and demand ransom, but my intuition says it’s not, and I find out quickly enough that I’m correct in recognizing their true intent.

Eugene walks over to the small dining table in my suite and places the briefcase on top of it. Then he clasps his hands in front of him and turns back to me. “I appreciate your hospitality, and I assure you this shouldn’t take too long, though that depends on a few things.” He taps the top of the briefcase. “I have here a collection of stones for you to look over. Mr. Mercier insisted you are to have your pick of any of

them, and if none of the stones I brought with me today meet your standards, I can set up an appointment for you to visit our showroom here in the city.”

Dumbfounded, I merely nod.

He turns toward the briefcase and discreetly keys in a combination before producing a silver key from his pocket. Once both locks are disengaged, the briefcase pops open, revealing a black velvet tray with two dozen stones evenly spaced in four neat rows. Though they vary in type—diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires—they’re all absolutely enormous.

“I’ve gathered for you today a collection of heirloom stones as well as uncut gems, and I assure you once you pick your favorite from among them, our masters at Leclerc & Co. will get right to work on customizing your one-of-a-kind engagement ring.”

I step closer and peer down into the briefcase, momentarily mesmerized by the light bouncing off the gems. The contents of this briefcase could fill an entire Smithsonian exhibit. I shudder to think of their combined worth—no wonder there are two armed guards near the door. I wouldn’t be surprised to find more stationed out in the hall.

I lean down, inspecting a diamond that would cover the entire width of my ring finger.

“Ah, the lady has good taste. That’s an emerald-cut white diamond, weighing ten and a half carats with a provenance that can be traced back to Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly, originally found in a ring made by Cartier.”

“And this one?” I ask, pointing to a pale blue stone.

“That is the Blue Moon Diamond. It’s a flawless thirteen-carat vivid blue diamond. Discovered in India in 1703, it was then purchased by French royalty. It has enjoyed a long history of use as a crown jewel. It has graced Louis XV’s coronation crown and the scepter of Napoleon III.”

“Beautiful,” I say, standing back up and looking at him rather than the rings. “They all are. Who did you say sent you?”

He adjusts his stance as if somewhat flustered by my shift in conversation.

“Mr. Mercier.”

“The father or son?”

His eyebrows furrow. “Frédéric.”

“I see.”

I step away from the briefcase and offer Eugene a tight smile. “I do appreciate you allowing me the pleasure of viewing these stones today, and though I hate to leave you with a task, I do think it would be more fitting to have the younger Mr. Mercier, Emmett, choose from among them.”

“Of course.” Nodding with understanding, he walks swiftly toward the briefcase and closes it securely once again. “It’s no trouble at all. I understand the appeal of doing things the old-fashioned way. I’ll set up an appointment with Mr. *Emmett* Mercier right away. Now, if you’ll excuse us, my men and I will be on our way.”

They vacate my hotel suite smoothly, one security guard positioned on each side of Eugene.

Already, there’s a pit in my stomach. The pleasure of my morning is gone now, replaced with worry over what Emmett

will do once he receives that case. He probably doesn't even know about it, not if his father was the one to send the jeweler here today, never mind the intrusion on my privacy. I'm sure my grandmother was all too happy to inform Frédéric where I'd be this weekend.

Determined to continue my day as planned, I grab my purse and head for the hall.

The wait for the elevator is long, but when I step on, I'm blessedly alone. I ride the whole way down with only my reflection in the mirrored walls to contend with.

The doors open to a cacophony of noise down in the lobby. I pass more than a few familiar faces and smile at them as I pass. It seems everyone who was here for the fundraiser last night is checking out of the hotel and heading home at this *precise* moment.

I bypass the madhouse and rush out into the crisp autumn air to join the taxi line. With it being so close to the hotel's official checkout time, the line is slightly longer than I expected, though I'm sure it'll move fast. The sidewalk is bustling with people toting their luggage out of the hotel. Bellmen rush around, attempting to direct the flow of traffic and offload bags from tired guests. A sleek black Range Rover pulls up to the curb, blocking the taxi lane and eliciting curses from the people in front of me in line.

"These drivers think they can just park wherever the hell they want!"

Impatient taxi drivers add to the noise, laying on their horns with gusto.

"What's goin' on?!" one shouts to a hotel attendant trying to appease the crowd.

The attendant waves at him to calm down. “We got some special guest leavin’. Should just take a minute.”

At hearing this, we all turn collectively to watch as a small entourage of people exit the front entrance of the hotel. I suspect it to be Eugene and his briefcase at first. No doubt they’d require special treatment like this, but then I see two hotel attendants carrying luggage, a bodyguard bringing up the rear, and then...Emmett walking alongside Miranda, cutting across the sidewalk like he owns the world.

For a brief moment, I observe him as if I’m just another unsuspecting pedestrian. He’s paired a navy suit jacket with a slightly darker sweater underneath it. From his cuff, his silver Jaeger-LeCoultre watch peeks out. His black hair is impeccably styled and his shoes look as if they’ve just finished being shined, but he hasn’t shaved this morning, leaving a tantalizing amount of stubble that I’m unaccustomed to seeing on him. He somehow looks more French today than ever.

Sacré bleu.

He looks up into the crowd and catches me staring; the intensity of his brown eyes makes me feel momentarily off balance, but his expression doesn’t change. There’s no hint of recognition, no kindness.

I’m the same as everybody else, watching with a slack jaw as he escorts Miranda to the waiting Range Rover. He reaches it first, and rather than getting in, he stands back and ushers her forward then offers his hand. She doesn’t need it. She is fully capable of sliding onto the back seat without his help, but she doesn’t pass up the chance to gently lay her hand in his and bestow a beautiful smile of thanks in return for his gallantry. Then it’s Emmett’s turn to get in, but for a moment he stalls, his hand on the roof above the door.

I stand frozen, my breath arrested, hope growing with every millisecond he fails to get in after her. Then his head turns as if listening to something Miranda's just said, and without another moment's hesitation, he slides into the vehicle beside her.

I'm left on the sidewalk, waiting for my taxi while everyone around me chatters loudly about Emmett and who they think he could be.

"Probably some big-time actor. Did you see how smug he looked walking out of the hotel like that while we all stood here, *waiting*?"

"He's not an actor," someone corrects. "He's a businessman. I recognized him. Can't think of his first name, but he's that French guy's son. Mercier something."

The hotel attendant directing the taxi line hears this. "That fucking billionaire guy? Are you shitting me?"

"We should have asked for an autograph or some spare change."

They laugh at this, and then someone cuts in, "You see the girl he was with? Damn, she was *fine*."

Having had enough, I step out of the line and decide I'll take my chances with the subway.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Lainey

The week after I return from New York City, my grandmother thinks it's a wonderful idea to throw Emmett and me an engagement party. The invitations go out without my knowledge. In fact, I only find out about it the morning of when a bevy of floral designers and event planners overtake the house in preparation for the evening's festivities.

I catch my grandmother in the foyer, directing the catering crew to the kitchen.

I lead with, "I don't think this is a good idea."

She completely ignores me, so I'm forced to cut in front of her again and reach out for her hand, demanding her attention.

"I wish you had asked me before doing this."

She sighs. "It's tradition. I hardly need your permission to throw a party in my own home."

"Yes, but perhaps it would be best if we skipped all of this. I just think—"

Her brown eyes level me with a glare of impatience. "Elaine Evangeline...if you think I'm *not* going to throw my only granddaughter an engagement party, you're sorely

mistaken. In fact, I'm going to throw you and Emmett a party the likes of which Boston has never seen."

At that, the front door opens to a woman holding up a stack of linens so tall it towers over her head, blocking her vision.

"A little help please!" she begs.

Jacobs swoops in and takes half of the folded items from her before they all go crashing to the ground.

Wanting no part of the party setup, I slip out of the house around lunch time and head for Morgan's. It's not my usual day to work, but I'm eager for the distraction the gallery is so good at providing. Collette is there, sitting behind the counter in the main showroom, answering emails. Her eyes widen when I walk in the door.

"I didn't expect to see you today."

I smile brightly. "I thought I'd see if you needed help with anything."

"Umm...*hello*, don't you have a party to get ready for?"

My good mood evaporates in an instant. How does she know about the engagement party?

She laughs, sensing my confusion. "Your grandmother invited half the city. I think everyone from St. John's received an invitation—which, by the way, looked like they cost a thousand dollars a pop. I'm shocked a swarm of butterflies didn't spring forth when I opened the box."

Oh god.

"Right. Yeah...she gets a little carried away."

I sound apologetic, which might be why she eases up.

“They were pretty, really. I’m just still in shock. *You and Emmett?* Since when?”

And so it begins.

The lying, the deceit, the stories.

No one has coached me on what I’m supposed to say. It would be nice to sync up my version of events with Emmett’s so we don’t sound like fools. Hell, for all I know, he’s being totally forthcoming with the truth. Collette might already know the engagement is a sham.

I open my mouth to answer her, but the words get lodged in my throat.

Her expression softens, and she holds out her hands as if trying to calm a wild animal. “Listen, I for one think it totally works. He’s always been a little dark and mysterious, and you have that misunderstood side to you too. At first, I was shocked, but now I get it. Of course, I want all the details... when you’re ready to share them. Like what is he like behind closed doors? I don’t think I’ve ever had a proper conversation with the guy.”

I force a laugh.

“It’s...unexpected,” I say, deciding the best course of action for now is to keep it vague.

“Well if you’re happy, I’m happy. And naturally I’ll be there tonight.”

I smile and nod then set my purse behind the counter.

“Good. Now put me to work.”

I distract myself at Morgan’s until half past 4 o’clock, at which point my grandmother and Margaret insist I need to get home so I can start getting ready for the party. The house is no

less crowded when I walk into the foyer. If anything, the madness has only ratcheted up tenfold. Fortunately for me, Margaret has directed my hair and makeup team up to my room so I miss most of the last-minute frenzy.

I sit at my vanity, letting the professionals work. They sense I'm in a quiet mood and don't press me for small talk. I'm immensely grateful because my nerves have set in. Even resting on my lap, my hands still shake. I try to clench my fists to disguise it, but I worry everyone still notices.

When I'm done with makeup and they're putting the finishing touches on my hair, Margaret knocks and enters. "Here, dear. It's lavender honey tea with a little something to take the edge off."

When I take a sip, it's so delicious I hardly taste the vodka.

She winks and steps back to sit down on my bed. While they untwist my hair from the curlers, she smiles approvingly but says nothing else. I love that about her—her ability to offer silent support. Just her presence is a comfort.

"Your dress is stunning. Do you like it?"

It's a white silk draped gown that will hug my figure and dip low in the back, a classic style that would look good on anyone. There's nothing not to like.

I smile and nod, knowing Margaret had a hand in selecting it for me.

"It's lovely. Thank you. Help me put it on?"

The others pack up their things—the makeup palettes and brushes and hair pins and hair spray—and then they vacate the room so it's just Margaret and me as I slip into the gown and stand in front of the mirror. She zips it up then drops her hands to my shoulders.

“Look at you. I can’t imagine a more beautiful bride.”

I hate that tears spring to my eyes.

She squeezes my shoulders and then moves away, giving me a moment to gather myself before reaching for my shoes.

By the time I make my grand entrance, the party is in full swing, just like my grandmother intended. It’s a real princess moment as I walk down the steps and smile for everyone. An official event photographer snaps photos of me from the bottom of the stairs, and I make sure to smile and appear as happy as a real bride-to-be.

My grandmother waits for me as I descend, and I’m grateful to have her at my side as she parades me through the party, ensuring I greet everyone, from current acquaintances to people I haven’t seen in years. The crowd skews slightly older, which doesn’t surprise me. This party is as much for her as it is for me.

I’ve lost count of how many people I’ve shaken hands with, smiled at, pretended for when there’s a sudden commotion in the front foyer.

Jacobs appears in the tall arched opening of the living room holding a piece of stationery.

There’s no need for him to collect everybody’s attention. The gasps coming from the entryway have done his job for him.

Still, he clears his throat and offers me a kind smile before reading aloud.

“Your soon-to-be father-in-law is heartbroken that he couldn’t make it for tonight’s celebration, but he wanted to send his well wishes to the happy couple and formally welcome Elaine into the Mercier family.”

At this, he steps back to allow a perfectly synchronized line of men dressed in black suits to waltz into the living room carrying artfully arranged bouquets of flowers. Their arms are each bent at precisely the same angle. Their steps are perfectly timed. Each one carries a bouquet filled with different flowers: garden roses, peonies, orchids, proteas, ranunculus, lilies, tulips, gardenias, hydrangeas...

A laugh of delight bubbles out of me at the over-the-top display, and I hold my hand up to my lips, trying to contain another, as the men walk over and set the flowers onto a table, one after another, arranging them in a way that, once complete, shocks the room by forming two intertwined Es.

The crowd *oohs* and *ahhs*, and even I'm touched by the thoughtfulness.

It almost relieves the suffering I've been enduring, waiting for Emmett to arrive.

It's all anyone wants to ask me about. At first, they comment on my dress and hair and makeup, telling me what a beautiful bride I'm going to be, but the conversation inevitably devolves into inquiries about Emmett.

"And where is your fiancé tonight?"

"Did Emmett mention he was going to be late?"

"He can't keep us here waiting all night."

I can only evade their questions for so long before it becomes clear something is amiss. One Mercier absence is easy to write off, but two?

If it weren't for Emmett's brother, there would be no Merciers present at all.

I was shocked to see Alexander arrive earlier. Beyond a smile and a nod from across the room, we haven't talked. He's lingered with a group from St. John's—Emmett's friends—and I've carefully avoided them all evening. Even with Collette in their midst, it feels like going over to join them would be akin to entering the lion's den. Surely, Alexander of all people knows the truth of what's going on.

But he's here and I don't get the sense he's come to cause trouble, though I could be wrong.

We eventually cross paths when I go to get a closer look at the flowers Frédéric had delivered. I'm leaning in, inhaling as much of the intoxicating gardenias as I can manage, when Alexander strolls up casually beside me. I peer up at him, trying for a steadying breath as I prepare myself for the worst. He's so unlike his brother. Where Emmett's hair is almost black and always orderly, Alexander's medium-length hair is a few shades lighter with more curl to it. He has a prominent Roman nose and features more rugged than Emmett's, though they do share a sharp jawline. Alexander's just happens to be covered with a beard.

"Hello *sis*," he says with an amused smile.

Immediately, I sag with relief.

There's a lightness to him that's not so easy to find in Emmett. It doesn't mean it's not there. I've seen it for myself on occasion, but to the world, Emmett is severe and cold. His brother is the opposite.

He nods to the flowers. "What a display, huh? He could have just sent a dozen roses and been done with it."

"It's beautiful."

"It is. What a shame it's all pretend, right?"

I blink and look away. It's better that he can't read every emotion on my face. I've never been good at playing nonchalant.

He leans down and softens his voice. "I meant no harm by that. Just...it's perhaps better if there's no pretense between us. C'mon, you're a real villain...don't back down now."

He grins as if he's just paid me a compliment.

"I'm not."

"A villain?" His thick eyebrows arch in disbelief. "Emmett seems sure of it. The way he tells it, you're single-handedly ruining his life."

He unfurls a grin, meanwhile I'm growing more angry by the second.

"What an elaborate piece of fiction. Be sure to remind your brother of the part he played in all of this the next time you see him. I'm assuming he won't be coming here tonight?"

"Afraid not."

I hum like it's inconsequential.

"Right. If he's trying to play games—"

"No games. At least not where you're concerned. He's merely trying to make a point to our father. You happen to be collateral damage, though I think he's convinced himself it's fine if you sustain a fair bit of blowback along the way since you yourself volunteered for the position of Pretend Fiancée."

"It still doesn't give him a pass to act like an asshole."

"Doesn't it?"

My spine stiffens. "I see. You've been sent here tonight as Emmett's emissary?"

His devious grin only widens. “I assure you, I’m on no one’s side. In fact, the truth is, this whole charade is in my best interest. You have no idea how nice it is to be the son who’s *not* at the center of controversy for once. I could get used to this.”

I glower at him as I hum. “Right. I don’t know why you’re acting so smug about this situation. You could be next on the chopping block, you know.”

He shrugs, unruffled by the threat. “Oh, I doubt it. My father doesn’t bother with me. I think for the most part, he’s just happy when I’m not in rehab. It’s Emmett who carries the world. My father expects too much from him, and Emmett, idiot that he is, never ceases to rise to the occasion. I tell him all the time that all he has to do is fuck up a time or two and our father will forget about him as he’s forgotten about me.”

“Problem solved,” I tease.

He laughs. “Exactly. Now, between you and me, I don’t know what all the fuss is about...” He runs his gaze over my dress and doesn’t try to hide the fact that he’s blatantly checking me out. “Emmett acts as if he’s been saddled with some ogre. You, frankly, are nothing short of exquisite.”

“I’m also your soon-to-be sister.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “Oh, taboo. Things just got interesting...”

I can’t help but laugh at his idiocy. It’s refreshing having a conversation with someone so blunt, and whether it’s his easygoing smile or his kind eyes, I know he’s only teasing me. There’s nothing lascivious about him.

“Truthfully, I appreciate you coming over to chat with me. I was too scared to approach you.”

“Oh yes. Dealing with my father and brother does that to a person. Everyone lumps me in alongside them without realizing I’m the golden retriever of the family. All bark, no bite.”

“Good to know,” I say with a thankful smile.

“Now I feel it’s probably best to wish you good luck.”

“Why’s that?”

He reaches for my shoulder so he can slowly begin to spin me around to face the room.

“Because a distinguished-looking man just walked in, and if my instincts are correct, he’s looking for you.”

I gulp down panic and finish whirling around, expecting to find Emmett.

Instead, it’s Eugene, the man from Leclerc & Co. who visited me in New York, and he’s obviously here on assignment.

“I’m looking for Elaine Davenport,” he says to the room with a twinkle of delight in his eyes.

My panic is wiped out by dread.

Alexander steps away, dropping his hand from my shoulder and giving me center stage as Eugene’s gaze lands on me. He smiles and changes course to head my way, loving the pageantry of the moment as he speaks loud enough for most of the room to hear.

“Since your fiancé couldn’t be here to celebrate with you, he asked me to deliver this.”

A hush falls over the room as Eugene pulls out a black velvet box.

I feel the color start to drain from my face.

To be honest, when I told Eugene to get Emmett's opinion on the stones, I didn't expect to see Eugene again. I assumed Emmett would want no part in choosing a wedding ring for me.

But it's obvious I underestimated Emmett, because when Eugene slowly pries open the velvet box and shows me what's inside, it's clear he has sent a message.

Nestled in the ring box is a blood-red ruby, hideously large, positioned with four prongs on a thin gold band.

The crowd rushes forward to get a look.

"Oh, how original!" Diana exclaims.

"I've never seen anything like it," Collette adds.

Eugene perks up at their interest. "It is *quite* rare, an heirloom that dates back to the French monarchy. It's rumored this stone once belonged to Marie Antionette."

Oh Emmett. You could have been more subtle than that...

I don't move to retrieve the ring, so my grandmother steps forward to pluck it from the box and slide it onto my ring finger. It doesn't fit. The band is too loose and the stone is so heavy it slips to the side—a bad omen if there ever were one.

"It's...large. I'll give him that," my grandmother murmurs under her breath.

I can tell she doesn't approve, and it's obvious why.

To everyone else here, this appears to be a sweet gesture from my fiancé, but it's not. I can't stand the sight of the gem, and it doesn't help that the rest of my night is spent holding out my hand so others can inspect it. I smile at their

compliments and do my best to seem in awe of it, but the moment I escape back to my room after the party has ended, I slide it off my finger and let it clatter onto my silver jewelry tray.

It stays there day in and day out, never worn. I half expect my grandmother to insist I wear it, for show if nothing else, but she never mentions it. Eventually, Margaret or Jacobs nestles it neatly back in its black velvet box for safekeeping.

If I could return it to Leclerc & Co., I would.

When people inquire about it, I say I had to send it away to be resized. No one questions my story.

Short of his public display, Emmett and I haven't seen or talked to each other since the morning after the St. John's fundraiser in New York. I'm not absolutely certain he's still in Boston. I refuse to look him up on social media, and the same goes for his brother and any of their other St. John's friends. If Collette brings him up at work, I'm good at evading questions.

Winter sets in around the city, and my light cashmere wraps are replaced with thick wool coats and Canada Goose jackets. It snows the first week of December, and I trudge through the slush-covered sidewalks on my way to a public lecture given by Henri Zerner, professor emeritus of art history at Harvard. Zerner wrote *Renaissance Art in France: The Invention of Classicism*, which I read as an undergraduate student. I still have my worn copy tucked into my bookshelf, filled with annotations. In my world, Zerner is a celebrity, and though he retired from teaching in 2015 after educating students for 42 years, I'm not surprised the university has asked him back for their public lecture series.

When I arrive to the auditorium on campus, I find the room less filled than I would have hoped. It's a pity

considering Zerner was such a pioneer of art history, specifically pertaining to the Renaissance. At least there are some of us in attendance tonight, and I'm sure there will be a few more last-minute arrivals as well.

I went out on a limb and invited Collette to attend the lecture with me. She's already here, sitting in the front row alongside another woman I don't recognize until I walk up the aisle and catch sight of her profile.

I stop mid-stride. If I weren't so excited to hear Zerner's lecture, I'd do an about-face and walk right out of the room.

Collette sees me and waves me over. I slide past a few seated guests, reluctantly taking the free seat on her left.

"Hey! Lainey, have you met Miranda? She's a friend of mine. I bumped into her last minute and invited her to come with."

I look over and meet Miranda's gaze. She's stunning up close. Her brown eyes are so light, almost caramel. Her blonde hair is sleekly styled, and she wears a pop of red lipstick that suits her complexion perfectly.

"No, not officially, but I feel like I know you from everything I've heard."

She cocks her head to the side. "Oh? Strange. I can't place you. Are you from St. John's? I went to Simmons, in Connecticut."

I find it hard to believe she doesn't know who I am. I can't discern whether she's acting or not, her smile so convincing, but seeing as she was with Emmett the morning after news broke about our betrothal (and perhaps the night of as well), there's no chance she missed it.

“Yeah, Lainey was at St. John’s, though she’s a few years younger than us. She works with me at Morgan Fine Art Gallery, and oh my god, *duh*, she’s engaged to Emmett.”

Miranda’s smile doesn’t move an inch. “Yes, of course.” Then she chuckles as if Collette’s just said something funny. “Congratulations.”

My stomach twists as I nod, and then I turn toward the stage.

Throughout the duration of the lecture, my focus is a moving target. I doubt I catch half of what Zerner says, which is incredibly annoying. I’m in a bad mood when he wraps up and invites everyone out into the foyer for refreshments and further discussion.

“I wish I could stay,” Miranda says, fetching her coat from the back of her chair. “But I’m actually headed to a late dinner. I don’t want to keep my date waiting.”

Her taunting gaze meets mine, and her intent is crystal clear; she’s going to meet Emmett.

I ensure my smile is sugary sweet as I reply, “Have a great time!”

But that’s the extent of my ability to pretend. I skip out on the refreshments and instead head out into the cold night, perturbed that it’s started to snow again.

Two weeks later, the warm afternoon light filters in through the curtains in my grandmother’s sitting room. A fire crackles calmly in the fireplace. Jacobs pours tea for four using my grandmother’s solid silver antique Reed & Barton tea set, which she purchased at auction last year for an amount equaling a small nation’s entire GDP.

We're entertaining guests. A short while ago, Diana arrived at my grandmother's house with her granddaughter, Victoria, in tow. Only a few years older than me, Victoria is everything my grandmother would love me to become. On paper, we share many of the same qualities: boarding school bred, Ivy League educated, worldly, sophisticated, polished—but Victoria exudes confidence. Where she goes, the world follows. She's always right in the thick of things at the parties and soirees we attend, running the show, whereas I'm so often hanging on the fringes. Our paths rarely cross, though she's nice enough on occasions like this when we're forced into each other's company because of our grandmothers.

For the last fifteen minutes, Victoria has been chatting away, regaling us with stories of her life recently. A silly mishap with a London milliner. A horrible blind date she endured with a Swedish shipping heir. An “*amazing*” spiritual workshop she just finished in Bali. Her friend, Kate Hudson, invited her to attend.

I listen and sip my tea, nodding when appropriate, trying and failing to give a damn.

Perhaps she can sense the fact that she's losing me because she leans in and waggles her brows. “Oh! I can't be-*lieve* I haven't told you this yet—do you know who I saw last night?”

A pregnant pause follows, and I realize I'm supposed to actually guess.

“K-Kate Hudson?”

She rolls her eyes. “No, silly. *Emmett* was at Number 9 Park with a lovely blonde. I was sitting just one table over from them, but I didn't catch his companion's name. Maybe you know her? She was on the taller side, and I feel like I've seen her around town lately. She was slender, with short hair.

She had this great vintage Chanel bag that I almost asked her about. Anyway, is she a friend of yours?”

I shake my head.

She is definitely not a friend.

Her smile falls, and a faint blush colors the tops of her cheeks as she looks toward her grandmother for backup. “Ah, well. I’m sure they’re only acquaintances. You know how it is...”

What she means to say is among the upper crust, it’s not uncommon for men and women to step out of their marriages, or in this case, their fake engagements. Usually, it’s done with discretion, but not always. There are no paparazzi to capture scandalous moments—we’re too discreet for that—but gossipmongers like Victoria take it upon themselves to source every salacious detail so they can spread the news like wildfire.

She’s hardly the first to inform me of Emmett’s comings and goings. Over the last few weeks, it seems to be all anyone wants to talk to me about.

He was with a gorgeous woman at the Somerset Club last night.

There was a woman on his arm at the Boston Public Library auction.

I thought I saw him with someone outside Sorellinas yesterday evening, but perhaps I was mistaken...

Though I wish I could grow a thick callous around my heart, it proves impossible not to feel wounded. Each story is as painful as the last. Emmett seems intent on parading around town with as many women as he can manage, and I’m sure it doesn’t stop there. I press on my wounds by imagining him

taking them home at the end of the night, crawling up and over them just like he did to me on the pier in Italy...his mouth slanting over theirs, his heavy body caging them in against the bed...

When Diana and Victoria leave, my grandmother stands, and all the careful grace and elegance she exuded for the last two hours melts away in an instant.

Her expression is murderous when she turns to me.

“He makes a fool of you!” she hisses, looking on as if hoping I’ll share her vehemence.

I reach forward and carefully set my half-finished tea on the coffee table, avoiding her gaze.

My voice is flat when I reply, “He’s free to do as he likes. We aren’t married.”

“You’re betrothed and the whole world knows it! Never mind about the actual ceremony or some silly marriage certificate.”

“I don’t think it truly matters—”

“It does, and you’re too young and too naive to see that. Or perhaps you just don’t care, but you’ll do as I say and bring him to heel.”

I almost laugh. “You have a great deal of misplaced confidence in me if you think that’s possible. Emmett doesn’t answer to anyone but his father.”

I’m wrong to assume that will end her tirade. If anything, it only makes it worse.

“Then I suppose I’ll have to have a word with *him*.”

I cringe and stand immediately, trying to catch her before she leaves the room. “No, please—”

But she’s already made up her mind. I have no doubt she’s on her way to give Frédéric a call this very minute.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Emmett

There's an anger in me that I can't kill. If I keep busy, I can almost forget it exists, but it's always there in the background on a low simmer.

Through the latter half of November and early December, I work like a dog. I'm back and forth from New York City and Paris. I'm close to buttoning up the new Leclerc & Co. buyout, and I've had four meetings with the historical restoration team from Banks and Barclay concerning the new GHV headquarters in Boston.

I've also made headway with my home. Though far from being complete, it's livable. Pierce Waterhouse has finished furnishing several of the rooms on the main floor, enough for me to move out of my suite at the Mandarin Oriental two weeks before Christmas.

As soon as I've finished unpacking my last box, I regret my decision.

The city was already proving lonely. The days are growing short, night creeping in earlier and earlier each day. The snow is endless, and the conditions have pushed everyone indoors. At the Mandarin Oriental, I could have a drink at the bar or eat dinner downstairs and feel as though I wasn't quite so lonely and adrift. In my quiet house, it's not so easy.

The holidays take over in full force. The buildings around the city get dressed with red bows and twinkle lights, and I'm a scrooge, hating every bit of it, wishing the holidays would pass quicker. Happy families seem to follow me wherever I go. I walk past children making snowmen, tourists on ice skates, a makeshift hot cocoa stand run by two sisters with dark braids capped at the ends with alternating green and red beads.

"Mister! Hey mister! You want some hot chocolate?!" the younger one asks me.

"No," I reply grumpily, picking up my pace.

I swear her eyes well with tears on the spot. I make it only two steps further before exhaling a heavy sigh, turning back, and withdrawing a fifty-dollar bill out of my wallet to stuff into a plastic cup that up until now was only filled with loose change.

"Hey! THANKS!"

I plan to spend Christmas Day chained to my desk. It's out of necessity, really. This is an incredibly busy season for GHV. The fourth quarter out earns all the others, and it's also when there are the most fires to put out. Even Alexander seems to be focused on work, a rarity for him.

Beyond that, nothing has changed regarding my betrothal to Lainey.

My father hired a wedding planner after the engagement party I didn't attend, but I blocked her email address, and when she made another one, I blocked that one too. If the wedding is moving forward, I know nothing about it.

I received a chiding phone call from Papa recently. The moment I answered, he started to berate me in rapid-fire

French. *Ingrat. Imbécile. Impulsif.*

“You make a mockery of her by cavorting all over town with different women.”

Her being Lainey.

“I don’t care if you keep lovers, but you’ll act as if I raised you properly. You’ll behave and show the Davenports more respect than this.”

He assumed his tirade would convince me to fall in line, but I hung up and called Miranda to tell her there was a dinner I thought we should attend. Never mind where; it didn’t matter as long as it felt like a big *Fuck you* to my father.

All the while, through the turmoil of the holidays and my fighting with my father, I develop a habit I’ve come to rely on, a secret I admit to no one save for my driver, and him only because he’s directly involved. Tuesdays and Thursdays, in the afternoons, if I’m between meetings or otherwise free, I tell him to head to Morgan’s, and when we arrive, he parks in front of the gallery and keeps the Range Rover idling. I don’t plan to get out, and he knows that.

Instead, I sit and peer through the floor-to-ceiling windows, searching for Lainey. I don’t always get lucky, but occasionally I do. Once, she stood right near the front door, talking to an older woman. I didn’t know who she was—an artist, a collector, a dealer—but they were speaking passionately about something, and Lainey’s expressive smile felt almost palpable through the glass. I would have sat there the whole afternoon had my schedule allowed it.

Another time, I caught her as she was leaving for the day, bundled up in thick layers so that I could barely see her face. I looked up to the sky, troubled by the heavy clouds and the

promise of more snow. The sidewalks were already covered with a few inches.

Surely she isn't going to walk, I thought, already reaching for my door handle.

But she raced straight for an idling car parked right in front of mine, in no need of saving.

My plan to spend Christmas chained to my desk is interrupted by a phone call and an invitation from Alexander.

“Maman is coming to town for the holidays.”

“You’re kidding. When’s the last time you saw her?”

He mulls it over. “San Tropez, three years ago. Or was that four? She was dating that singer with the long hair.”

“That’s right. Ignacio. He was what, twenty?”

“If that. He also barely spoke English, but she didn’t seem to care.”

“Do you think they’re still together?”

“I guess we’ll see.”

The arrangements have already been made, and apparently my father is on board too. Oh joy. The last time we were all together was for Alexander’s college graduation. I have no doubt it will be a spectacle, but it’s Christmas Eve, and I’d rather spend the night with my dysfunctional family than with no one at all.

I have an armful of gifts my assistant helped me source: a rare Birkin for my mother, a snowboard made in collaboration with Jean-Michel Basquiat for Alexander, and a perfectly impractical La Dona Menagerie Fountain Pen for my father.

The wind bites at me as I hurry from my car into the Four Seasons where we're set to have dinner. A personal concierge is waiting for me just inside the door, and beside her stands a bellman with a silver cart. My gifts are immediately offloaded by the bellman then I'm shown the way down the hall, past the noisy dining room where Bostonians are enjoying a Christmas Eve buffet, to a discreet private room hidden behind thick burgundy curtains.

"You've arrived just in time, Mr. Mercier," the concierge tells me with a kind smile. "Please enjoy your evening at the Four Seasons and let us know if there's anything we can help you with in the future."

She gives a small bow then sweeps aside the curtain for me to enter. I walk into the room to find every seat at the dining table already filled, save for one. I'm the last to arrive. Down at the head of the table, my father sits like an emperor on his throne. Beside him, Maman, and to her left, Ignacio. Alexander sits beside Ignacio. On the other side of my father, Fay Davenport lifts a glass of red wine to her lips, surveying me with a cold gaze. On her right, with her attention pulled down to the table, sits Lainey.

"What an awful surprise."

Lainey winces, but no one says a word. My father shoots me an aggressively disapproving glare. Maman is too self-absorbed to register what I've said.

"Emmett! My precious boy!"

She leaps up from her seat in a great show of motherly affection, rounding the table with her arms stretched wide. I get engulfed in a hug I don't want, squeezed tightly by a mother I hardly consider family at all. She's had work done since I last saw her. When she pulls back to look at me, I

notice her nose is thinner, slightly out of proportion with the rest of her face. Her eyebrows are arched unnaturally high, and her lips and cheeks are overly filled. She's still beautiful, but it's hard to discern beneath all the fakery.

She attempts to shake me, but she doesn't have the strength. "You naughty boy. I had no idea you're engaged!"

"I'm not," I reply flatly.

"*Emmett.*" My father's warning slices through the air.

Alexander laughs.

Ignacio laughs too, confused about what's going on.

Fay Davenport looks like she'd like to chop off my head, and Lainey does absolutely nothing. It's like I'm not even here.

The only free seat at the table is beside her. I can't stand the idea of them orchestrating the seating arrangement before my arrival as if all we need is a meal together to fall madly in love, thus resolving this entire issue.

A server hurries over to pull out the chair, but I wave him off and do it myself. It screeches ominously, and I don't miss Lainey's flinch.

So she *is* aware of me.

It's fitting considering I'm despicably, annoyingly, desperately aware of her. She's wearing a tight long-sleeved red velvet dress that hugs her figure. The deep V-neckline showcases a diamond choker, but her ring finger is still bare. Odd considering the ruby I gifted her would have gone perfectly with her outfit.

"Where's your ring?" I ask once I take my seat.

She curls her left hand into a small fist then tucks it into her lap. “I’m having it resized.”

“What a shame. I’m sure it pains you not to have it on your finger to show proof of ownership.”

“*Charming.*”

She turns her body slightly away from me, a subtle way of telling me to fuck off, I think.

I almost smile.

“I wasn’t aware you would be here tonight. I hope you aren’t expecting a gift.”

“No need to worry,” Alexander says, interrupting our private conversation. “I brought you a little something, Lainey.”

She perks up and peers over at my brother with a curious smile.

Vines of annoyance grow up and around my neck, tightening my throat.

“What a friendly gesture, brother. When did you find the time? Are we not giving you enough to do at GHV?”

Alexander only laughs, enjoying this all a bit too much.

He retrieves three Cartier gift boxes from a bag that must have been resting at his feet. “I was going to save these until after dinner, but why wait?”

He distributes them to Maman, Fay, and Lainey. They thank him and tell him it wasn’t necessary then open them in tandem to reveal matching emerald and diamond tennis bracelets.

Lainey's cheeks color pink with delight as she lifts it up out of the box and admires it in the warm light of the chandeliers.

"It's stunning, Alexander. Truly. You shouldn't have."

Down at the other end of the table, Maman squeals with glee and immediately begs Ignacio to help her put on her bracelet.

Even Fay gives Alexander an approving smile.

Lainey leans over the table toward him, her voice low as she reveals, "I've never been gifted jewelry before...well, not from anyone but my grandmother."

Her voice sounds annoyingly intimate. It's like I'm not even sitting here.

"I gave you a ring," I remind her, unamused.

She doesn't even deign to look at me as she quips, "*That* wasn't a gift so much as a bloody horse head."

Alexander's howling laugh draws the attention of the entire table just before a suite of servers walk into the room, each one halting in place behind a chair before serving from the left and presenting us with our first course in unison.

It's crostini slathered with goat cheese, pomegranate arils, and rosemary, and we all eat while playing at polite conversation.

Fay and my father seem adept at carrying on as if they're old friends. Ignacio and Alexander bond over discussion of the current F1 standings. My mother checks her reflection in a compact mirror, touching up her lipstick after taking precisely one bite of the appetizer and then pushing it aside to keep herself from indulging in any more.

Lainey and I seem to be on our own little island, pretending the other doesn't exist as we tuck into our appetizer and sip our wine. Of course that couldn't be further from the truth. I'm overly aware of her. I find I can't keep my gaze off her. The details I took for granted before these weeks we've been apart—the delicate curve of her wrist, the careful way she smooths a finger down the spine of her wine glass, every bite she takes—seems more interesting than anything else in the room.

She's wearing a perfume that's a poetic blend of amber and floral. I recognize the signature scent from our previous encounters, and with every breath, a sad sort of clarity sinks in.

I've pinned my loneliness on the holidays and my unfamiliar surroundings. I've wondered if perhaps going to Paris would assuage some of the sadness, but now I realize fleeing to another continent wouldn't save me from this feeling. As I sit beside Lainey, trying to keep from watching and adoring her every move, I worry it's far more complicated than that.

The second course is set down and swept up, then the third. We've moved on to a honey-drizzled citrus salad with pistachio-poppy seed granola when the elephant in the room is finally brought up.

“Now why aren't we discussing the most interesting topic at hand?” my mother gushes, looking between Lainey and me. “Have the two of you decided on a date for the wedding? It won't work for me if it's too soon. I go to Singapore in February, not to mention I'll need a few months to secure a dress. I think perhaps a custom Versace. Or Balmain? The

options are endless, but I want to be assured I'll have enough time for at least three fittings."

Lainey unfolds and refolds the napkin on her lap.

"Late spring," my father answers for us. "In Paris."

She claps her hands together happily. "Oh wonderful! And where? I can already think of a few designers who would love to be showcased at the Opéra Garnier or the Petit Palais."

"I think we've decided on the Musée de l'Orangerie," he answers.

Having heard more than enough, I can't help but speak up.

"Who's we?"

My father sighs.

"I'd prefer to have a civilized dinner," he says, acting as if I'm the problem here.

Jesus, this whole room needs therapy.

Maman, having completely missed the tension starting to brew, picks right back up where she left off. "And what about the flowers? Nothing purple, I hope. It does absolutely nothing for my complexion. No red either. I don't want it anywhere near me. I'd prefer pale pinks. Now, will Ignacio be a groomsman or—"

Unable to listen to her drone on for one more second, I cut her off.

"There is no wedding," I say, gruffly enunciating each word.

Silence blankets the table, and my father carefully sets his utensils down on his plate, gathering his patience before

looking up at me. “What do you think you’ll gain by acting like a petulant child?”

I laugh at the absurdity of his question.

“My freedom from a tyrannical dictator.”

“Freedom?” He chuckles. “Freedom doesn’t exist in this world, Emmett. I thought you were already well aware of that, but perhaps I didn’t drill the concept home well enough while you were growing up, running amok at that boarding school.”

“You have me confused for Alexander.”

My brother throws up his hands. “*Hey!* Don’t pull me into this.”

My father ignores him, his blazing fury pinned solely on me. “You’re spoiled and ungrateful. If my father asked me to do something, I did it.” His snapping fingers pierce through the silence. “Like that,” he insists.

“When have I not done exactly as you asked? In school. At work. I carry the responsibility you’ve given me better than most men would and still, you demand more.”

He scoffs. “Yes. I’m hardly going to pat you on the back for enduring the *hardships* of growing up with a silver spoon in your mouth.”

I rise to stand. “That’s the root of it, isn’t it? You resent the fact that you were forced to become a self-made man while I was not. Your father was a lowly factory worker and your mother was a humble dressmaker and yet now you’re one of the wealthiest men in the world. Still, you’re unhappy. You see Alexander and me as ungrateful because we weren’t born beggars on the streets. You wish we’d had to claw our way up just as you did.”

His face colors red with anger.

“Tu dois montrer un peu de respect,” my father spits as he whips his napkin down on the table.

It collides with a wine bottle, knocking it over. Lainey jumps and tries to help as red wine bleeds into the white linen tablecloth. Her grandmother tugs her back down into her seat with a shake of her head.

Maman clasps a hand over her mouth, crocodile tears filling her eyes over the fact that some red wine splashed onto her dress.

Alexander holds his hands out, trying to ease tensions. *“Il est inutile de discuter de l’affaire plus longtemps.”*

He’s right. It’s useless.

My father and I will never see eye to eye, and though I could back down and put this issue to rest simply by cowing to his demands, I won’t. I’ve reached the end of the line letting him play puppeteer in my life. If I don’t push back now, it will never end.

I’m already on my feet. There’s no sense in staying.

They can continue this farce of a Christmas dinner without me.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Lainey

Watching the red wine spread slowly across the tablecloth feels like I'm experiencing the last vestiges of a waking dream. I sit there wholly apart from the chaos that ensues around me, the crying and the shouting—all of it muffled like I'm in a soundproof box.

Sit up straight.

Stay quiet.

Be polite.

Act gracious.

Never argue.

Emmett and his father go at it like two alpha wolves tearing into each other's flesh and then...Emmett's gone.

The fight is over.

My grandmother places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "You behaved wonderfully, darling."

Except this time, her praise doesn't feel good.

Her words aren't the salve I need them to be. I frown and shake my head, looking around the room, first at Emmett's ridiculous mother shouting about her ruined dress, then at his overbearing father, who's still pacing with fisted hands, and

last at his brother, who's gone back to eating his food as if nothing's happened.

I can't stand it for one more second.

The absurdity of everyone here has me leaping to my feet and tossing my napkin on the table.

“Where are you—”

My grandmother doesn't get to finish her question.

I'm going after Emmett, but he has the advantage with his head start and his longer, anger-filled strides. When I first spot him, he's already clear across the hotel lobby. I shout for him to wait, but I don't think he hears me before he flings the door open and escapes out into the night.

Rather than give up, I curse under my breath and hurry faster. One silly high heel slips off my foot and then, annoyed, I shake off the other, glad to be rid of them as I run and push the hotel door open. Immediately, icy wind tears into me. My feet go numb in a matter of seconds. My eyes water and fight to stay open. I wrap my arms around my chest to try to protect myself as best as possible as I turn in a circle, looking for Emmett.

He's gone, down the sidewalk, taking off without a car.

“Emmett!” I shout.

The howling wind doesn't let up.

“EMMETT!”

He turns and looks back, anger still evident in his dark features. There isn't a moment that passes between him turning around and him rushing back to me, whipping off his suit jacket so he can wrap it around me tightly.

“You’re a fool! Get back inside,” he roars.

“Don’t leave!”

He shakes his head, already taking me by the shoulders so he can push me back. “Lainey, go back inside!” he demands, his voice rising over the wind and the traffic. “You don’t have fucking shoes on.”

God, he’s pissed. With his dad, with me. We’ve made it so impossible for him.

“Please don’t leave.” My voice breaks with emotion, but he doesn’t listen. He’s so intent on being rid of me.

I can already feel the moment starting to slip through my fingers. He’ll deposit me in the lobby and disappear, this fleeting window for honesty will end, and we’ll be right back where we started—enemies.

I can’t bear it.

I can’t endure another breath knowing he hates me.

“I’m sorry!” I shout suddenly, so overcome with emotion that I nearly choke on the words. “I didn’t mean to play a part in any of this—”

“Don’t,” he cuts me off, his jaw locked tight.

“You have to listen, Emmett.” I grab for him, desperate to get it all out. “The last few months have been unbearable. I’ve tried to please everyone. I’ve tried to play the perfect part for my grandmother, but it’s killing me. I’m catatonic, day in and day out. I hear rumors about you, where you are, who you’re with—”

“Where I am and who I’m with has nothing to do with you!” he erupts, so intent on letting his anger get the best of him.

Already, freezing tears are starting to slip down my cheeks.

“How can you say that? *How can you be so blind?!*” I jerk out of his hold and push his chest again and again so that he’s forced to step back, my momentum carrying us down the sidewalk, away from the hotel. “It’s my heart you stomp on, my fucking *soul* you crush beneath your ruthless acts. ‘It has nothing to do with me’ and yet every rumor of you with another woman is a knife in my chest. I care for you though you’re an utter fool, a selfish...unkind man.” The longer I rant, the cooler my tone becomes until eventually, I just sound totally defeated. “You have no regard for anyone but yourself. Don’t you see that? *I’m* in this too. *I’m* the one you injure in this war with your father.”

Still, he doesn’t listen. “You put yourself in the middle of this, Lainey. You’re to blame as much as me.”

“You’re right. I am equally to blame. But do you know why I was so willing to go through with my grandmother’s request of me? Beyond my desire to please her?” I get right up close to him, my head tilted back, my gaze clashing with his. “You want to know my deep dark secret?” His dark eyes bore into me as I continue faintly, “Because I love you.”

No.

I look down as I amend, “I *loved* you. Once, when I was younger. I built you up as some fantastic mirage of a man. I left you roses on the dock every night when you swam—”

His expression suddenly changes, hardness giving way to confusion. He shakes his head. “You what? What do you mean, you—”

I toss my hands up in the air, and his jacket slips off my shoulders and falls to the sidewalk in a crumpled heap. It

doesn't matter; I'm immune to the cold now. "That was me!" I slap my chest. "*Me* sneaking down from my room so I could watch you swim night after night. I was obsessed with you. You gifted me those books on your last day at St. John's, and you know what? I never returned them, not even when I graduated. I paid the fines and took them home and I still have them. They've felt like such treasures and I was so embarrassed to admit it, but now I can't seem to care at all."

A wild, end-of-the-road laugh tumbles out of me. I think I've gone crazy. I *feel* crazy.

"The last few months have left me with no ego at all so, in a way, it feels freeing to finally come clean about my silly infatuation with you, because it's done." I step back. "You've ensured that."

I'm turning back toward the hotel when he says my name, just once.

"*Lainey.*"

There's a poem in that word. It's gentle and heartbroken and pleading enough that it brings forth a fresh batch of tears, but it doesn't convince me to turn around.

Unbothered by my bare feet and mascara-covered face, I pull open the door to the hotel and go to find my grandmother. We have a lot to discuss.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Lainey

It's late, and we should both be in bed. Christmas Eve is about to become Christmas Day, and yet my grandmother and I are in the sitting room, cast in the twinkling glow from the Christmas tree proudly posed in the corner. When we got home from the Four Seasons, I asked if we could talk, privately. She had the forethought to tell Jacobs to bring us each a spiked hot chocolate, complete with a tiny candy cane dangling over the side of each mug.

Though it's cheery and delicious, I haven't had much more than a few half-hearted sips of mine.

I tentatively peer over at my grandmother and find she hasn't touched much of hers either. She sits facing the tree wearing a wistful expression as she studies the delicate white lights and heirloom ornaments we hung together earlier in December. That easy winter day seems a thousand miles away now.

She's never one to sit in her emotions, but tonight, she seems fragile and sad. Her austere mask isn't in its usual place.

I feel bad for what I'm doing. I'd much rather continue to sweep our problems under the rug, but leaving well enough alone just doesn't seem possible any longer. The rug is

overflowing at this point. Besides, I've already come this far, and it seems silly to back down now.

I set my mug carefully on the side table and turn toward her. The ominous sound of china hitting wood draws her attention as I begin to speak. "This will not be a pleasant conversation, I'm afraid."

Slowly, her lips curl into a melancholy smile. She tilts forward and sets her mug down as well. Then she looks at me with surprising gentleness. "Oh, let's have it out and be done with it. The night was dramatic enough already. If I didn't go into cardiac arrest at that dinner table while French curses were being flung across the room, I'm sure I can handle this. I'm not some wilting flower. Speak now. What is it?"

Her demanding tone draws the truth out of me.

"I'm not happy with the way things are," I blurt. Then, more gently, I continue, "It's..." I shake my head and start again. "I've tried so hard to fall in line, to simply exist in whatever manner you'd like me to, but I've come to realize that I can't. Not anymore.

"For so long—since I was a child, in fact—I've been so terrified of displeasing you. I worried if I spoke up or went against your wishes, you'd assume I'm filled with too much of my mother's flaws and not enough of my father's virtues."

"Lainey, I—"

"*Please*. Let me finish," I rush out desperately. I hold a hand up, palm open. "I have felt your hatred for my mother as if it were hatred for me, and it's a hard thing for a child to feel so wrong, merely for existing." I let both hands fall onto my lap, trying to keep them from shaking with adrenaline. "The simple fix has always been to ensure my own happiness takes

a back seat to yours, but it's made life too hollow. Tried as I have to shirk her looming shadow, I've made peace with the fact that I will always be my mother's daughter."

For most of my speech, my eyes were anywhere but on her. My bottom lip quivers as I gather the courage to meet her gaze.

She looks on sadly, shaking her head. "It breaks my heart to hear you say that. I feel I've truly failed you if you believe I don't see you for exactly who you are—a wonderful, kind young woman with a heart of gold."

She sighs.

"Lainey, if I may, I have no doubt you've gathered up a great deal of courage to be able to stand before me and reveal the secrets of your psyche, but I'm much more perceptive than you give me credit for. I've seen the unhappiness in you lately, that wild spirit struggling to be free."

I open and close my mouth, my shock momentarily stealing my tongue.

"Now tell me, do you have some plan you've concocted? Are you going to backpack solo across Europe? Hike the Appalachian Trail? Oh dear, are you set on getting a nose ring?"

My brows furrow. "I...hadn't thought about it."

"The nose ring?"

"Any of it."

She looks relieved. "I see."

"To be honest, I'm uncomfortable even talking about this. I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful or silly...or that perhaps I don't realize all the ways my life could have been

harder.” I pause to mull it over. “The thing is, I’m not looking for some great big change. I genuinely enjoy my life here in Boston with you, only...I think I’d like to stretch my legs. I want more independence. I want to be in charge of my schedule and social life. I want to take on more hours at Morgan’s. *Oh!* And I want my paychecks to be deposited in a bank account that *I* manage.” My voice takes on a determined edge as the ball gets rolling. “And I don’t like going to your clubs for those lectures. I hate those snooty old places, but I absolutely *must* continue to be by your side when you go to the opera and ballet. And no more of you and Margaret picking my outfits for me like I’m a doll!”

I’m almost winded by the end of it, and far from looking disappointed or annoyed, my grandmother almost seems... proud.

“And what about your living arrangements?”

I deflate slightly as I look around the familiar sitting room, the warm and inviting furniture, the well-loved books layered on the shelves. It’s home, especially now with all the familiar Christmas decor in place.

“I was thinking it would be okay if I stayed here...”

She nods solemnly. “I see no issue with anything you’ve asked for, though Margaret will be sad to lose access to your closet.”

I smile at her quip and then let my gaze fall on the Christmas tree once more.

“Is it small of me not to demand more? Am I weak for not wanting to leave this life altogether? Find a little apartment and pave my own way? Not many twenty-five-year-olds still live with their grandmother...”

“So what of other twenty-five-year-olds? Who gets to say what’s best for a person? I think whatever makes you happy should be enough.”

I nod. “True. It’s just... I know we don’t talk about it much, but after losing my parents so young...” I shake away the sadness lurking in the periphery of my mind and heave a deep breath. “I guess I’m just not quite ready to leave you if that’s okay.”

She stands then and walks to me, bending so she can hug me close. She squeezes me against her chest as she leans down and presses a kiss to my hair. I’m enveloped in her scent and softness. Every inch of her is a comfort.

“You’re the most precious part of my life, Lainey, but you should know I’ve never experienced a challenge on earth quite so hard as parenting, and even in my old age, I don’t think I’ve quite mastered it.” She peels back to cup my face with her hand. “You understand I would never have forced you down the aisle if it wasn’t what you wanted.”

I lean away slightly so I can wipe away the residual tears as she continues, “If you’ll let me explain myself, I do admit to playing matchmaker...a bit. Royce was a good man and I won’t apologize too strongly for trying to safeguard your future happiness, but I can see now how wrong I was about the two of you. It’s so clear that you have always been meant for Emmett.”

My jaw drops. “You can’t be serious. Did you not listen to a single thing I just told you? It’s done, these old-fashioned betrothals—all of it.”

She smiles and pats my shoulder. “We’ll see about that.”

“You’ll never stop!” I tease, and she winks and shrugs, playing coy.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s me you need to worry about now...”

Chapter Thirty

Emmett

I receive exactly one gift on Christmas morning, and it's a note sent directly to my home via courier.

I'm fireside, in buffalo check pajamas, sipping spiked eggnog and wallowing at 8 AM, when my doorbell rings. The thought that it could be Lainey, here to pick up where we left off last night, is the only thing that gets me off the couch.

Unfortunately, when I open the door, I find a heavysset guy holding up an envelope.

He looks me up and down for a second, obviously unimpressed by my appearance. I know what he's seeing. I accidentally caught my reflection in a mirror in the hall earlier and had to look twice: dark circles under my eyes, dirty hair, angry scowl.

"You, uh..." He squints as he reads from his iPhone. "Emmett Mercier?"

With his thick Boston accent, my last name comes out butchered.

"Mer-see-*AYE*," I snip, to which he replies, "Like I could give two shits."

And oddly enough, it makes me laugh.

I tip him well and close the door, studying the small envelope. Instead of opening it right away, I set it down and go to retrieve my eggnog. I drink as I stare down at where the envelope rests on the edge of my entry table.

Like I'm scared it'll burn me, I flick it with the tip of my finger so it turns over. As I suspected there would be, embossed letters boldly stretch across the sealed flap: EED.

I swallow down the rest of my drink and decide it's probably best to just get it over with. I don't know why I'm putting it off.

I open it and withdraw a thick stationery card. There's a single line of text written in small, looping letters.

I've called it off. You're free.

I read it three times, trying to decide if it will catch new meaning if only I read it in a different cadence.

I've called it off. You're...free.

I've called it off...You're free.

I've called it off. You're free.

None of them help.

The weightlessness I'd hoped would come from the declaration is absent. In fact, I feel like I might throw up.

Eggnog for breakfast will do that to a person.

EED are obviously Lainey's initials. I know this is her way of calling off our old-fashioned fake engagement. I know I'm supposed to pop champagne and toast to my victory in this hard-fought war, only now, suddenly...I don't want it.

Isn't that hilarious.

It's so funny I pour myself another round of eggnog. I'm good and drunk before 10 AM. I put on Christmas carols and sing, and when my voice gets tired and my stomach rumbles, I slip on some shoes and go out looking for food, only every fucking place is closed because it's Christmas Day. I wander in aimless circles until I find a small Chinese food restaurant that's open. The sign says takeout only. I go in to order, and an elderly woman hands me a menu and, with a no-nonsense tone, asks me what I want.

"*What?*" I ask, looking up at her with astonishment, tears suddenly clouding my eyes.

"What do you want?" she asks again, prodding my menu with her pen impatiently.

"The thing is...I don't know anymore. I thought I did. I really fucking thought I did, only now I'm not so sure." My brows crinkle with frustration. "Do you understand?"

She doesn't understand.

She asks me to get out of her restaurant.

I'm relegated to the hot dogs they've got at a 7-11 down the street, the ones that have been rotating aimlessly on a greasy conveyor belt for the better part of a week. To finish off my fancy holiday meal, I grab a random American beer from the cooler, and then I go eat on the curb in the parking lot, trying to pick apart my feelings as best as possible.

This is...inconvenient to say the least.

An epiphany like this would have been great, say, twenty-four hours ago.

Now, it's agony.

Even with copious amounts of alcohol addling my brain, I know full well this is not a simple case of wanting what I can't have, or not knowing what I had until it's gone, or simply being a stubborn asshole. It's not even just a bad case of the holiday blues.

Even if I wasn't abso-fucking-lutely sure of it already, my driver would be quick to remind me that my twice-weekly stalker episodes at Morgan Fine Art Gallery might prove that underneath it all, I have very real, very obvious feelings for Lainey Davenport. Of course I do. I always have. She pulled at my heartstrings even when we were younger. There's a French expression for this: *la douleur exquisite*, the heart-wrenching pain of loving someone unattainable.

I'm suffering the improbable possibility of pushing Lainey away over and over and over again out of some self-righteous need for independence, only to be given exactly what I want and despairing over it.

It starts to snow while I mope there in my pajama pants and robe, which feels apropos. I look down at my half-eaten hot dog, now covered in icy snowmelt. *Zut.*

My phone starts to ring, and I dig it out of my pocket. When I answer, Alexander tells me he's been pounding on my front door for the last ten minutes.

I can't even be bothered to add inflection to my tone. "I'm not home. I'm down the street."

"Where?"

"Out on the curb."

"You're *what?*"

He thinks the connection is bad.

“I’m eating a hot dog.”

“Jesus Christ.”

It’s not even five minutes later when his driver pulls into the parking space right in front of me, and my younger brother, the one I’ve dragged out of clubs, reprimanded, shaken sense into countless times in the past, looms over me in an Armani suit and a camel-colored wool jacket.

“You’re wearing your house slippers.”

I look down.

Huh. I hadn’t realized.

“Why are you sitting out here?”

“J’ai une peur bleue.”

I’m scared to death.

“Of what? Getting heartburn? Because if you finish that hot dog, you’ll be regretting it later. Believe me.”

Inspiration hits suddenly. “Do you have Lainey’s phone number?”

He smiles and shakes his head. “Let’s hold off on making any important phone calls for now. You’re not in the best state, *frère.*”

Fine.

“Why were you at my house?” I ask.

“Where else would I be on Christmas Day?”

“I once found you in bed with three women on Christmas Day.”

He smiles, not the least bit embarrassed.

“What can I say? Some years are better than others.”

I roll my eyes and lift my hand so he can help hoist me up off the snow-covered ground.

“Have you talked to Father yet today?”

“He’s on a plane back to Paris, no doubt cutting us both out of his will.”

I shrug. “It was worth it.”

He leads me toward the waiting car and ensures I get into the back seat without knocking my head on the doorframe. “I’m only kidding. He’d never cut you out of his will. To him, you’re the second coming of Christ. He only puts so much pressure on you because he sees so much of himself in you. It’s eerie, really. The older you get, the more you take after him.” He shudders. “I can’t bear the idea of there being two of him.”

“I’m not so similar to him.”

He barks out a laugh like I’ve just said the most ridiculous thing he’s ever heard.

“You should see it through my eyes.”

I look out the window as the driver pulls away, looping around the block and making the short trip back to my house.

“What would you have done if you were me? In all of this?” I ask, peering back at him.

He looks over at me with a look of sincerity. There’s no humor behind his gaze, no mirth as he states simply, “I would have happily married Lainey.”

I frown. “Because of Father’s insistence?”

“Because Lainey is a fucking catch and I’d be lucky to have her in my bed every night.”

In seconds, I have him by the collar. Jealousy rages through me, assisted strongly by all that eggnog and beer. I'm shoving his face up against the window so that his cheek is comically squashed against the glass.

"*Jesus*, let go of me, you idiot."

"Don't fucking talk about her like that."

"Like what?! You're ripping the collar of my shirt—this is Gucci! Goddammit, one of the buttons just ripped off."

"She's not for *you*," I bite out like some incensed crazy person.

"You're a madman!"

He's half pissed, half amused as he grabs me by the forearms and shoves me off him once and for all.

"*It's Christmas*," he says as he straightens his shirt and collar. "And you're paying for that button, by the way."

"*Ah, allez vous faire foutre, Alexander*."

"We're here," says the driver, looking back at us in the rearview mirror, completely unfazed. It's like he's witnessed two brothers brawling in his back seat so many times it's boring at this point.

Once we're inside my house, Alexander tells me I need a shower. I tell him he needs to leave. He ignores me and heads to the kitchen to make himself comfortable. I go to my room and tear off my pajamas so I can wash away the stench of beer and hot dog.

By the time I'm dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, damp hair and all, Alexander is peeling potatoes in the kitchen with my linen chef's apron tied around his waist.

He arches a brow at me as he continues his work, asking me in French, “Why were you out eating that food when you have a fully stocked fridge?”

“I didn’t feel like cooking, and I wasn’t aware that you knew how.”

“I had to teach myself after I left St. John’s. It’s not like Maman would have ever taught us.”

I snort. “She’s never cooked a day in her life.”

“Exactly. Now, are you going to help or just stand there?”

I head for the refrigerator. “*Chapon?* Or *poularde?* My housekeeper went to the butcher for me yesterday. She was going to prepare a whole meal, but I told her not to bother.”

“Let’s cook both.”

Sheesh. “Who all are you planning to feed?”

“The two of us. Jonathan and Emelia, the *lovebirds*, are in California visiting family. I can’t be bothered to worry about Maman and Ignacio, and poor losers that we are, we have no one else to consider.” He shrugs. “We’ll have leftovers.”

He starts to slice the potatoes with a mandoline, dropping them immediately into a simmering pot that’s filled with milk and garlic. He’s preparing one of my favorite dishes: *Gratin Dauphinois*. Already, the kitchen smells divine.

“What about that woman you were attached to at your house a while back?” I ask. “The one in your kitchen I thought I’d have to pry you off of.”

He furrows his brows as if genuinely perplexed. “I don’t even remember who you’re referring to.”

Of course he doesn’t.

I start gathering what I'll need to cook the *chapon*: fresh herbs, an onion, garlic, butter, lemons, sherry, and salt and pepper. Alexander and I spend the better part of the day in the kitchen cooking and listening to some of our favorites: Edith Piaf and Jean Sablon. We stave off our appetite with cheese and wine, enjoying two bottles of my vintage Chateau Margaux red blend.

At the end of the day, we have a good meal sitting at my kitchen table. When he's finished, Alexander sets down his fork and knife and leans back in his chair to sip his wine.

I feel him studying me, and yet I ignore him, finishing off my food.

Still, he persists.

“What is it? You look as if you're trying to solve all the world's problems in that head of yours.”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “I've let you get away with sulking all day because I didn't want to rock the boat, but now I've had too much wine and I don't give a damn if you plan on rearranging my face just for bringing her up. What will you do about Lainey?”

I take my time sitting back and dabbing my mouth with my napkin while he stares at me expectantly.

I shrug. “The way I see it, there's only one option that would bring me happiness.”

I go back to eating, but he waves for me to get on with it.

It's simple, really.

“Marry her.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Emmett

Fay Davenport's home is as impressive as I assumed it would be. Right in the heart of Boston, the historical property has been restored and well cared for. When I knock on the front door the day after Christmas, a butler greets me.

"May I help you?" he asks with a heavy air of formality.

"Yes. I'm Emmett Mercier, a friend of Lainey's. I was hoping to have a word with her."

He looks unimpressed, inspecting me down the bridge of his nose. "She's not in residence."

I hear a familiar scornful voice behind him. "Who is it, Jacobs? Who could be rude enough to pay us a call the day after Christmas at such an early hour?"

Fay Davenport appears behind her butler with a sharply disapproving expression, but as soon as she sees me standing on her doorstep, her glare cools. In fact, she almost looks pleased.

"Ah, Jacobs, no need to block his way—this is Lainey's betrothed." She motions me forward impatiently. "Come in already. It's freezing cold out there, and you're letting all of my warm air out."

Jacobs steps back to allow my entry, and then I'm led down the hall to a formal sitting room where Fay takes a seat on a couch and beckons for me to sit across from her.

"Coffee? Tea?"

"Coffee, please. Black."

She nods to the butler at the door. "Make it two cups, Jacobs. Extra sugar for me. Thank you."

Once he's off preparing our coffees, Fay focuses her astute gaze on me.

"So you've come to see my granddaughter?"

"I'd like a word with her, yes."

"After the stunt you pulled at dinner, I would think you'd want a bit more than a *word*."

I almost chuckle.

"Yes, I think you're right. She isn't home?"

"Gone on a walk. I have no idea when she'll be back. I'm afraid you'll have to keep company with me instead."

I'm not entirely sure if I mind that or not. I'm more than a little intrigued by Lainey's grandmother.

She rests her hands primly on her lap. "If you've come to ensure she's called off the engagement, there's no need to bother. She seems to have already moved on."

"That was rather quick..."

"Yes, well, it was all for show now, wasn't it? It's not as if she had developed real feelings for you."

"You sound so confident of that."

"I know my granddaughter."

“I’d like to think I know her well too.”

Her brows arch in contradiction. “And yet you treated her with so little regard these last few months? I feared the day she would encounter a man like you. They had a word for it back in my day.”

I can barely hold back my smile. “I’d like to hear it.”

“A rake, my dear boy, and you’d better cover that smile. There’s no need to look so proud about it.”

“I only think it’s funny that you have me pegged so incorrectly.”

“Tell me where I’m wrong and I’ll gladly eat crow.”

“I care for your granddaughter.”

She rolls her eyes as if she doesn’t believe me, and I decide I might find better success with a different approach.

“Did you marry Lainey’s grandfather because you loved him or because it was expected of you?”

Her shoulders stiffen. “It was a different time...”

I sit quietly, making it clear she hasn’t answered my question.

She continues impatiently. “My marriage was arranged, and to be frank, it was the last thing I wanted, but I placed duty above self-interest, and I have no regrets about that.”

“I respect that, but I could never do the same.”

“Marry someone you didn’t love?”

I balk at the idea. “Never.”

“So that was the issue with your betrothal to Lainey?”

“Not at all.”

She frowns then, annoyance evident across her face.

“Stop circling the truth and spit it out.”

“I think it would be best if I spoke to Lainey first.” I stand up and apologize for the quick visit.

Jacobs hasn't even returned with the coffees, but if Lainey isn't here, I see no reason to stay.

“Please tell her I stopped by.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Lainey

It's New Year's Eve, and Collette's invited me to a party, mostly out of pity. I've been sulking at the gallery all day, and she assumes I've hit a rough patch with Emmett. I can't bear to tell her the actual truth of what's going on, not that it matters; her guess is close enough. We've definitely hit a rough patch. My grandmother told me about his morning visit, and it only infuriated me more. He had every opportunity to come talk to me for months before that.

"I know you're about to say no," Collette says, holding up her hand to stop me from answering right away. "But it's going to be low key, just friends and a few others you'd probably recognize. We rented out this swanky little bar and it'll be packed to the gills, so if there's someone you're trying to *avoid*, I bet you wouldn't even see him. There'll be enough strangers there that you could totally stay anonymous if you wanted to, you know, pretend to be someone else for a night."

"I have nothing to wear."

She tips her face down so she can stare at me from beneath her brows, thoroughly unimpressed with the lack of creativity in my excuse.

"We live in Boston. There are like ten boutiques on this block alone."

“Still, I don’t know when I—”

“We’ll go at lunch.”

I clasp my hands on top of the counter. I had plans to watch the ball drop in the comfort of my home, dressed in pajamas and slippers, but this sounds infinitely more fun.

“Okay.”

She raises her eyebrows.

“What?”

I laugh. “Okay, I’ll go.”

“You’re joking.”

“No. I’ll find a dress at lunch.”

“I’ll help!”

True to her word, Collette accompanies me to every single boutique within a mile radius of Morgan’s during our lunch break. Most of them don’t have anything appropriate for New Year’s Eve, AKA slinky, sexy, sparkly, and fun. We luck out at the final shop though. They have a killer white sequined mini dress that I buy straight off the mannequin without even trying it on because we have to book it back to Morgan’s for a 1 PM meeting.

At the end of the work day, Collette doesn’t let me make my escape.

“I know you. You’ll go home and lose steam and then I’ll be receiving one of those lame, ‘Sorry, change of plans. Staying in tonight’ texts. No. Consider me your fairy fucking godmother. Let’s go. When I was supposed to be sending emails this afternoon, I was actually booking us appointments

to get our hair and makeup done, and if we're fast, we can eat at this little sushi place around the corner first."

Okay then. Who am I to argue with that?

The evening passes exactly as Collette had planned, and at 9:30 PM, I lock myself in her bathroom to change for the party. I take off my work clothes and fold them neatly, then I unzip the dress. There are built-in cups, which is nice because I definitely didn't wear the right bra for it. I step in and gently tug it up, panicking slightly as I feel the hem hit just beneath the tops of my thighs.

"Uhh...Collette," I say, my voice already wobbly. "This might not work."

I reach around to zip it up, hoping that by some miracle, I'll get more length from the dress once it's situated on me correctly. I don't. The bodycon fit hugs my curves, the strapless neckline accentuates my cleavage, and the subtle sequins shimmer in the light.

"How is it?"

"Umm..."

I open the door for her to see it herself.

Her eyes practically bug out of her head. "Holy shit."

"Too short?"

"Yes. It's *obscene*. I love it. Spin." I do as she says, and she lets loose a ridiculous catcall. "It's perfect."

"For a small child maybe."

"Whatever. I'm obsessed. Here." She holds out a pair of silver heels that have a thin ankle strap. "I rooted through my

closet. I know you're a half-size smaller than me, but these heels should work if you tighten them enough."

So this is it. There's no going back.

Collette and I walk arm in arm through the lobby of her apartment complex to the Uber waiting outside. The driver clears his throat when we get in, his cheeks coloring slightly as he turns back to us.

"Uh, hey. You ladies ready to go?"

Collette grins and shoots me a wink. "Ready."

Bar 717 has been completely transformed by a team of event designers hired by Collette and her friends. Near the entrance, a thick wall of fresh white flowers creates the perfect backdrop for photos. Disco balls rain down from the ceiling, the bar's usual furniture has been replaced by modern white tables and silver chairs, and filled champagne buckets ensure no one's flute is empty. Loud music pulses around us, and the bar is packed. Collette wastes no time thrusting me into the throng of people.

"Let's get a drink!"

I'm glad she doesn't abandon me straight away. As one of the party hosts, she knows everyone here, and she's nice enough to introduce me around as she gets tugged into conversations on our way to the main bar. It's not long before we bump into faces I recognize from St. John's.

Collette perks up when she sees her friends. "Pippa, Francesca, Heath, you remember Lainey Davenport?"

Pippa and Francesca look less than pleased to see me. They barely give me passing smiles, but Heath's interest is immediately piqued.

“Little Lainey Davenport, holy shit. I never thought I’d see you at a party like this. Killer dress,” he says, stepping closer. “Where are you two headed? The bar? I’ll come.”

He drops his hand to my shoulder to help guide me and off we go, the three of us slipping through the large crowd.

I remember Heath from St. John’s. He belonged to Emmett’s group and I think he was on the soccer team too, but I can’t be sure. My blinders were up when it came to other guys at school. That’s how loyal I was to the man I wish I weren’t thinking about right now.

Even still, I remember Heath being such a player back then, and obvious about it too. He dated a senior girl when he was only a sophomore then wound up cheating on her with her best friend. Worse, the original girl didn’t even care. She took him back a month later, and they dated until her graduation, when he promptly dumped her and moved on to someone else.

I look over at him with a shrewd stare. “Do you actually remember me?”

He laughs. “Uh, yeah. You were legendary at St. John’s. Ghost girl, right? Don’t think it’s weird, but I sort of had a little crush on you.”

“Right.”

He smiles. “I’m serious. I mean obviously you were way too young for me, but you could see then what you were going to become...”

I raise a brow. “What’s that?”

He almost looks embarrassed. “Don’t make me say it. A girl as hot as you probably gets compliments thrown at her nonstop.”

A girl as hot as me...

Hilarious.

If only he knew the truth.

I don't want to care what the former students of St. John's have to say about me. Quite frankly, his declaration doesn't change things now, but it satisfies the fragile ego of the young girl still sheltered inside me, the one who felt so alone at that school, the one who clung to the idea of Emmett with everything she had.

"Don't tell your fiancé I said that." Heath laughs.

So he knows about Emmett and me. He doesn't need to worry, though.

Emmett isn't here.

At least not that I've seen, and I've looked. The crowd is thick, but not so much so that he'd go unnoticed. Emmett's never been one to easily blend in.

Maybe he doesn't celebrate New Year's Eve like the rest of his old St. John's friends.

Maybe he's with someone else. The seductive blonde, perhaps.

"What do you want?" Collette asks me when we reach the bar.

They have a few signature cocktails listed and I peruse the list, landing on a cranberry martini. It's served with a dusting of sugar on the rim, candied cranberries, and an orange peel garnish. It's almost too pretty to drink after the bartender passes it over to me.

"You guys want to dance?" Heath asks.

The DJ is playing house music woven with popular songs from artists we all know: Taylor Swift, Lizzo, Justin Bieber. It's actually pretty catchy.

I look to Collette, and she shrugs. "Sure, yeah. I could dance."

Well so much for pretty garnishes. I down that drink quickly, both out of fear that I'll accidentally spill it all over my dress as Collette drags me away from the bar and because I need the liquid courage if I'm going to go out onto a dance floor. Fortunately, there are so many bodies crammed into the space, everyone getting into the music, shouting the words when they know them—no one cares about me and what I'm doing.

I'm on the fringes for a while, barely shuffling back and forth, laughing at the over-the-top enthusiasm some people have for their favorite songs, then the DJ blends a Calvin Harris song with Rihanna lyrics and I can no longer restrain myself. I let Collette pull me toward her and we belt out the lyrics together, adding silly dance moves, mostly just...acting our ages, something I've never done.

I'm on my second drink, overheated and having fun on the dance floor still, when Alexander catches my attention and waves to me from across the room.

"You want a drink?" he mouths while miming the gesture with his hands.

I laugh and hold up my half-finished martini.

He nods and cuts around the crowd toward the bar. Then he comes to find us when he has his beer in hand.

I'm genuinely happy to see him until he leans in and tells me, "Just so you know, I texted Emmett to let him know

you're here.”

I rear back, knitting my eyebrows together. “What? Why did you say it like that?”

“Like what?”

“Ominous and foreboding, like something bad is about to happen.”

He winces.

“*Alexander.*”

He tugs a hand through his hair. “You haven’t seen him these last few days...”

“No. Of course I haven’t.”

“Well...let’s just say it hasn’t been good. He’s pretty eager to see you.”

“Alexander!”

He holds up his hands in innocence. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

Lucky for him, a firearm didn’t go with this dress.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Lainey

I'm sitting in the center of a booth in Bar 717, sandwiched between Heath and Collette and their friends. Everyone is talking, but I'm staring at the door, a nervous wreck. I dumped the last half of my second drink and switched to water the moment Alexander warned me Emmett might be on his way. My leg bounces underneath the table, and Collette shoots me an odd look.

“You okay?”

Absolutely not.

Time has a new meaning. Each second feels like eons, and when Emmett finally walks into the bar, I feel like I might pass out.

Just as I suspected, his entrance is quite the ordeal. I swear the volume of the music dips slightly. Gravity bends in his direction. He has us all ensnared as he stands near the door, scanning the room. It's an eerie thing to watch a predator at work, to endure the gut-clenching fear of knowing you're the one they're seeking. I force down a hard swallow and wet my lips.

He's wearing what I now realize is his signature look: black suit; black button-up shirt, unbuttoned at the neck; silver

watch glinting on his wrist. Inky dark hair and a harsh glare. The devil called—he wants his wardrobe back.

When he finally spots me, Collette's leaning in to tell me something, talking right against the shell of my ear so I can hear her over the music, but it's no use. I'm not listening. Emmett has my attention.

My stomach twists as he takes his first step in my direction. He doesn't waver in his pursuit, even as people try to talk to him.

He has a face like thunder as he watches Heath put his arm around the back of the booth, skimming his fingers along my bare shoulder.

It's intentional, I know. Heath sees Emmett walking toward us. He hears the chorus of greetings.

"Emmett!"

"Emmett, you made it!"

"Pull up a chair. Or, here, we can all scoot in."

Heath doesn't move his hand, but he does lean over the table just as Emmett arrives at our booth, ensuring Emmett can hear his goading tone.

"Nice of you to show...I've been keeping your fiancée company."

Emmett doesn't even look at him. His dark gaze captures mine.

Pissed is an understatement.

He holds up his hand, waving his pointer finger and middle finger in a universal gesture for, *Come here*.

I don't move.

I'm not sure he understands what's going on, but I know he got my note. *I've called it off. You're free.* I don't belong to him. He can't beckon me like a dog.

But even if I'm willing to stand my ground, the others aren't. These are Emmett's loyal subjects, after all. The people to the left of me start scooting out of the booth, clearing the way for me, Collette included. How annoyingly helpful of them. I give Emmett a dirty look and start to slide out. Everyone watches me. I'm surprised no one throws out teasing barbs. It feels like my daddy has come to collect me from a party, like I'm about to be dragged home and grounded for weeks.

I slip out of the booth, stand, and straighten my regrettably short dress. Nerves threaten to win out. The urge to keep my gaze on the ground, to bow my shoulders and shy away from this confrontation is strong, but I've always been a wallflower. Tonight is a chance to be bold for once. So, rather than brushing past Emmett with my face half-hidden behind my long hair, I walk right up to him, meeting his surly expression with a menacing one of my own.

God, it feels good.

"Did you need something?"

He takes me in slowly. *Too slowly.* His arrogant gaze rakes down my body. I can feel it as clearly as if he were skimming his fingers across my skin.

"I've been hunting for you all over the city."

I hum, sounding bored.

"Have you?"

There're a few seconds of silent standoff, and then he reaches out to gently brush a strand of hair off my face. I go

perfectly still as he continues to curve the back of his finger down my jawline and beneath my chin, lifting it up to expose my neck. Then a little higher still, and my back arches.

Once he has me like that, his eyes fall down my chest to my cleavage, then lower. I'm too aware of every breath, of the rise and fall of my chest. It's like he's inspecting a luxury good, deciding if he'll pluck it off the store shelf or not.

I wrench my chin away and narrow my gaze.

He's not the least bit bothered by my show of defiance. In fact, I think he likes it.

"What do you want?" I hiss.

His eyes are all too teasing when he replies, "A word."

Not here. Everyone at the table is watching us, I'm sure of it. We're far too conspicuous. Even with everything else going on at the party, we're the main attraction. Emmett draws attention by merely existing; I'd rather not be a spectacle if I can help it.

I walk away, first around the side of the crowd, away from the booth, and then inspiration strikes when I see a pair of heavy black velvet drapes, sectioning off a corner of the club. Though it looks off limits, I dip behind the drapes, and to my relief, no one tries to stop me. I realize immediately why no one's guarding the space: it's just a dead end into a supply corner. There are boxes of empty alcohol bottles waiting to be recycled, crates of clean glassware, folded linens.

Emmett's on my heels. He steps behind the drapes and then deftly unhooks one of the panels from its tieback so it falls, mostly concealing us from the rest of the party.

I turn toward him and fight back a gulp. He's a real monster in the dark now. Playing at bravery in a crowded bar

is one thing; having to contend with Emmett in private is far more dangerous.

Adrenaline has all my hairs standing on end. My hands tremble at my sides.

I should swerve around him and leave. That would get my message across once and for all. God, I can almost imagine the visceral pleasure of getting to devastate him the way he's devastated me time and time again.

But I can't do it.

I have traitorous blood. It makes it so I want him, always. I stand weak before him as he steps toward me, a shadowed scary figure.

"Should I compliment you on your dress? It's fucking obscene."

His challenge makes it slightly easier to stand my ground.

I *tut-tut* like he once did to me. "*Language.*"

His eyes spark and then he leans in to be sure I hear him. "*Vous êtes très baisable.*"

A decadent shiver rolls down my spine.

"Is that better?" he asks me.

"I don't speak French," I say icily.

He smiles deviously. "Should I translate for you?"

I swallow and shake my head.

I force my gaze over his shoulder, acting as if there's someone more interesting in the crowd behind him. "Don't bother. In fact, unless you have something you need to talk to me about—"

He steps forward, blocking the party from view, shrouding me in darkness. Then he bends his head, towering over me. “You thought you’d confess your love on Christmas Eve then run and hide like always? The little mouse, the quiet girl...I’m not buying it anymore.”

I try to swallow past my nerves. “I’m not hiding. Didn’t you get my note? I’ve called off the engagement. It’s over.”

He dips down further, very nearly pressing his lips to mine. “*Non*. It’s barely begun.”

Fire ignites in me so suddenly I press my hand to his shirt, just beneath his neck so it’s easy to push him away.

“Of all the ridiculous things you could say...I suppose you suddenly find it convenient to want me? It’s that easy?”

He presses into my hand, staying close. “Don’t make me sound so flippant. Neither of us was being honest before, now were we?”

I try to push him away again, harder this time, but he doesn’t move. “I don’t want to talk about the engagement. It’s done. You could have married me. You had the chance. Instead you fought tooth and nail against it. I don’t believe your feelings have changed.”

He flattens his hand over mine, ensuring my palm stays on his chest. “You have one part correct. I fought to make a choice of my own volition, yes, and I won’t apologize for that. But *you* were never the issue. My feelings haven’t changed one bit. I always wanted you.”

I let out a short, caustic laugh. “Oh, is that right? Is that why you went around town dating other women these last few months? To prove how much you *wanted me*?”

“I never dated anyone.”

His nonchalant tone enrages me even more.

I lean in, spitting angry. “Don’t lie to me. I sat and listened to the gossip day after day. The rumors only grew worse. You and some breathtaking blonde at a bar, at a museum, at dinner. You wanted me so badly...” I laugh like I find it absolutely absurd.

“Fuck the rumors. I admit I was attempting to toy with my father, buck his control whichever way I could, but I’d like you to listen when I say, *I was never dating anyone*. I haven’t slept with anyone—haven’t even kissed anyone, in fact—in months. Though...that doesn’t include a certain night in Italy. Do you recall?”

His taunt nearly makes me see red.

“We’re not talking about Italy.”

“No, why would we? You let me crawl up on top of you and cage you in against those wooden boards. Your pouty lips were so willing to part for me.”

I hate that my stomach swoops with the headiness of his words.

“You told me you would never marry. Said you don’t believe in it.”

“Yes, and then...*you*.”

He says it so swiftly, like his mind has been made up for decades.

Me.

The gravity of his declaration makes my head spin.

He doesn’t give me time to recover before he continues, “You told me a truth the other night about your infatuation

with me, so I'll do the same. I find you intoxicating, beautiful...addicting. I was intrigued by you when you were a child, though now, the feeling is less wholesome, you see. I find I'd very much like to—"

"Don't finish that sentence." My voice sounds pleading rather than stern, and I hate myself for it.

"You're already blushing."

"Because I can imagine where your sick head is going."

His gaze takes on a new desperation before he replies, "*I am sick, Lainey.*"

And with that he tips his head down to kiss me—once, quickly—making me rise up on my tiptoes, falling toward him as he breaks it off. He likes me having to beg. He does it again, a kiss softly pressed against my lips, a mere taste when what I need is never-ending indulgence, a ceaseless barrage.

My hand changes its agenda. I'm no longer pushing him away; I'm gripping the lapel of his jacket with every ounce of strength I have.

Impatience sparks inside me. I'm about to lift my head toward his again, but I barely manage to stop myself. I sway with indecision. There's a withdrawn pause as our gazes meet. A silent, heavy question lingers in the air.

Continue or turn back?

I wet my bottom lip as I consider the surrender and all its conditions.

Overwhelmed, I lean into the crook of his neck, deeper into the shadows.

Pure impulse takes over, words tumbling out of me before I've even fully considered them.

“Show me what it would be like...” I whisper against his hard jaw, leaving off the ending of my plea.

To be yours.

It’s a minor acquiescence. I’m hardly admitting defeat. Rather, a ceasefire. I think we both need it. Exhaustion has a chokehold on me, and maybe if he just gives me a reprieve from this constant *wanting*, I’ll have the strength to consider the proper decision.

His head dips down and he places a string of kisses along my jaw, up toward my ear. “Come back to my house.”

“No.”

That much I can’t allow. That line cannot be crossed.

“We’re in the back of a bar. The curtain is only half-closed.”

He doesn’t sound like he’s against the idea of continuing what we’ve begun; he’s merely stating the facts, getting consent, I suppose.

I loosen my grip on his lapel and slide my hand up and around his neck, tugging him back down to me. I love the size difference between us, his coiled muscles beneath my hand a reminder of how outmatched I am in this moment.

It goes without saying that I’ve never done anything like this, and he knows that. He knows by pressing me further behind the drape, he’s lifting me up and out of the mediocre sameness of the life I’ve lived for so long.

Anyone could look in and see, at least that’s the idea. In reality, though, it’s not so easy. The club is dark, this corner darker still, and Emmett is concealing me, ensuring it’s his back they’ll see if someone peers in, not his mouth meeting

mine, hunger starting to win out against common sense. Not his hands sliding up from my hips and over my breasts, toying with each peak, making me whimper. Not my hands fisting his shirt, drawing up the material with no real goal in mind except to sate my need to touch him.

He takes more, tilting my head to the side, parting my lips so his tongue can meet mine. The way he makes me feel is almost enough to enrage me.

I let him slip his hand up beneath my short dress. It's so little material for him to contend with and he's so smooth at getting what he wants. My panties feel wet against his middle finger as he runs it along the seam, back and forth, teasing me. I shudder and he feels it, already trying to coax out more. It's easy. *I'm easy*. Or perhaps not. These feelings have been pent up inside me for so long. Drawing them out shouldn't be hard for him. Can he tell I would give him everything?

His ring finger joins his middle, running the length of my underwear, drawing circles over the most sensitive little spot so that my mouth pops open and I cry out.

He doesn't shush me. He doesn't seem to fucking care.

His fingers hook into the side of my panties and draw them aside. The silk was nice, but nothing compared to Emmett's fingers. Thick, long, so *so* skilled at making me feel like I might shatter at any moment.

"This is what it will be like," he says, all confidence as he kisses me roughly and then peels back to finish. "When you're mine."

It's on that word that ownership seems to take full effect, because at that precise moment, he presses his fingers inside me.

A soundless gasp.

Eyes pressed shut.

Tiny tingles building up, up, up.

There is no stopping it.

Emmett had a hold on my life even when I was still a child at St. John's, racing through the woods, trying to catch a glimpse of the French prince.

I love you.

It's the thought I hold on to, *cling to* as he draws his fingers out then presses them back in, swirling his thumb where I need release. He lets me ride his hand in a cruel, savage way I shouldn't like as much as I do.

His French words whispered against my lips are like drops of kerosene.

It's so painful.

When I come, it doesn't feel good so much as earth-shattering. For a brief moment, my world depends solely on him. My gravity, breath, life—they're all his.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Emmett

“Come home with me.”

It's the third time I've asked.

I have Lainey in the back of my car. We're heading through the city streets, back toward her grandmother's house after leaving Bar 717. At any second, we'll arrive and she'll get out, and I hate that I haven't been able to change her mind about coming back to my place.

“It's not even midnight.”

She shrugs, keeping her attention out the window. “Then you still have time to go find another woman to kiss when the ball drops. I'm sure Miranda would be all too happy to oblige. And if not her, the next one down the line...”

I haven't touched her since we walked out of that draped-off corner of the bar, but I've had enough. I reach over and grab her by the chin, forcing her to look at me. I'm not being kind or respectful. I'm being a fucking animal.

“What do you need me to say? She means nothing. They all mean nothing. If I never saw them again, I'd think nothing of it.”

She tries half-heartedly to pull away, but I don't let her.

I lean in closer. “You're the one I want, *petite souris*.”

Her green eyes are wide with panic. Her pupils dilated. Her lips bruised and red.

What we did at the club was torture, barely a taste.

The car starts to slow. We've arrived, and Lainey's relief is palpable.

She's unbuckled and opening her door before we even come to a full stop. I follow suit, flinging my door open to walk her up the stairs.

She's not amused.

"Do you find it so hard to believe that I want you?" I ask.

She whirls around to face me, her voice turning desperate as she throws her hands out toward me. "Do you find it so hard to believe that I don't *care*?"

"I thought we were done with lies."

I almost touch her again, almost pull her into my arms and force the issue.

It's hard to stay away and watch her shake her head as she looks up to the cold night sky. When she resigns herself to meeting my gaze again, a fissure of fear runs through me. There's a detachment there, a purposeful separation between us.

"Emmett, I almost feel bad for you. When's the last time a woman actually turned you down? When's the last time you were heartbroken over someone?"

I drag my hands through my hair, utterly exasperated that she's trying to degrade the issue to something as mundane as that. "Don't paint me with that brush. You know I'm not that guy. We sat in the library at St. John's and whispered our fucking secrets to each other. We had a kinship, you and I, and

you know full well I've dealt with heartache. I'm a bleeding heart on your doorstep, Lainey. I've known so little love in my life that it's blatantly obvious to me what this is."

She looks physically wounded by my declaration.

"How can you ignore that?" I ask, my voice already fading.

Then she forcefully shakes her head, wanting no more of this discussion. "Good night, Emmett."

Jacobs is there closing the door after she steps inside her grandmother's house. He gives me a disapproving frown as if discouraging me from trying to go in after her.

Fuck.

I curse under my breath as I head back to my car.

I don't know what I expected Lainey to do when I showed up at the club tonight—throw herself in my arms? She did, however briefly.

This situation is complicated and messy and I worry we're approaching a point where for her, enough is enough. No matter the past we share or the undeniable chemistry between us—it might not be worth it to her. I can't bear the thought.

I ride back to my house in silence, replaying everything she told me on Christmas Eve.

Her insistence that her feelings for me are in the past doesn't hold water.

She kissed me in that dark corner tonight. I felt her desire.

Right now, she's scared and angry. Her defense mechanism has always been to pull back and self-isolate, to shrink herself

down into corners and hide. She thinks she's protected as long as she keeps me at arm's length, but I won't allow it.

I owe Lainey a fight, not just the Lainey I know now, but the girl I met when she was thirteen, the girl I gifted my library books to, the girl who kept them all this time.

The following evening, I show up at Fay Davenport's house with flowers in hand. I knock and stand there, straightening my tie, feeling as fidgety as a teenager about to pick up his prom date. Jacobs opens the door, and I watch his lips purse in disapproval as he takes me in.

"I'd like to see Lainey."

He nods tersely and grants me entry into the foyer, but he doesn't invite me to take a seat or make myself comfortable. He disappears down the hall, and the grand house's silence bears down on me from all sides.

A row of pictures on a marble entry table captures my attention. It's Lainey through the years: proudly showing off two missing front teeth, about to walk in for her first day of elementary school, smiling and holding her college diploma. There's even a photo of her during the time I knew her at St. John's. I lean down to get a closer look, and emotion tightens my throat. I recognize the location right away. She's at St. John's sitting on the grass in between the rose garden and the lake. She's wearing that pink tulle dress and she has perfect ringlet curls in her hair. It strikes me as odd that her grandmother chose to frame the photo, because Lainey doesn't look happy. She's not smiling at the photographer. She's looking back over her shoulder at the camera, her pale green eyes pleading for something.

When I was at St. John's, I knew Lainey was young and fragile, but seeing her now through the eyes of an adult, it

seems impossible that she could have survived such a place.

“She isn’t receiving visitors at the moment,” Jacobs says with a jut of his chin.

I stand up and nod. “Right.”

Well seeing as how I have no plans to mow down a butler well into his sixties, I set the flowers down in front of the photos of Lainey and ask him to make sure she gets them. Then I leave with plans to return the next day.

And I do.

I even develop a routine. I leave work and stop by a florist right by my house so they can put together a bouquet for me.

“Another?” the owner asks with a wink. “You certainly know how to spoil her.”

Then, I go and stand in Fay Davenport’s foyer. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes...Lainey never shows.

By the sixth day, I decide maybe the flowers aren’t right. So, I stop in at a bookstore instead.

It doesn’t take me a long time of perusing the aisles before I land on *The Midnight Library*. I read it a few years ago and loved it; it felt like a book I immediately wanted to discuss with someone. Now, Lainey can be that someone.

I purchase the book and go through the now-familiar routine of knocking on Fay Davenport’s door and contending with a displeased Jacobs.

He opens the door and delivers a drawn-out “Yes?”

I brush past him, walking into the foyer so we can get this dog and pony show on the road.

“Jacobs, you look well this evening.”

He clears his throat, trying hard to continue to find me unamusing, but his act can only go on for so long. At this point, we’re practically friends.

He closes the door and turns to assess me. “No flowers this evening?”

I hold up the book for him.

“Think she’ll like it?”

“She enjoys reading,” he says, attempting to stay neutral.

“And what has she done with the flowers?”

Hopefully they haven’t all suffered a terrible fate, buried at the bottom of a trash can, shredded in a garbage disposal, crushed beneath the heel of her shoe.

“They’re in her room.”

My eyebrows spike. “All of them?”

He nods a bit reluctantly, as if he’s betraying her by giving me this information.

“Good. When you go alert her of my arrival tonight, you should tell her I have no plans of stopping.”

“Tonight, I won’t tell her anything. She isn’t in residence.”

It’s Friday night, close to 8 PM.

Surely, she’s not...

“Is she on a date?” I ask, sounding indignant.

He nods nearly imperceptibly. “A friend came to collect her. Collette. They went to dinner.”

There’s no inflection in his tone, no hint of any feelings.

“Right. Thanks.”

I hand him the book, knowing he’ll pass it on to her. On my way out the door, I turn back to him. “Has anyone ever told you that you missed your calling with the FBI?”

I swear, for the first time since I met him, he almost smiles.

“Good night, Mr. Mercier.”

The next day, I have a work dinner with Alexander and the team from Banks and Barclay that runs late. I don’t leave my office until close to 10:30 PM, but I still have my driver take me to Lainey’s grandmother’s house. Once we pull up and I see all the lights off, I decide I can’t knock. I’ve missed my opportunity, and it doesn’t sit well with me. The day went by without a visit and I don’t want Lainey to get the wrong idea, so the next morning, I arrive on her doorstep before work. The sun hasn’t even fully risen, and my breath is visible as I wait for Jacobs to let me in.

I have coffee and fresh croissants from a bakery, enough for Jacobs and everyone.

The moment he opens the door, I quickly explain, “Tell her I came last night, but it was too late.”

He nods as he lets me in, closing the door against the chill before taking the food and drinks from my outstretched hands.

I expect him to send me away like usual with some brushoff about how Lainey is otherwise occupied, but he returns a few minutes later with *The Midnight Library* in hand.

My heart sinks. My brows furrow as I have no choice but to accept it. It feels like an obvious rejection. She might not have returned the flowers, but she’s returning the book. She’s telling me to stop.

Then I feel the raised ridges on the spine, the evidence of a book read through to the end, bent back on itself and well-loved. I turn it in my hand, running my finger down over the binding with gentle reverence.

“She read all of yesterday evening,” Jacobs divulges as I continue to study the book. “Up in the front sitting room. I think she might have been waiting for you to come.”

I’m impatient, giddy almost, as I rush to speak. “Let her know I’ll come back this evening. I’ll bring another book.”

I look back up at him, and there’s a softness in his gaze he’s usually careful to hide.

He nods to let me know he’ll keep up his end of the bargain then I’m rushing back to my car, already thinking of which title I should get her next. I slide onto the back seat and the book falls open on my lap. Neon yellow highlighter catches my eye. I flip a few more pages to see she’s done it every so often, highlighted a line or two of text. Once, a whole paragraph. There are no annotations or notes. Instead, she’s simply marked her favorite passages. It’s her way of letting me know she liked it.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Lainey

I wait for him every day.

It's a habit I'm not proud of. At first I assumed it would be easy to ignore his comings and goings. I received the flowers and set them up in my room then went on with life as if there were nothing at all different except my new hours at Morgan's and the modest social life I've started to carve out for myself. I've tried little things. I took myself out to dinner the other night, alone with my Kindle. It was utterly thrilling and I felt like everyone in the restaurant was watching me the entire time, but in truth, no one cared. In fact, the waiter gave me a glass of wine on the house and asked me about the book I was reading but largely left me alone. I can't recommend it enough.

That said, there is no ignoring Emmett, no matter how much I wish I were immune to him. The flowers are unbearably beautiful and over the top, and I change the water and trim the stems. When a rose starts to wilt, I press it between the pages of an old art history textbook, hoping it'll dry nicely.

My grandmother, Margaret, and I don't discuss Emmett's gifts.

Margaret turns a vase, eyeing the flowers, but she doesn't give me any advice about them. She doesn't tell me I'm making a mistake by stringing him along, doesn't say I better be careful not to allow his interest to lapse.

I'm not used to the freedom, and I almost bring him up to them countless times.

What would you do in my shoes? seems like a question that's perpetually on my lips, but I don't ask it.

I don't really want to know what they would do.

The night after I return *The Midnight Library* to him, I happen to see his Range Rover slow to a stop at the curb outside my grandmother's house. He's come back just like he said he would this morning. I hurry over to my bedroom window and peel back the heavy drape so I have a perfect view of him lit by streetlights as he slides out of the back seat of his car, holding a second book.

My heart races like mad. I catalogue every detail as quickly as I can. His navy suit and crisp tie, his dark hair and knitted brows—he's so handsome it hurts.

A large part of me wants to race down the stairs, run across the foyer, and leap into his arms, but I hold my ground and wait to hear Jacobs' footsteps out in the hall.

He knocks on my door, and I go to answer it calmly.

"Mr. Emmett Mercier is here to see you," he tells me, no hint of judgment in his voice. "He's also sent me with this."

Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

I can't help but smile. He's starting to get cheeky.

"Should I send him off?" Jacobs asks.

The first day Emmett arrived, it was all too easy to turn him away. My answer to Jacobs was swift and stern, no room for second-guessing. Now, though, I waver.

“Ms. Lainey?” he asks again.

“Yes,” I say, weakly. “I think so.”

He responds with a simple nod then closes my door once again. I rush back to the window and wait for Emmett to walk back out to his car. It’s impossible not to question myself. What the hell am I doing? What kind of punishment does he deserve, if any?

It’s painful to watch him leave the house, his head tipped down, his shoulders crestfallen and dejected. When your heart beats for someone else, they can inflict incredible damage. It’s hard to extrapolate right from wrong when every step Emmett takes feels like a wounding blow.

I can’t get into *Crime and Punishment* no matter how hard I try. I carry the book with me around the house and to work the next day. I read it on my lunch break, but the words carry no meaning. I only daydream about Emmett and what time he plans to stop by later. I imagine a scenario where he grows so desperate he ignores Jacobs and stomps up the stairs to get to me, a caveman on a mission. It’s utterly ridiculous and silly, and yet, a thrill runs through me.

I trick myself into thinking my infatuation with him is over when in reality it’s only been refocused on this new game of cat and mouse. If I don’t go down to see him when he visits, I feel as though I’m winning. Never mind that he’s all I think about, the heaviest thought in my head day in and day out.

One month in, the flowers are mostly wilted and gone.

The gifted books are stacked beside my bed.

Every day, I fear it's the last day he'll come, and every day his black Range Rover pulls up in front of my grandmother's house then a few minutes later, Jacobs knocks on my door.

I have no idea what my grandmother thinks about all of this. She hasn't mentioned a single word to me about Emmett. No compliments about the flowers, no offhand remarks about his visits. Lately, it's been nothing but discussions about the spring ballet season.

This evening is the opening night of *Swan Lake* followed by a black tie gala to raise funds to aid the Boston School of Ballet. All the invited guests have been asked to dress in black and white in honor of the theme.

My grandmother and I spent hours combing through racks of dresses at Neimans and Saks, and we eventually fell in love with a white princess gown. Its base is a simple fitted bodice with a full skirt, but intricate beadwork covers the sheer neckline and long sleeves, sprinkling down like raindrops onto the skirt. My grandmother's borrowed pearl choker sits nicely at the nape of my neck, and my long hair is pulled into an up-do to better show off the details of the dress.

We have a private box at the ballet we share with Diana and Victoria. I sit on the far side beside my grandmother, looking down onto the crowd below. I've already read through the program once, sipped an entire glass of champagne, and done my fair share of people watching. I *love* the ballet. The pageantry of opening nights never disappoints, so much fashion and beauty on display. No one has missed the mark on the theme, the crowd a sea of black and white gowns, pearls and diamonds adorning every ear and wrist. I find my favorite outfits from among them, already hoping I'll get to take a

closer look at the gala later. The men are impeccably dressed as well, all in tuxedos, some even in tailcoats.

A group of boisterous women fills the box to our right, smiling and waving at us as they take their seats. It turns out my grandmother knows them, which isn't surprising. Some days it feels like she knows half this town.

A waiter comes around to ask if we need anything. Diana and Victoria opt for a second round of champagne, but I hold off for now and go back to observing. My grandmother is pointing out a story in the program highlighting one of the dancers, tilting toward me to show me the picture, when there's movement in the box to my left. I've been wondering who would fill it and when. The ballet is due to start any minute.

I look over in time to catch sight of the first two men walking in, and I know right away who will follow after them. It might be well over a decade since we were all at St. John's together, but even today, Heath and Harrison are never far from their fearless leader. And *ah*, right on cue, there he is, walking in just behind his brother, the last man to fill the box.

It's not a shock to me that Emmett wears a tuxedo so well. The fitted jacket clearly has a designer touch, and his black bowtie is so spot-on I wonder if he stood in front of a mirror for thirty minutes trying to get it just right, or if he's just *that* good at tying them.

Alexander notices me first, and his wide smile and big wave don't quell the swarm of butterflies filling my stomach.

I press my hand against my belly and try to find my bearings, but when Emmett's cool gaze meets mine, I might as well be laid bare for him, every nerve ending exposed and humming.

“Well don’t they make a fine group,” my grandmother notes.

Yes, they could be a Ralph Lauren ad. *Oh wait*—Ralph Lauren couldn’t *afford* them.

Emmett veers off from the rest and heads toward the edge of his balcony, closer to us. He drops his hands on the railing and nods first toward my grandmother.

“Mrs. Davenport, you look enchanting this evening.”

“I was just going to say the same to you. Who designed your tuxedo? It looks custom.”

“Tom Ford.”

She hums in appreciation. “Nicely done.”

“Lainey,” he says, turning his dark gaze on me. I’m pinned in place, paralyzed by the weight of his attention. He tips his head, a coy expression playing on his lips. “Have you been enjoying my gifts?”

I flush with warmth and hope beyond hope that the low theater lighting helps conceal my reaction to him. I’d hate for him to see the effect he has on me, still. It negates everything I’ve tried to do these last few weeks.

“Some more than others,” I say, batting his question away with a simple shrug.

His mouth curls with amusement and then he steps back to claim the seat behind him, the one closest to me. From balcony to balcony, we’re only a few feet apart.

I wonder how he managed to snag the box right beside ours. Was it a coincidence or a carefully laid plan? My grandmother has held this same box for the last two decades, and everyone who frequents the ballet knows that.

Once he's said hello and settled into his seat, Emmett doesn't ask me any more questions. In fact, he doesn't look in my direction. A waiter comes around to collect their drink orders just before the lighting dims further and the orchestra begins to play.

I feel a jolt of excitement when the curtain slowly starts to lift to reveal the opening scene of *Swan Lake*.

This is my favorite ballet, and I've seen it performed in London, New York, and San Francisco, but never in Boston. My favorite part is in act II, when the four shortest girls in the corps de ballet dance together holding crisscrossed hands and moving their feet and heads in perfect sync. They're meant to be four little swans, sticking close together, curious about exploring their new world. It's a moment of levity in an otherwise dramatic work.

Soon after, I feel a tap on my shoulder.

"From the gentleman," the waiter says, nodding toward Emmett's box.

I thank the waiter and take it, feeling Emmett's eyes on me as I lift the glass of champagne to my lips. It's decadent, both the taste and the feeling of him watching me while I sip it.

The orchestra's sweeping score makes the moment feel all the more intense, Tchaikovsky's haunting "Flight of the Swans" like a signifier of fate. It takes everything I have not to look over at him. I know what I'll find, and it's already been hard enough to sit in this box and try to focus on a ballet filled with passion, longing, and doomed lovers without comparing it to my own life.

I hate the ending. I know to expect the same every time. The sorcerer's curse prevails long enough to fate Odette to an

eternity as half-swan, half-woman. Devastated, she drowns herself in the lake. Heartbroken over her death, her lover does the same. Their mutual sacrifice breaks the sorcerer's spell once and for all, and Odette and her lover are finally reunited in the afterlife. I should feel like that's enough, but I want a real happy ending.

I always tear up as the corps ballerinas dance together in the final scene, mourning the loss of their queen, Odette. It's beautiful, from start to finish. I stand and clap loudly as the dancers take their bows, forgetting for just a moment that Emmett is so close.

His gaze is on me as he claps too, and if he thinks it's foolish of me to get so into a ballet, he doesn't show it. When I dare to look at him, there's sympathy in his warm gaze, as if he completely understands what I'm feeling.

Surely we aren't as doomed as they are...

"Come along, dear," my grandmother says, reaching for my arm so she can link it with hers. "I'd like to take a moment to freshen up before we make our way to the gala. You know how that ending always gets me. My makeup is probably smeared every which way."

I let her lean some of her weight on my arm as we curve around the balcony chairs. There's already an attendant waiting with a friendly smile near the door, ready to escort us to a private bathroom and lounge.

Emmett stands on the edge of his balcony, watching me walk away. My legs feel like lead weights. Every step away from him is excruciating. There's a reason I haven't allowed myself to go down to see him when he visits my grandmother's house day after day. I've refrained for my own survival. Keeping him at a distance was the only way to

preserve my strength and resist temptation, and tonight, I've just had that theory thoroughly proven. The last few hours were an exercise in futility. I don't think I took in a proper breath the entire performance. The ballet loomed large, but Emmett loomed larger in my periphery. Even now, I want to pause and look back. My body is poised to whip around so I can speak to him just once more. My voice would be filled with unbridled hope: *Tell me you're going to the gala. Oh, please come.*

But I don't look back.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Lainey

The entire first floor of the opera house has been transformed for the gala, everything done in a dramatic black and white motif. They've draped white silk from the ceiling to create the illusion of an indoor tent. There are round cocktail tables covered in black linens, and on each one, there's an extravagant centerpiece made from white orchids and black roses. In the heart of the space, right in the center of the dance floor, there's an ice sculpture of two swans resting against one another that soars almost seven feet tall. Couples pose in front of it for photos, and my grandmother leads us around it, to where Diana and Victoria have already started to amass a group of friends.

One of the principal dancers from the ballet is among them, still dressed in his prince costume. He's tall and lithe, good-natured and polite enough to indulge all of our questions. It's a good fundraising effort for the ballet company to send out their dancers and have them schmooze the crowd. Even *I'm* a little starstruck by him.

“Think I have a chance with him?”

The question is asked by one of Victoria's friends, a tall handsome man with pale blond hair and thick black glasses.

He stands just to my left, and though he's bent down to talk to me, his enamored gaze is still on the dancer.

"Romantically?" I ask, just to be sure.

He winks, and I nod.

"Are they allowed to flirt with gala attendees? I'm sure it's frowned upon."

"Well technically I'm a guest of Victoria's, a no one, really, so maybe I should exploit that loophole."

I laugh. "Well you do have good taste, I'll give you that."

He smiles, and then it fades as he catches sight of something over my shoulder.

"Speaking of good taste...don't look now, but there's an insanely handsome man looking over here. Wait, he's not just *looking*—he's shooting daggers at me."

Awareness trickles down my spine.

I don't bother to turn back to see for myself. "Does he have dark hair?"

"Yes, and an amazing suit, and he has to be, what, six foot two? *Please be gay, please be gay, please be gay,*" he starts to chant.

I can't help but laugh.

"How angry does he look?"

"Um, yeah, now that you mention it, I think he might want to rip my head off. Strange considering I don't recognize him."

"It's because of me," I admit with a note of apology.

"Oh my god, what did you do? He's coming over here. He isn't going to try to fight me, is he?"

Another laugh bursts out of me. “I sincerely hope not.”

“You don’t sound convinced, and this is a rented tux. I can’t mess it up or I’ll lose my deposit.”

I take pity on him. I barely know this man; there’s no reason to drag him into the crossfire.

“I’ll sacrifice myself,” I tell him with a wink and then turn to face Emmett all on my own, walking away from the safety of the group.

Just as promised, he looks murderous.

“It’s not at all what you think,” I tell him when we meet halfway. I even press my hand to his chest just in case he gets some wild idea to blow past me. “You can stop staring at that man like that. He’s a friend of Victoria’s.”

Emmett looks down at me with raised brows as if to say, *And your point?*

“*And* he’s currently trying to win over that *male* dancer standing in their group, so there’s no need to lay claim or anything.”

“Lay claim?”

It’s like the idea suddenly intrigues him.

He looks up and surveys the room briefly before refocusing his dark eyes on me.

“So, he’s not a bother...” he continues, “but there are other men here no doubt vying for an opportunity to talk to you. Maybe I *should* lay claim.”

“Worried I’ll slip away?”

“You’ve proved elusive enough these last few weeks.”

I know he's only teasing now. He can't truly be worried that I care for someone else. There is no world beyond him.

"What else was I supposed to do?" I ask, trying to keep up the charade.

He drops his hand over mine. "Relent, eventually. Will you?"

I don't know how to answer him. The question means too much. So, I sidestep it.

"Did you show up here tonight by pure coincidence?"

"Your grandmother called me."

My jaw drops. "That saboteur."

He smiles. "She took pity on me."

I barely resist the urge to stamp my foot. "She was playing it so cool and everything. I thought she was giving me the freedom to make my own choice in the matter."

"She is, I assure you. She made that clear to me. But...she saw me come over to the house a few times. She knows my feelings." He squeezes my hand. "It was kind of her, and now that I've told you my secret, you can't run off..."

He takes my hand, gently lacing our fingers together, and then he starts to pull me toward the dance floor.

The members of the orchestra set up in the corner play a pared-down, slower version of the *Swan Lake* suite. The delicate harp and violin provide such a gentle melody.

With only a few couples on the dance floor, I feel like the whole room watches us as Emmett sweeps me up into his arms.

"You never asked me if I wanted to dance."

“Would you like to?” he asks, putting the full force of his charm behind his question. I’m surprised my knees don’t give out.

“Well, it’d be a shame to stop now,” I tease, sounding like I’m doing him a huge favor by enduring his touch when in reality, I’m abuzz with nervous excitement.

We’re approaching the end of the road, the moment when I’ll have to dig my heels in once and for all over a situation that feels muddy and complex and now...suddenly, so silly.

But I don’t *have* to.

I could deviate from the plan I’ve been carrying out over the last few weeks.

Not with a huge deal of forethought but on instinct alone, this feeling in my stomach, this rapid beating of my heart tells me to do it. Just...let it happen.

“Since you told me a secret, I’ll share one as well.”

He peels back to look at me.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I admit quietly.

It’s only a tiny truth, I know that, but we’ve been playing at war for so long that it feels like a white flag.

And he accepts it, easily turning the conversation into more while he leads me on the dance floor.

“I am too. I enjoyed the ballet. The last time I saw it, I was in Paris. The dancers were wonderful, the principal ballerina most of all.”

I want to scowl. “What if I told you that makes me ridiculously jealous to hear, to think of you admiring a ballerina on stage?”

He looks pleased. “Good.”

I nearly groan. “We’re both doomed.”

“Are we?” He spreads his hand across my lower back. “I mostly watched you tonight. I’m surprised I don’t have a crick in my neck from staring over at your box.”

“I knew.”

“You didn’t look over.”

I smile down at my feet.

“Even if I hadn’t seen you here tonight, I would still have continued to come to your grandmother’s house, to try to get to you no matter what. It’s the least I can do. You understand, don’t you? You’ve proved to me that love endures.” His gaze holds steady. “How long have you loved me, Lainey?”

Obstinate tears gather in the corners of my eyes. I look away and answer with determination. “A painful lifetime, and I had no plans to continue.”

He pulls me closer, ensuring we’re chest to chest as he leans down. His tone is even more determined than mine. “Had I known it was your choice, that you truly wanted me and not just some pre-planned betrothal...”

“You’d have suddenly loved me back?” I snap, shocking us both. Apparently, my residual anger isn’t totally gone...

His eyes stay gentle as he shakes his head. “I would have stopped acting like a fool.”

I have nothing to say to that, no weapons left in my arsenal.

I’ve told him everything. I’ve fought against him. I’ve held out and tried to play at punishment, but Emmett seems so

fixed on having me. And why am I resisting when he's all I've wanted since I was a child?

"Sometimes it feels impossible that you could love me," I whisper. "You must remember what it was like for me at St. John's. The torment, the mean girls... The day they found the picture I kept of you underneath my pillow...you must have known how much I loved you then."

"You were young, Lainey," he says, trying to ease my embarrassment, but I'm not embarrassed.

"And yet I knew then what I know now." I meet his gaze comfortably, at ease in his arms for the first time as I continue, "I love you, Emmett. I *have* loved you in so many ways. The innocent love of a child...the clandestine love of a teenage girl wanting someone who's off limits...the hopeless love of a woman longing for a man who feels just out of reach."

He keeps one hand on my lower back and brings another up to wrap around my neck, to tilt my head back so he has a full view of me.

"Do you know I still have one of your roses?" he asks. "One you left for me on the dock."

I shake my head, fighting against the rising tide of emotion. I don't want to cry here on the dance floor.

"I admit, I didn't preserve it well. I was a teenage boy who thought sticking it in a shoe box for a few years would do the trick. I'm surprised it hasn't crumbled by now."

He studies my face, seeing everything I'm too overwhelmed to conceal, including unabashed love, I'm sure.

"Did you ever wonder why I went down to the lake every night to swim?" he asks.

I knit my brows as I consider those nights so many years ago. I had it worked out, or at least I thought I did. “I assumed you needed the escape, *the freedom*, the same way I did. Swimming like that helped you quiet your mind.”

“You’re right, that’s true...though there were quite a few nights where it went a bit deeper than that.” His solemn voice almost scares me. “Times where it was my only means of survival. Swimming night after night...it kept me going during a time when I felt I had very little to live for. So when that first rose just *appeared* on the dock—an angelic white one, no less—I took it as a sign. It felt like a real beacon of hope.”

His forehead wrinkles with emotion. “Do you understand what I’m trying to say? What you unknowingly did for me with those roses?”

I nod, but it’s too difficult to speak.

His head tips down until his forehead touches mine. I squeeze my eyes closed, but still, a tear slips out.

“I love you, Lainey. I didn’t realize it was you at the time, but I owe you for being my guardian angel all those years ago. If nothing else, I’m at least glad you know that.”

My hand tightens on his bicep as if I’m worried now that he’s said that, he’ll slip away.

I’m so desperate to keep him.

“Where do we go from here?” I ask.

He doesn’t seem relieved by the question. His features haven’t relaxed. He’s as worried as I am.

“I don’t know. Should I ask you to come home with me for tonight or to move in? Should I ask you to be my girlfriend or my fiancée? I know what I want, and I can’t take it slow.”

I'm trembling, and I'm sure he can hear it in my voice.
“How about we only worry about tonight? Or maybe not even that far? Maybe just our next step?”

“Okay. Do you think your grandmother would mind if I stole you away?”

He's already starting to lead me off the dance floor.

“No.”

“Then, let's go.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Emmett

I have Lainey's hand in my hand.

I'm tracing the contours of each finger, up to the tip of her nail and down again, along the ticklish skin between her knuckles. I hold it so gently. I'm surprised it's real, the fragile hand of the woman I love. I find it intoxicatingly small—scarily small. Suddenly, the dam has broken. The worry of loving someone has filled my chest so that every breath comes a little harder. Nothing can happen to her, ever. It's an uncomfortable feeling to love someone too much. It tightens your throat. It makes you wild in ways that seemed so easy to constrain before.

Already, I'm scared of tomorrow. What if she changes her mind about me?

“Are you okay?” she asks quietly.

How can I admit the truth?

I'm not okay; I'm in love.

The excruciating torture of having exactly what you want, knowing it could be lost at any moment...does it get easier?

Will I take her for granted one day? In five years? Ten? When I wake up and prepare to leave for work while she rocks our child, will it all just seem so normal? Will I still

contemplate the sheer improbability of getting to live every day alongside Lainey?

All I can do now is grasp her hand tighter and look out the window. It's only a ten-minute drive back to my house.

There's no lightness. It's like we're both too weighted down with emotion to make small talk. When we arrive, I open her door and take her hand again. We walk up the stoop and I lead her inside.

"Beautiful," she tells me, looking around the foyer as I continue tugging her deeper inside.

Tours will come. She'll know every nook and cranny of this house eventually. She'll know the back door sticks if you don't lift up slightly as you open it. The kitchen sink takes forever to get hot water, but in the bathrooms, the water gets too hot *too* fast. She'll notice the way the morning light streams in through the kitchen window. She'll cover the walls with art she loves, line the shelves with our shared library. Her favorite coffee mugs will fill the cabinets and her favorite coffee grounds will fill the air.

We'll argue about what to do with the spare bedrooms.

A nursery. We'll need at least one.

An office for her if she wants it. Whatever she wants.

She's happy to let me lead her down the hall, and if I'm moving too fast, she doesn't complain. This isn't about getting to the finish line; it's about the excitement, the heady rush.

At the threshold of my bedroom, I flip on the light and let go of her hand. I walk in, just to the edge of my bed, and turn back.

She stands in the doorframe in her white gown, and I can see what she'll look like on our wedding day. Impossibly beautiful. Impossibly mine.

She sweeps her gaze around the room, and I wish she'd tell me her thoughts.

It's just a room. If she doesn't like it, we'll change it together.

The only thing I care about is the frame on my bedside table, the one with the white rose.

I watch her go still as she notices it, her expression slowly crumbling as she blinks back tears, her forehead crinkling as she comprehends what it is.

I told her I saved it.

I will always save it.

"It's all right," I reassure her.

We can't save each other this pain. The tightness in my chest is in hers too. Love isn't always a gift; it's a burden, and right now, all I want to do is lighten her load. So, I hold my hand out, asking her to trust me.

She comes, and as soon as I have her, I wrap her up so tightly in a bear hug. Her scent fills my lungs, and I wonder if I'll have to travel with a bottle of her perfume from now on.

The hug changes, a calm reassurance tightening into overwhelming need. Her breath hitches as she lifts her hands up and turns slowly in my arms. She bends her neck forward, and I understand what she wants as I start to tug her zipper down.

Sweet silence accompanies the slow peel of that zipper. My gaze roves over her slender neck, down to her shoulder

blades and bare back. I trace my palm along the length of her spine, my pointer finger running along every ridge.

She shivers, and I lean in to kiss the nape of her neck.

I love you. I love every part of you.

Her dress slips off her shoulders, the sheer beaded neckline falling away. My hands work up underneath the material and I start to push it down further. Lainey helps, stepping out of the full skirt, and then it's just her and the pink silk panties at her hips.

Oh Lainey.

She moves away from me, fearlessly turning back, all that raw emotion plain to see.

This is all I am, she seems to say, this skin and bones, and if you give me love, I'll give it back to you tenfold.

There's almost a smile on her lips, but I can't return it.

I can't seem to do anything but stare.

She reaches up to her hair, slipping the pins from her intricate up-do. They clink down on the wood floor, the only sound in the room as she lets her long hair loose. The rich dark strands are wavy and messy. I fist my hands, a way of placating myself for the time being. I'll touch her soon. I'll touch every fucking inch of her if it takes me a lifetime.

She arches a brow, almost taunting me.

"Well?" she asks.

The shy girl I once knew is more capable of speech in this moment than I am. *Petite souris*, who knew you were so brave?

She takes a step toward me with a slight tremble, and suddenly I'm on her like I've just been let out of a cage. Tearing at my tuxedo jacket, my shirt, my bowtie—the seams are no match for my impatience, and Lainey helps. Her lips graze my chin as her fingers work on my pants, fumbling with the button. I feel her teeth and almost lose it. My groan sounds like a thousand years of yearning.

I kiss along the top of her shoulder, the shadowed space beneath her neck, the dip of her collarbone. Her breast fills my mouth and my hand covers the silk between her legs. She presses up onto her tiptoes as I tease her and I feel her nails at my neck, the sharp bite of them digging into my skin. She's as crazed as I am. There's no chance of a slow descent for us, a gentle discovery of each other's body. I come to know her with a frenzy, like the opportunity might be stripped from me at any second.

Her skin burns my lips as I bend down further, my mouth passing over her taut stomach, kissing her navel. She quivers in a deliciously inviting way as my lips hit the top of her panties.

She rocks back on her heels, perhaps nervous, but then her hands are in my hair and she presses her body against me, granting me permission to take the silk in my teeth and tug them down. My fingers help loosen the material at her hips so that with one swift yank, they fall to her feet.

I'm adoring her on my knees, a beggar at her feet.

When I peer up, her big green eyes are rimmed with tears.

She doesn't try to hide her emotion. We left pretense at the door. In this room, it's all heart. I kiss her sensitive skin, just on the inside of her thigh.

Part your legs for me, Lainey.

Let me kiss you, here.

She isn't shy about letting me know what she likes. She might not verbalize it, but her hands fist my hair when I run my tongue between her legs. She squirms and sighs and shakes. She rises onto her tiptoes and my hands grip her thighs and I hold her steady as my mouth stays on her, tasting and taking until I hear her start to whimper.

God, the sound.

I stare up at her as I continue, watching her eyes pinch shut and her mouth fall open. She jerks in my hands, but I don't back off. I watch her come like I'm watching the sunrise over the ocean. A sight to behold. A sight I'll chase forever.

When she opens her eyes again, there's a fire burning in her gaze.

For the first time since we arrived at my house, I smile. It's devious and wicked, and she responds by bending down and tearing at my dress shirt. It's gaping since only half the buttons got undone earlier. She starts pushing it off my shoulders, impatiently undressing me. She wants me as naked as she is, the two of us on an even playing field. Or maybe she's as curious as I am.

I've wondered about her body. In the shower, in my bed, at work—I've thought about these hidden parts of her, but my imagining didn't do her justice. I wasn't generous enough.

"Help," she pleads.

I find her impatience cute, but she doesn't.

I stand and work to undo the last few buttons, and then I fling my shirt onto the bench at the end of my bed. I push

down my pants and manage to take one sock off before I pounce on her again, just a kiss, give me another kiss, please *god*.

She bites my lip in punishment.

“*Finish,*” she says, pushing my shoulders back.

Her skin is pink and marred. Her heavy breasts bear the evidence of my mouth.

I get distracted again and she groans and pushes me back, continuing until I hit the bench and then crawl back up and onto the bed.

It’s the opposite of that Italian pier, her up and on top of me, her body weighing me down. She yanks off my other sock and my boxer briefs.

Now she’s the one distracted. She’s the one with the gaping mouth.

Not so easy, is it, Lainey?

She can’t help but touch. Her small hand wraps around my length, and I tip my head back and close my eyes, savoring all that goodness.

It’s the hand I held in the car on the way home, the hand I worshipped, and now she’s returning the favor. She doesn’t understand how close I am to the edge. Her soft lips skating over my jaw is nearly too much. She works her hand up and down, and I give in to the pleasure of it for a few more strokes then I grip her hand and still her.

“Too much?” she asks with a crinkled brow.

How do I tell her I want her so badly it feels like my heart is splitting open?

Yeah, it's too much, Lainey. Everything about you is too much.

She lets go of my length and drops both of her hands to my chest. Her position on top of me is such obscene innocence. She doesn't mean to tempt me.

"Is now a good time to mention that I..." She pauses, clears her throat, starts again. "I've never."

"Okay."

I work to keep every trace of emotion out of my voice. She's not telling me so I can pass judgment on her. I don't give a damn what she's done in the years we've been apart. I don't want her because of some perceived purity.

My love for her hinges on absolutely nothing.

Her mere existence is enough.

"We can do whatever you'd like," I tell her. "We can stop here."

She nods and mulls that over, her eyes roving down my chest.

"And if I'd like to continue...?"

"Then I'd say we're on the right track."

She lets loose a gentle laugh, and I know it helps soothe some of her nerves.

"I stopped you just then because your hand felt too good," I say, trying to reassure her.

Her brows shoot up in surprise. "I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Would it help you to know that this feels new to me too?"

She looks skeptical, so I continue.

“There’s a French quote by Molière. *Vivre sans aimer n’est pas proprement vivre.*”

“What does it mean?”

I trace a circle on her hip as I translate. “To live without loving is to not really live.” My eyes capture hers. “So you see why this is new for me too, *faire l’amour*...to make love.”

She falls quiet then, looking down on me. It’s not pity in her gaze, but sincerity.

She sits atop me, her legs spread across my stomach, and I want her so bad I shake with it. But I don’t rush her. I run my fingers up the length of her arms and back down, then I wrap my hands around her biceps and gently pull her until she’s lying flat on top of me, her hair tumbling down onto the side of my face. I’m enveloped in her scent, and it could be enough, just this. My arms wrap around her back, and we stay like that until I sense she’s comfortable enough to continue. Her hand works between our bodies, and her fingers skim the tip of my length again.

It feels important for her to at least initiate, but I’m not shy about taking over. I’ll lead her tonight as I know she wants me to. The ease of letting a lover guide you is a gift I want to give her.

Protection is at the forefront of my mind. I go to reach for a condom in my side table, but her hand captures my forearm and she shakes her head.

“Could we not?”

“Are you on birth control?”

“No.”

“And you’re aware of the implications...”

She smiles. “I’m aware.”

The gravity of that settles over me. Does it matter if we don’t use anything? Not if we’re both in agreement. Not if we both want the same thing.

I roll us so she’s lying flat against my bed and I don’t get sidetracked by the sight of her. Later tonight, tomorrow morning, the day after, I’ll have her lie here and I’ll beg her not to move so I can get my fill, but tonight my hands roam, toying with her breasts and working up her desire again until she’s a writhing needy mess. God, I love it.

I’d go down on her again, but I know she’d protest. Instead, I part her legs and slip my hand between them, ensuring she’s ready.

She nods and I press my fingers inside her, trying to ease some of what will come next. It won’t be comfortable at first, she knows. She reassures me as I line us up, and I press another kiss to her lips. I’m lying over her, resting my weight on my elbows, whispering in her ear.

“*Ça va, petite souris*. Relax.”

I feel her tense as I press inside her, thrusting until I’m completely seated.

Her entire body goes rigid with the pain.

I hate it. I would take it from her if I could.

“It’s done. It’s done,” I reassure her, brushing her hair back off her face and pressing featherlight kisses across her cheeks and chin and neck, soothing her as I hold perfectly still.

I taste her salty tears and our mouths collide, and she kisses me like I’m a pain reliever. That small ease of tension

begins. Her body relaxes beneath me, her hands no longer gripping me for dear life.

“Okay,” she whispers against my lips, and I can feel her smile.

Tentatively, I roll my hips, and the sensation makes her arch off the bed.

My ego can't handle how receptive she is. Every little movement elicits a delicious sound from her lips. She's as passionate as I knew she would be, fiery and aggressive enough that I don't feel as though I need to hold back once we find our rhythm. She grips my hips and my hand traces its way down, past the slight dip of her navel, the sharp edge of her hipbone, that tantalizing warmth back between her legs. She squeezes around me when I stroke her. I don't register that I'm saying anything until a string of French curses have already slipped free from my mouth, forbidden French I can't contain, and Lainey responds to every single word, her head tipping back, her mouth falling open. Her moan is guttural and oh so sweet as she comes. Her body wraps around me, tightening with every wave of pleasure. There's no possible way I could hold back. I try, I try, I try, and then I see black stars dancing behind my closed eyelids as I squeeze them shut. The pleasure is almost too intense. It's all baser senses. Her heated skin. Her salty taste. Her sweet scent. That tight squeeze. Her hand holds my neck as my head falls to that safe groove between her chin and chest. I come undone and my body racks against her, and I'm weighing her down, asking for too much, taking even more than I should.

When I feel like I can breathe again, I blink my eyes open to find Lainey staring up at me, wonderment evident in her eyes.

Then a teasing smile unfurls across her lips.

“That was quite a lot of French...”

“Should I translate some for you?”

Her eyes widen with alarm. “No!”

Embarrassment looks too cute on her.

“Okay, how about this?” I ask, toying with her. “*Je suis amoureux de toi.*”

She looks so serious as she listens then asks, “What does that mean?”

My touch is whisper soft as I press a finger to her furrowed brow, then I continue gliding it down along the bridge of her nose. I can’t resist the urge to touch her red lips. I’m staring at them as I tell her.

“I’m in love with you.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Lainey

The next evening, I'm sitting on my bed in my grandmother's house, reading. Logs crackle in the fireplace, and a candle burns on my bedside table. Dinner will be served soon, and then the rest of the day will probably unfold as it usually does. My grandmother and Margaret will go into the sitting room to play cards. I might go for a walk, or I might continue reading.

There's a knock on my half-cracked bedroom door, and then Jacobs pushes it open further. I set down my book, prepared for him to tell me it's time to come down for dinner.

"Mr. Mercier is downstairs. As usual, he's asked me if you're available. Should I tell him—"

There's no concealing my smile.

I've held out hope that Emmett would come today, but I was doing a good job of trying not to show it. All day, I've gone about my normal life. I worked at Morgan's and ate lunch with Collette and even managed to sell a painting in the afternoon.

Now I leap off my bed, half-running, half-walking toward my door, and then I rush out into the hall.

“I can tell him you’ll come down!” Jacobs says, trying desperately to hold on to some kind of decorum, but I’m already barreling down the stairs.

Emmett stands in the doorway, cradling a book and a box of chocolates. *La Maison du Chocolat*.

He looks up to see me just as I finish descending the stairs.

“I didn’t know if you’d come,” I say, breathless.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d turn me away.”

How could I?

“I worried about it all day,” he admits, passing over the chocolates and the book.

We only left each other this morning. I stayed at his house, in his bed, cocooned in his sheets all night until he had to wake for work and I had to dress to get back home so I could shower and hurry off to Morgan’s.

He offered me everything: a change of clothes, breakfast, his driver.

I pressed a kiss to his lips then slipped out his front door, not wanting to be a burden.

Now, I see how silly that was.

“You shouldn’t have worried.”

“You could have stayed.”

“In your bed?” I ask in a lowered voice.

He grins. “Yes. We could be there now, in fact.”

I set his gifts on the entry table beside us and shake my head. “No. I have other plans.”

His brow cocks with curiosity.

“A date.”

At this, he nearly laughs.

“A real one,” I add. “You’ll buy me pizza at a grungy little place and it’ll be the best slice we’ve ever had, and we’ll share a bottle of cheap wine and it’ll be too loud in the restaurant, and we’ll barely be able to hear each other, and all you’ll be thinking about is how you’ll be able to convince me to go home with you at the end of the night.”

He helps me into my wool coat then ties the belt around my waist for me.

“You think it will take convincing?” he asks, all that devilish charm practically oozing out of him.

“God no, but at least I can make it seem that way, right?”

He laughs and bends down to kiss me. It’s chaste at first, but maybe it would have deepened if my grandmother didn’t clear her throat behind us.

We jump apart like two teenagers. I look down at the ground, trying to keep my cheeks from overheating.

“And where are you off to with my precious granddaughter?” she asks, and though the question is formal, her tone reveals that she’s happy to see him here.

He looks down at me. “To get a slice of pizza, apparently.”

“I see. And, Lainey, will you be back before I go to bed?”

I meet Emmett’s eyes, and his expression makes it perfectly clear that the answer is no. I won’t be coming back here at all tonight.

“I don’t think so.”

I'm prepared for some kind of reprimand or a warning at the very least, but instead, she nods and comes over to press a kiss to my hair.

"Then have a nice time. And Emmett, take good care of her."

He nods reverently and then we're free to head out the front door and down the stoop. His car is waiting at the curb. Already his driver is en route to open the back door for us.

I tug Emmett's arm. "Let's walk."

There's no argument from him.

"I'll be on call," his driver tells us.

Then it's just the two of us walking hand in hand down the sidewalk.

"Is there somewhere you had in mind?" Emmett asks.

I strain my brain to come up with the name of a single pizza restaurant in the entire city.

"No. My grandmother prefers fine dining."

"A travesty. We'll walk until we find something."

"You know what I really miss? The pizza they served in the cafeteria at St. John's."

He laughs. "It was surprisingly good."

It's maybe too cold to be out on a leisurely walk, but neither of us tries to rush, and we're hardly the only ones out here. Brave Bostonians litter the sidewalk. A few tuck their hands into their pockets and burrow down into their coats, hurrying along, but most of them look wholly unaffected by the weather. Kids with red noses and chapped cheeks play chase, darting past us while letting out peals of laughter, as if

immune to the biting wind. A mom pushes her stroller while singing quietly to her baby. Emmett and I carry on, talking about our favorite food at St. John's.

Just before we turn the corner, I look back at my grandmother's house, and for a moment, I'm no longer down on the sidewalk with Emmett. I'm standing up on the balcony, outside my room, wistfully watching the parade of people come and go, just as I've done on a hundred evenings before. With a pang of loneliness, I drop my head in my hand and hunch over the railing, looking first at the woman with her stroller and her sweet baby. Then my attention is stolen by the running children and I smile, briefly feeling the same wild glee they feel as they scurry around other pedestrians. Finally, my gaze snags on the beautiful couple holding hands, the sharply dressed man with his dark hair and warm smile, staring down at the woman by his side as if she hung the moon. They're so in love.

It's a sight worthy of an old black and white film, a snapshot that would stand the test of time. He can't keep his hands off her. They make it two steps forward, almost around the corner and out of sight, and then he backs her up against a brick wall—in plain view of everyone—and bends down to kiss her.

“God, I missed you all day” is what he tells her, his lips daring to move down to her neck.

I don't have to wonder if she loves him like he so clearly loves her.

I don't have to imagine she's happy.

I'm no longer the girl on the balcony.

“I missed you too,” I tell him, rising up onto my tiptoes to press a firm kiss against his lips.

Epilogue

Lainey

It's midnight and the grounds of St. John's are deserted and quiet. The moon looms large in the sky, our only light.

Emmett stands at the end of the dock, turned away from me, staring at the pine trees across the lake. He's dressed in a black suit, nearly the same color as the calm water stretched out in front of him. Despite the late hour, he's impeccable as always, not a single strand of hair out of place. He could have just walked off the pages of *GQ*.

I walk barefoot on the cold grass, having wisely discarded my heels a while back. My hair hangs loose, full of its natural wave. The long white dress I'm wearing once belonged to my mother. I found it while going through a few boxes of her things with my grandmother. I mentioned how much I liked it and, in secret, she took it to get cleaned and mended for me.

The dress is free-flowing, almost ethereal in its style and simplicity. It pairs well with the bouquet I foraged from the school's garden. They're roses I would have left for Emmett back in our youth, a little wilted, a little brown at the edges, still lovely.

I have no doubt I present quite a sight in the moonlight. I'm sure if my old St. John's peers could see me now, they'd

say, *Told you she was a ghost all along!*

The thought makes me smile.

Either Emmett hears the subtle creak of the wooden boards beneath my feet as I step up onto the dock or he senses my presence, because he turns to watch me walk toward him, down our makeshift aisle.

Tomorrow, we'll dash off to Paris, dress in designer, and stand in front of a crowd of five hundred invited guests, smiling for flashing cameras as we say I do. We'll fulfill the commitment our families expect of us. Tonight, however, is just for us.

Wedding planning has gone just as I expected it would. There was no hope of us having an intimate affair. Right from the start, my grandmother hired a team of professionals to bring her vision to life. Frédéric was no help either. At every turn, he never failed to add to the madness. More people, more press, more food, more flowers. The pageantry of the day will be on par with a royal wedding, and coverage of it will be splashed across newsstands come Sunday morning. I've already seen some snippets. *After a two-year engagement, GHV heir is off the market* and *No luck for you, ladies—Emmett Mercier is officially taken* and *Have you SEEN the ring?*

Emmett and I agreed early on to a compromise. Tonight was his idea.

One night, months ago, he returned from work to find me in the kitchen. I was standing frozen in front of our dining table, the antique wood covered in a mess of papers, swatches, sample booklets, and inspiration boards, all of it spread out in a heap in front of me. My to-do list was a mile long. It seemed like every few minutes my phone would ring with yet another

question. What kind of accent flowers do we want to have on the reception tables? Are we doing cream tablecloths or ivory? *Vintage* white chairs or *classic* white chairs during the cocktail hour? Would we prefer passed hors d'oeuvres or a grazing table? A string quartet? A DJ?

Emmett walked up behind me, wrapped his arms around my body, and forced me to loosen my grip on a linen sample.

“This is maddening,” I told him. “I don’t want any of this.”

“I don’t either.”

“So then why are we doing it?”

He turned me slowly, bending to meet my eyes. He gave me no answer because he didn’t need to. He knew my feelings about the wedding, and he agreed. While it wasn’t our cup of tea, it was something my grandmother and his papa desperately wanted. And to be fair, I wasn’t against it completely; I was just too overwhelmed in that moment to remember my motives.

Emmett tugged me forward, though at first, I didn’t budge. His smile turned teasing, and eventually I relented, letting him pull me flat against him. I inhaled the scent of his cologne on his sweater and he bent to kiss my hair.

“Why don’t we return to where it all began and elope before the wedding? Just you and me.”

And so here we are cast in moonlight as Emmett slips my ring out of his pocket. While he holds it out just in front of my left ring finger, he looks into my eyes and tells me his promises of enduring love, of caring for me in sickness and in health, of forsaking all others and standing resolutely by my side until death do us part.

Then he moves the heavy oval diamond up and over my knuckle; it's a perfect fit.

By contrast, my vows are near whispers. I don't trust my voice to keep from shaking with emotion, but Emmett keeps ahold of my hands, squeezing them with reassurance.

When I'm done, I slip his gold band onto his finger, and then he cups my face and tilts it up as he kisses me with every ounce of love he has.

In Paris, we'll kiss again up on the altar while our guests cheer us on excitedly, but out here, the moon and the lake and the pine trees are our only witnesses.

We're married.

"It's time for a dance," he tells me.

On the end of the dock, Emmett leads me in our first dance as he softly hums the romantic tune of *La Vie En Rose*. We slowly sway together, my roses resting at our feet. He translated the lyrics of the song to me once while we lay in bed together. He told me I am his rose, he said being with me gives his life a pink hue, just like in the song.

We barely move, chest to chest, as his humming softly quiets. Then his mouth presses against my cheek, and he whispers, "You're my life now, Lainey, *mon cœur qui bat*."

I hope you loved reading about Emmett and Lainey in **Forbidden French**. If you're a sucker for the marriage of convenience trope as much as I am, continue reading for a sample of **To Have and to Hate**.

SYNOPSIS

Marry a man I barely know to save my family from ruin.
It might've been simple, if my betrothed were anybody else.

On our wedding day, my husband-to-be arrived at the courthouse like a black cloud rolling over Manhattan. Walt didn't crack smiles or pepper in pleasantries as we exchanged hollow vows in front of the judge.

His disdain for me was so palpable I assumed we'd walk out of that ceremony and resume our regularly scheduled programming. But then fate was like, *Hold my beer. I got this.*

In desperate need of help and with nowhere else to turn, I had no choice but to ignore a crucial rule in our contract: *I shall only contact Mr. Jennings II in case of emergency.* But hey, what's a little fine print between husband and wife?

Turns out, Walt's a stickler for legalese—I think it might be his love language. Oh, and his attitude at the courthouse wasn't a put-on. My so-called husband is a jerk. He takes what he wants without giving any consideration to other people—specifically ME, his blushing, contractually-obligated bride!

I knew life with Walt would be no honeymoon, but a marriage of any sort should still come with a few standard guarantees:

To have and to hold.

For richer or poorer.

In sickness and in health.

But after experiencing Walt's version of wedded bliss, I say let's forget about all that lovey-dovey crap and just take me straight to *death do us part*.

TO HAVE AND TO HATE

an arranged marriage novel

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

R.S. GREY

Chapter One

I stand out like a sore thumb. Even in New York City, people tend to opt for cream or white when it comes to bridal attire. I'm in neither. Even worse, my dress is shorter than I remember it being when I left my hotel room. The hem has lost inches on my walk to the courthouse. I like to think the cheetah print is subtle, but my black Doc Martens are not. I've had them for years. They're my version of Dorothy's slippers.

Another gust of wind blows up my dress and I shiver in my boots, looking up and down the street, waiting for him to show. I'm surprised by the number of blushing couples that rush past me, eager to get out of the cold and begin their wedded bliss with a ceremony inside the courthouse.

I'll be one of them soon, I suppose. I look down at my naked ring finger and imagine how it will look with a fat diamond weighing it down, then I think back to the phone call I received last night.

My mom rarely calls me. In fact, I did a double take when I saw her name appear on the screen.

"Mom?" I asked after I answered, still wary of the odd turn of events. Part of me assumed the call was a mistake—a run-

of-the-mill butt-dial—until she spoke. Her sharp tone sent a shiver down my spine.

“Elizabeth Brighton, where *are* you? All that background noise is dreadful.”

The music grew louder as the artists continued their performance in the center of the museum’s foyer.

“I’m at MoMA.”

She tsked as if she didn’t like the answer, and before she even had to ask, I walked away from the thick crowd of onlookers who’d gathered until I found a quiet corner.

“Can you hear me better now?” I asked, testing the waters.

“Yes. Thank goodness. Now, before I begin, you should know I don’t relish making this phone call.”

I puffed out a laugh, slightly taken aback by her candor.

“Thanks, Mom. It’s nice to hear from you too.”

“Don’t take that tone with me.”

I ticked my jaw, willing myself to bite my tongue and rein in my sarcasm, not wanting to make the situation any worse for myself. My mom and I have a strained relationship to say the least. If she had it her way, I’d fall in line with the rest of my siblings, move home to Connecticut, and follow right in her footsteps.

I assumed that was what the call would be about, actually. I thought it would follow the pattern of all the others: “Do you have to be so difficult? Do you truly think you can pay your bills with your doodles?” always leads into “Your father and I do not support this and we will not continue to fund this bohemian lifestyle you’re so hell-bent on achieving” which

eventually dissolves into a teary “Elizabeth, I don’t understand how you could do this to us.”

When I was growing up, my mom loved my interest in art, but only because she assumed it would eventually dead-end into a career accepted by her and her high-society friends. It’s one thing to cultivate a gentle pursuit in art advising or collection management. It’s another to *be* an artist, down in the trenches with the masses.

I girded my loins for the same conversation we’d had a million times before, but then my mother sighed, deep and heavy. A long pause followed, and my heart sank in my chest. Something was off.

“Mom?” I asked hesitantly. “Is everything okay?”

“No,” she replied with a clipped tone. “As a matter of fact, it’s not. Your sister has run away with her driver.”

Now, I’m not proud of the fact that I laughed in this moment. It was just *so* unexpected! My sister has always perfectly fit the mold of my mom’s dreams for her. Popular in school—check. Classically beautiful—check. Just smart enough to get into an Ivy League but not so smart that she could be labeled as a stuffy intellectual—check. I’ve never seen her without a full face of makeup. I’ve never seen her *not* decked out in designer clothes. She was probably on track to marry some blue-blood prince, and now this. THIS. Running away with her driver?! It’s too good.

At least it felt that way until my mom started to cry over the phone.

My laughter dried up on the spot once I realized her overwhelmingly dramatic sobs weren’t going to stop anytime soon.

“Mom? Oh god. I’m sorry, okay? It’s going to be fine. So what if Charlotte ran away with her driver? At least she’s happy!”

“No, Elizabeth. It’s horrible. *Horrible.*”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes, knowing instinctively why my mom was having such a hard time with this. “Who cares what your friends think?”

“My friends?!” Her shrill tone caught my full attention. “I don’t care about my friends! You don’t understand, Elizabeth. Your sister was betrothed to someone else.”

My memory of the phone call is broken off by a loud honk as two cars nearly collide on the street in front of the courthouse. Windows are rolled down. Curse words are slung from one driver to the other. “Well screw you, pal!” is the parting shot before they disappear and my attention is drawn to the group of pedestrians crossing the street in my direction. In the back of the pack, with his hands tucked into his wool trench coat pockets and his attention on the horizon, is a man I recognize but don’t know. He’s a near stranger, and he’s about to be my husband.

Butterflies stir in my stomach as excitement blends into dread. I can’t believe I’ve agreed to do this—to take my sister’s spot—and in fact, I’m still not so sure it’s a wise decision, but now that he’s here in front of me, flesh and blood, tall and handsome, I feel like I can’t back out of the arrangement.

He looks up from the sidewalk and spots me. I freeze as he moves closer, assessing me without giving any hint as to what he really thinks. His dark eyes slide down my dress, linger on my boots for a moment too long, and then finally drag back up to my face as he comes to a stop in front of me.

I swallow and wait for him to smile and introduce himself. In fact, my mouth is already starting to tip up, preparing to reciprocate.

Instead, he simply asks, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Bleak words for a bleak affair.

“Having second thoughts?” I ask, squaring my shoulders and jutting out my chin, trying to exude false confidence.

He sees right through it, narrowing his eyes so his black lashes cluster together, further defining his shrewd gaze.

I don’t move an inch, not so much as a hair on my body swaying under his intense scrutiny. It feels like he stares at me so long I should have vines growing up my legs, anchoring me to my spot, before he gestures for me to take the lead into the courthouse. I hesitate at first, realizing instinctively I don’t feel comfortable turning my back on him.

Who is this man?

I mean, I know *who* he is on the surface.

Walter Jennings II, AKA Walt.

Almost a century ago, our grandfathers worked together to invent the battery-powered pacemaker, thus founding Diomedica. Today, the company has grown to be the largest medical device company in the world, specializing in the design and distribution of cranial and spine robotics, surgical tools, and insulin pumps. Diomedica employs over a hundred thousand people across the globe. It’s also the main reason I’m here today, willing to go through with this hasty marriage.

I’ve been around Walt a few times in my life at dinners and holiday parties, though it’s been almost a decade since I last

saw him. He's ten years my senior, which means even back then, I don't think we had much to say to each other outside of obligatory greetings. Beyond thinking he was pretty hot for someone way older, he wasn't on my radar, and I *definitely* wasn't on his. I try to imagine what I would have looked like the last time we were together. There's no doubt I was rail thin and lanky, probably trying and failing to fill out my dress. In all likelihood, I was off reading somewhere on my own, trying to disappear into a corner. I always brought a book with me to those parties my parents dragged me to.

I wonder what he would have been up to back then. Working the room? Flirting with women? My sister included?

We reach the door of the courthouse, and he reaches out to open it for me and usher me inside. I catch a hint of cologne as I brush past him, slightly embarrassed to think of what I must smell like in comparison. I didn't bring much of a wardrobe with me to the city. This is my fanciest dress, and I was wearing it last night, which meant there was no time to get it dry-cleaned before this morning.

Walt is dressed much more appropriately than me in his camel coat and black suit. A leather watch is barely visible on his left wrist. His shined shoes click ominously against the tile floor, much more refined than my clunky boots.

I'm not sure where he's leading me. In fact, I'm not sure how any of this is supposed to go. I peer at him from the corner of my eye to see his gaze laser-focused ahead, down the hall. We keep walking, then he stops to call an elevator, and I have to awkwardly pivot my momentum to carry me sideways instead of forward. He doesn't seem to notice my wobble. In fact, I don't think he even notices *me*.

I'd ask him questions—I have a million of them—but I suddenly feel like the cat's got my tongue. I try to figure out why he seems to have stolen my voice as we step onto the elevator together, side by side. It's the height, I tell myself. He's got a good foot on me. Maybe more. The width of him doesn't help either. He's hefty, which I realize isn't a wonderful way to describe a human as it lends itself to both trash bags and general wideness in any direction, but he is hefty. Strong and broad-shouldered.

In contrast, I have the type of body that doesn't quite know how to hang on to muscle. With my long legs, I could have been a ballerina if only I had grace and talent and dedication toward a skill outside of art. I am one of those people who promises to start taking care of myself tomorrow and—shockingly—tomorrow never comes. Gyms just don't hold much appeal for me. I prefer hunching myself over my work table or easel, staining my fingers with pastels, letting the days blur together.

The elevator carries us up and I wonder, yet again, where we're headed. I know we're supposed to have a marriage certificate before we're allowed to go through with the ceremony itself. I assume that's what we're doing today, maybe just completing the preliminary steps toward a wedding that will be at some ambiguous date in the future, but that hope starts to drain out of me as we step out of the elevator to find two people standing near a closed courtroom. An older woman in black judicial robes laughs beside a young man with round acrylic glasses and short blond hair. He's carrying a black leather padfolio, a datebook, and a phone, all tucked neatly one on top of the other. When they catch sight of us, they pause their conversation.

“Judge Mathers,” Walt says with a tip of his head. “I appreciate the favor.”

Her smile is wide and genuine as she meets his gaze. “Of course. I cared a great deal for your grandfather, and call me crazy, but even in my old age, I’m a sucker for love.”

She meets my eyes as she finishes the last half of her sentence, and I catch genuine glee there. Oh dear. It’s obvious she thinks she’s marrying two lovebirds desperate to be together. I force a smile quickly, hoping I haven’t already ruined the façade.

“You must be Elizabeth Brighton,” she says. “I have to say, I love the dress.”

I glance down at the cheetah print and blush. “Oh, thank you.” And then I sense that Walt is watching me too, almost expectantly, so I quickly tack on an additional thank you to her for helping us out today.

“Like I said, it truly is my pleasure,” she assures us. “Now I don’t mean to rush you two along, but I only have a ten-minute window in my schedule. If we’re going to do this...” She nods her head back in the direction of the courtroom, and everyone gets the hint.

The blond man springs into action, tugging open the door for us. Judge Mathers strolls in first and then Walt waves for the man to go ahead so he can take the door from him. As I step past, Walt’s free hand hits my lower back for a moment to help usher me inside, and the contact is the start of a chain reaction in my body, one nerve firing to the next until I’m suddenly ablaze with anxiety.

I turn quickly, lowering my voice so only he can hear me. “I’m confused. Isn’t there some sort of waiting period? A few

days between when we get a marriage license and when we can officially get married?”

“Not for people like us.”

His eyes are almost bored as he looks down on me. My panic is obviously not shared.

“Oh...okay.” I look into the courtroom, then back down the hall as if assessing my escape options.

“But if you’d like to back out, all you need to say—”

I straighten my spine and whip my gaze back into the courtroom. “No. Of course not. I just wasn’t sure of the procedures. Let’s...get married.”

Chapter Two

I'm not someone who imagined what their wedding would be like at a young age. No binge-watching *Say Yes to the Dress*, no pining after dream venues or Vera Wang gowns. Even still, I can admit I didn't see *this* arrangement in my future: a quick walk down the center of a courtroom, a hasty signature on a prenuptial agreement, and now I'm standing across from a man I've exchanged only a handful of words with. Honestly, I chatted more with my Uber driver on the way over here.

I catch whiffs of classic wedding words. Judge Mathers repeats vows and says my name to prod me to repeat them. I think I say the right thing, but I can't be sure. The whole affair has taken on a dreamlike quality, like at any moment, Walt's head will dissolve into a thousand snakes and then I'll wake up in a sweat, trying to determine what it all means.

"Would you like to exchange rings now?" Judge Mathers asks Walt.

He shakes his head. "Not today."

This doesn't faze the judge, but it fazes me.

I clasp my hands together and brush my thumb over my naked ring finger, trying to decipher why the absence of a ring that would symbolize absolutely nothing hurts my feelings. It's

not about the ring itself. I don't covet diamonds. In fact, I wouldn't care what stone the ring was made of. I suppose I just wanted *something*. A sign that this farce of a wedding was built on something more than business alone. I now realize that was pretty juvenile. My mom laid out the terms clearly enough last night, and the sheer desperation in her voice is something I'll never forget.

“Broke” is a word I've never heard Julianne Brighton utter before yesterday. Over the course of one phone call, I learned just how much my parents had been hiding from me and my siblings over the years. My parents had hit the end of the road. Up to their ears in debt and out of options, they were facing imminent consequences: their homes, cars, clothing—all of it would be repossessed by the bank. They would be left without a dime and with no way to take care of themselves or my younger siblings. In their tight-knit social circle, there's no doubt they'd face public humiliation; their reputations would be forever tarnished. At first as I listened to her describe their circumstances, a small voice inside of me said this would be a good thing, a much-needed dose of reality, but that bitterness dried up as my mom continued to cry and let me in on their despair. I had no idea how much debt they'd accrued. I had no idea someone could be so far past the point of no return. My father had taken loans from the banks, and when that was no longer a viable option, he'd borrowed from his friend, Walter Jennings Senior.

At first, it made no sense. My father inherited gobs of money from my grandfather, more than one person could possibly spend in a lifetime, and yet *poof*, now it was gone.

“What about his shares in Diomedica?” I asked her, assuming there was still one last option for them.

“What shares?” my mom spat back with so much venom it almost scared me. “Everything your father had was sold almost a decade ago in his attempt to save his fucking print company. *Millions*, Elizabeth. He drained millions into a dying industry. Why? Because he believes in print media. He can’t stand the thought of people not reading newspapers anymore. *Jesus Christ*.”

“And you know what else? It’s not just that either. He’s funneled money into dying businesses left and right. Absolutely *ridiculous* ventures.”

I wanted to point out that she’s at fault too, that she spends and spends and spends as if money grows on trees.

Judge Mathers’ phone dings on the stand, distracting her from the ceremony and me from my thoughts.

She checks the notification and scrunches her face. “Shoot. I’m running late.”

“It’s fine,” Walt says, waving to the man in the glasses. “Why don’t we just sign the marriage certificate. Mason?”

The man steps up to the judge’s stand with a crisp piece of paper in his hand.

“Thank you,” Walt says to Mason, who I now assume is his assistant.

Judge Mathers takes the certificate and signs her name swiftly at the bottom of it. “I feel bad for rushing through this, but I don’t think either one of you minds. You can do all that ‘kiss the bride’ stuff in private,” she says with a wink.

Walt clears his throat, and I turn a nice shade of pink as my eyes fall to the floor. If he’s watching me blush, I don’t want to know.

I think even by civil ceremony standards, ours is rather swift.

Judge Mathers walks with us out of the courtroom, hurrying us along so she can get back to work. No one else seems to mind, so I tell myself I don't either.

She departs down the hall, and Mason tells Walt he'll be waiting for him outside. Then he takes off ahead of us, opting to go down the stairwell rather than take the elevator. I wonder if Walt's instructed him to do that or if he instinctively knew I'd appreciate a moment alone with my new husband.

There are a million things I want to ask him, but I settle on the question that's at the top of my list.

"I'm just curious...why marry me? What's in it for you?"

I probably should have asked him that *before* we entered the courtroom together, but I'd still like to know.

"It helps both of our families retain majority hold of Diomedica," he replies as he walks back to the elevator with purpose. He seems to be incapable of slowing down, even when it's obvious I'm having a hard time keeping up.

"Majority hold? You mean with shares?" *Oof*. Bad luck for him. Doesn't he know we're destitute? "I hope there's more to it than that, because you're wrong—my dad sold all his shares years ago. I won't inherit them."

As we reach the elevator, he sighs as if he's annoyed to be getting me up to speed. When he speaks, it's with sharp impatience. "Yes, he sold his personal shares. He had an inconsequential amount, which I don't care much about. The majority of your family's shares have been retained in a trust. Didn't your parents explain this to you?"

My mom did mention a trust on our phone call, briefly. On top of everything else she said, I'm not surprised to realize it's all become muddled in my mind.

"I was kept in the dark about all of this until last night," I reply, trying to mimic his harsh tone so he knows this is no picnic for me either. "It was a lot of information to absorb. Especially for someone with absolutely no business acumen."

His gaze falls on my dress for a moment and then his brows arch as if, for him, the proof is in the pudding. I know he's making assumptions about who I am. I know he's not the least bit surprised to hear I'm not business savvy. I cross my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at him, just in time for him to sweep his gaze up to mine.

The elevator dings upon arrival, the doors sweep open, and we stand there for a moment, still staring at each other before Walt chuckles in disdain, shakes his head, and turns to lead the way. We step onto the elevator together, and I have half a mind to press the emergency stop button so we can keep talking. The descent is too quick, and I want answers.

We're side by side, staring straight ahead. I get the impression he doesn't really care for me, though I'm not sure why. I haven't done anything to him.

"So how does it work?" I ask tentatively.

His eyes slice over to me. "How does *what* work?"

I try not to gulp. "The trust."

"I don't have time to explain to you what a trust fund is—"

"No. How does it work for *our* situation?"

God, is he always this infuriating?

“The long and short of it is, our grandfathers created a trust just after Diomedica went public. They saw what happened to traditional family dynasties of the era: the fathers toil and get rich, their sons become spoiled and sloppy, and their legions of grandchildren squabble and squander what few pennies survive the sinkhole of generational wealth. They wanted to do something different by sealing off the bulk of our families’ wealth and earning potential from the immediate generation below, hoping our fathers would establish themselves as enduring torches instead of short-lived infernos. And well... they were smart to do it.”

“Why?”

“No offense, but your father is an idiot when it comes to money, and mine is an alcoholic with a proclivity for gambling, so here we are—the future of our households.”

The elevator jolts to a stop. Already we’re on the ground floor of the courthouse and already Walt is taking off again, walking like he has a million places to be.

“As the eldest grandson, I’m the trustee put in charge of overseeing the trust’s assets. That job just became much more difficult as of five minutes ago.”

“Because of our marriage,” I assume.

“Yes. Our marriage was the trigger for releasing the assets to all of the beneficiaries. Well...*any* marriage between a Jennings and a Brighton would have sufficed. I could have married any one of your sisters and you could have married my brother, but well...here we are, wed.”

How ridiculously outdated.

“That makes no sense though. What would have happened to all that money if none of us had married?”

He sighs again and checks his watch. There's another shake of his head. "Your parents did you a disservice by keeping this information from you."

I couldn't agree more.

"In a week, if we'd failed to marry, Diomedica would have become an institutional trustee and the company would have then overseen the administration of the trust. In other words, the rules would have changed."

"And our families would have lost all that money," I reply, connecting the dots.

"Exactly. The shares would have been reabsorbed by Diomedica. Our grandfathers might have wanted to help set us up, but ultimately, their true loyalty was always to the company."

"Right."

He offers a curt nod before turning back toward the main set of doors.

I hurry to catch up to him.

"You never answered my question though. What's in it for *you*? On a personal level, I mean."

He smiles, but it's not the least bit sincere. "There is no personal level, Elizabeth. This is all business. I happen to believe in the future of Diomedica too. I'm the CEO, and I'd like to remain in power to carry on our grandfathers' legacies."

Nothing personal. Right. There's that pang of disappointment again. I know where it stems from: the utterly ridiculous part of my psyche shaped by my childhood. My Achilles heel. I suspect, deep down, it's the true reason I'm here today.

He pushes the door open, and outside, the wind is a slap across my face, a wake-up call I appreciate.

Less than half an hour has passed since I was last out here, and yet now, I'm a newlywed. A laugh bursts out of me like champagne fizz. This is insane. Truly.

“So what now?” I ask in disbelief.

“Tell your parents they'll receive a wire transfer by the end of the day. They should be able to pay off the bulk of their debts as we discussed.”

Jesus. Does he have to be so frank about all of this? It's like the weirdness of marrying a stranger doesn't even register with him.

He heads straight toward a black Escalade parked near the curb. Mason is standing beside the door. When he spots Walt, he quickly opens it for him and moves back to allow him to step inside. Before Walt does, he looks back at me.

“My assistant will be in contact with you soon.”

I want to demand details, but it occurs to me that I've been the one chasing after him for answers all morning and I'm tired of acting like a lost puppy. I'd rather be left in the dark than continue to look like a fool in front of him.

I nod. “Sounds good. Have a nice...” I falter on the unit of time to end the parting sentiment with. Day? Week? Month?

Walt recognizes my confusion and tips his head in response, answering for me with “Have a nice life” before stepping into the Escalade and shutting the door hard behind him.

I don't realize I'm scowling until his SUV turns the corner and leaves me standing alone on the sidewalk.

Chapter Three

I walk back to my hotel from the courthouse expecting people to look at me weird for what I've just done. In my head, they all know. I bet that man in the bowler hat walking his dog is just being kind by averting his eyes. That woman in the bright red parka is dying to tell me what an idiot I am for going through with this marriage. But not a single pedestrian stops me on my walk. No fireworks explode in the sky. There's not even wedding cake waiting for me back at my hotel room. Everything is normal, and somehow that's worse.

I should call down to reception and ask if they can swap me over to a honeymoon suite just for the hell of it, but I don't think this budget-friendly Radisson with its peeling maroon wallpaper caters to the newlywed crowd.

I plop down on the bed in a heap of useless muscles and bones. I stare up at the ceiling for .2 seconds before giving in to the urge to check my bank account balance on my phone. I already did it once this morning before leaving for the courthouse, but I do it again, just to confirm nothing has changed. I'm relieved to see there's still enough money in there to keep me afloat for a month or two if I play my cards right. It's a point of pride for me considering how much my mom loves to threaten to cut off my funds. She thinks that would be the end of the world, but little does she know that for

the last few years, I've hoarded cash like the U.S. Treasury was going to stop printing it. My emergency fund isn't much, which makes sense considering I've been finishing my degree at Rhode Island School of Design, but it's probably more money than my parents currently have. I smile at the thought and then immediately feel bad for it.

I wish I could stop wavering back and forth, swinging from one end of the spectrum to the other. I envy the truly evil sociopaths of the world. The sort of coldhearted animals that would leave their family destitute without batting an eye. The villains in the movies that walk away from an explosion without looking back.

I'm too weak, too susceptible to the plight of human suffering. How boring.

After closing out of my banking app, I call my older sister to check in. We aren't exactly pen pals, but we talk every now and then. After the revelations of last night, I'm dying to know what she's up to.

Charlotte answers after an endless drone of rings, and she sounds out of breath. "Lizzie?!"

Ah yes, the nickname she's used my entire life even though it grates on my nerves.

"Hey, Charlotte. Do you have a second to talk, or are you busy?"

I cringe at how I sound, as if I never want to put her out for even a second even though I'm the one who's just stepped up to the plate for our family. I'm the one with a new last name.

"Oh, I think I have a few minutes. I just finished up a ski run and I'm waiting for the others to catch up to me before we go for breakfast."

“Are you in Aspen?”

“God no. Vail. Aspen can be so...*pedestrian* this time of year. Every celebrity worth two cents shows up with a snowboard and expects to fit in.”

I offer what I hope is an empathetic groan as she continues to enlighten me about the differences between the two mountain towns.

“Not to mention it’s so easy to fly private here versus Aspen. The airport there gets so backed up with these Instagrammers posing on the tarmac in front of their *rented* planes. It’s sad, truly.”

I think she’ll continue on forever if I don’t cut her off, so I do, quickly and in a high-pitched nervous voice.

“And what about your driver? Jack, right? Is he there with you as well?”

“Who?”

“Jack,” I say again, louder this time. “Your driver. Aren’t you two...”

I give her the chance to fill in the rest for me, but she doesn’t reply right away, and in fact, I think the call has dropped altogether. I shift the phone away from my ear, look down at it, then press it back in place just in time to catch her raucous laughter that cuts straight through me.

“Oh god, is that the story I gave Mom? That I ran away with my driver or something? Hilarious. No, Jesus, Lizzie, surely you didn’t buy that. Don’t you know me at all?”

I feel like the floor of the hotel room is falling out from underneath me. My vision narrows as my heart beats a rhythm

so fast it's like a hummingbird is about to take flight out of my chest.

“Charlotte, what do you mean?”

My words are careful and measured, but she doesn't catch on.

She's still laughing, so amused she can barely contain herself.

“Mom has been on my case for years about my supposed *betrothal* to Walt Jennings. Did you know about that? Good grief. There was no way I was going to go through with it. I mean, I have eyes so I can see that he's good-looking and he comes from a good family and all, but he's such a bore. All he does is work. Take now, for instance—everyone who's *anyone* is here in Vail—*no offense*—and where is he? Probably in some stuffy boardroom. No thank you. That is not what I want for my life. There are plenty of cute wealthy men who know how to let loose.”

“So you didn't run away with your driver because you were madly in love?” I ask one more time, just to clarify.

“No, Lizzie. Absolutely not.”

I let the phone drop from my hand, and it thumps softly against the bed.

I can faintly hear her calling my name, mildly annoyed, and then the call cuts off and there's silence in that hotel room like I've never heard before. I feel absolutely hollow.

I'm not sure how to process this news, the last piece of straw liable to break the camel's back. Up until this moment, I was proud of myself for what I did. My family was between a rock and a hard place, and I was their last hope. I thought I was playing the hero, but in fact, I was playing the fool. My

sister would have never done what I did today. She would never have sacrificed herself. Maybe that makes her selfish, or maybe it just makes her smart. Either way, I feel sick.

I roll off the bed and go into the hotel's small bathroom to splash water on my face. I glance up at myself in the mirror, taking in the dark circles under my eyes. I didn't sleep much last night, and it shows in my appearance. I brush back my dark brown hair and then, still annoyed with it, I twist it around my hand and loop it up into a ballerina bun. Better, but only marginally. From my green eyes to my achingly high cheekbones, I look just like my mom, a person I can't stand to think about right now.

I turn away from the mirror and spot my suitcases on the floor. The one with my art supplies is what I'm after. I tear into it, yanking on the zipper until I can flip it open and spill the contents out around me.

I pilfer through the mess, gathering what supplies I need so I can set up shop on the table in the corner. All the while, I try to convince myself that what I did today isn't that big of a deal. My day-to-day life will not change. My hopes and dreams for myself don't have to disappear. Sure, legally I'm married, but who cares?

I open my box of pastels, blowing off some of the residual dust and surveying the short stubs, trying to determine how much more use I can get out of them before I need to purchase a new set. I like to order them straight from a boutique company called La Maison du Pastel in Paris, and it's incredibly expensive to ship them over to the States. I could find cheaper pastels at any art supply store in New York City, but I prefer working with natural handmade pastels from a company that's been around since the 1700s. Every great

impressionist from Degas to Renoir used pastels from La Maison du Pastel, so I do too.

I reach for the newspaper I picked up on my way home from the courthouse and then dump it out onto the bed. I toss aside sections that bore me until I land on business and smile, knowing the story about booming stock markets will be the perfect backdrop to the ethereal dancers I plan to overlay on top of it. My pastels are extremely pigmented, so I'm careful as I press them down onto the newspaper. I don't want the drawing completely opaque. I want to see the newsprint through the color so the two worlds collide. My hands move fast. Over the years, I've trained them well. One hand draws with the pastels, and the other turns the paper, smudges the pigments, brushes away the dust.

I draw on sheets of newspaper for the rest of the morning and through the early part of the afternoon until I have to leave for an appointment with my realtor. I hired Lisa to help me find an apartment in the city. It was always my plan to finish up my combined degree at RISD a semester early and then move to New York City to begin my career, and I arrived here a week ago after selling off most of my possessions in Rhode Island. It wasn't much. Most of my furniture was secondhand and worn down, not worth the cost to ship it all across state lines.

Yesterday, Lisa emailed me about an apartment she thinks could work. It's in Inwood, a neighborhood located on the northernmost tip of Manhattan. When I arrive after an hour-long subway commute, Lisa is waiting for me outside. This is the first time we've met in person, and right away, I can tell she's someone who spends a lot of time on her appearance: spray tan, bottle-blond hair, long glitter nails, and thick pink lipstick. She waves enthusiastically as she sees me walking up

the street, then she points to the structure beside her as if to say, *Check it out!* It's an old brick building on the corner of an intersection with a combined deli and grocery store on the bottom floor.

"I know it's not much on the outside, but give it a chance. The unit is up on seven," she tells me as she leads me inside and up the stairs. I'm embarrassed to show that I'm already winded by the fourth floor, so I do the thing where you sip in secret shallow breaths instead of great heaving mouthfuls. I fool no one. She glances back at me with an amused grin.

"There's no elevator, but you'll get a great butt from walking up and down all these flights every day."

Right, well, there is that.

Outside apartment 703, she retrieves a set of keys from her purse and unlocks the door, pushing it open wide with a game-show-host flourish.

"Your humble abode."

Humble is right. I'm not as prissy as the rest of my family, but this is a dreary place to live by anyone's standards. Chipping paint, stale air, water damage on the ceiling. Still, I look for the silver linings: there's a large window in the living room, the bedroom is big enough that I could fit a queen bed, and the last tenant left a hulking beast of an armoire in the living room that I could never manage to lift and remove on my own but would be the perfect spot to house all of my art supplies.

I turn back to Lisa, who's still hovering near the door and giving me space to look over the apartment on my own.

"I'll take it," I say, matter-of-factly.

Her brows shoot up in shock. I bet she assumed I was going to run out of here like my pants were on fire, but nope, I'll happily sign on the dotted line, and I tell her so.

“Great!” she says, walking toward me with a spring in her step. “Here’s the application. If you fill it out now, I can scan it in when I get back to the office. Then the landlord will need first and last month’s rent up-front as well as a security deposit. I’m not sure of the exact dollar amount, but I’ll get that info and email you ASAP.”

I nod, trying to tally up what that total could be in my head. Hopefully, I’m good for it.

“Then there’s the background check,” she continues, after handing me the application. “And a credit check. They’ll also want to see your W-2s from the last two years.”

What?

“Why do they need W-2s?”

She looks confused by the question, like she doesn’t usually have to explain this part to her clients. “Oh, just to confirm your salary meets the minimum threshold. There’s an algorithm landlords like to use. Usually they just want to ensure that the proposed rent falls well beneath your monthly income. You know the drill.”

I don’t, actually. I lived in the dorms at RISD, and my scholarship paid for that. Before college, I was at home in my parents’ sprawling mansion in Connecticut—a mansion they haven’t paid the mortgage on for years, apparently.

“What if I don’t have a credit history or any W-2s?” I ask gently. “I could probably pay for a few months’ rent up-front instead?”

She frowns. “I’m afraid that’s not an option. It’s surprisingly hard to evict someone from an apartment once they’ve moved in. There’re all sorts of protections in place for tenants, so landlords want to ensure the person is going to be able to pay rent for the full term of the lease, not just a few months. I can’t say I blame them.”

I nod, and she must be able to see my distress because she continues, “What about getting a cosigner? Tenants your age usually have a parent or guardian cosign on a lease. That way you and the landlord are both happy.”

Right. Sure. If I had someone who could cosign, I’d happily take that option. Unfortunately, my parents are good for absolutely nothing considering how much debt they’re in, and my siblings can’t help either. Only two of them are over eighteen. Charlotte doesn’t have a job, and Jacob is still in college. I have an uncle in Minnesota—my mom’s brother—but I’ve only ever seen him a handful of times, and not once since I was twelve, so it’s not like I can just call him up and ask for help with my lease either.

“Is there any way you could ask the landlord if he’d make an exception just this once?” I ask with a pleading smile. “Like I said, I’m probably good for three months’ rent up-front, and if I sell some of my pieces then I can continue prepaying on the lease.”

Her brows scrunch together. “Pieces?”

“My art.”

That really tips her over the edge. “So you work on commission only, I’m assuming? That’ll make it even harder. Any landlord in the city will want you to have a cosigner.”

“But could you just ask? Please?”

She nods as if she's going to do it, but I can tell she's already writing me off.

Outside on the sidewalk, we say our farewells, and as I walk away, I feel hopeless.

I just might have to make it work at the hotel for a while instead of finding an apartment, which sucks considering even though it's a budget-friendly place, it's still draining my funds faster than I'd like *and* it's absolutely tiny.

For the second time today, I feel like a complete idiot. I graduated from RISD with a half-baked plan to move to New York City, and I'm embarrassed to admit I thought it would be a little bit easier than this. A part of me wants to blame my parents for not preparing me for the real world. I lived an incredibly sheltered life until I moved away for college, and that's coming back to bite me in the ass. What kind of idiot doesn't know you need some kind of credit history and past income statements if you want to be able to lease an apartment? Apparently, *this* idiot.

My phone rings when I'm on the subway platform waiting on the train, still beating myself up. My first hope is that it's Lisa calling me back already with good news, but it's an unknown number. Usually, I'd let it go to voicemail, but I answer instead, just in case Lisa is calling me from her office line or something.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Am I speaking with Elizabeth?" a female voice asks.

"Uh, yes." A train screeches to a halt behind me, and I press my finger to my exposed ear so I can hear the person on the other end better. "May I ask who's calling?"

“This is April, Mr. Jennings’ assistant,” she replies, all business with her prim-and-proper tone.

“Walt’s assistant?”

“Yes. Mr. Walter Jennings II.”

Good grief, what a mouthful.

“Oh, okay.”

“Yes, sorry if I’ve caught you at a bad time, but I have a few things to go over with you.”

“Wait, I’m confused. I thought Mason was Walt’s assistant.”

“Yes, that’s correct. Mason is Mr. Jennings’ *first* assistant. I’m the one who handles his grunt work.”

I think she meant her statement to be self-deprecating, but there’s a heavy pause as we both realize she’s just referred to me as grunt work. I can’t help it. After the day I’ve had, I actually laugh.

“Is there any way we could pretend I didn’t just say that?” she asks, sounding thoroughly embarrassed and much less professional than she did at the start of the phone call. I think we’ve both decided to drop pretense.

“Sure, yeah. It’s fine. What did you say you’re calling about again? I’m waiting on my train so I’m worried the call might drop at any second.”

“Oh! I’ll be brief then. I have a packet of information to email over to you from Mr. Jennings’ lawyer. They need you to review it, sign, and email it back as soon as possible.”

“What’s in the packet?”

“I’m not sure. It’s password protected with your social security number, so I can’t view it.”

“Are you serious?”

“Um...yes.”

“Don’t you think this is all a little weird?”

“God yes.” She laughs. “I thought I was the only one.”

A laugh sputters out of me, and she lowers her voice before continuing, “Did you really marry Walt this morning at the courthouse? That’s the rumor going around the office, but I didn’t dare believe it.”

“Yes...I did.”

“Holy shit.”

“Are you two friends?” I ask impulsively, hungry for information about Walt.

“Friends? Um, not at all.” She emphasizes the words as if to drive home that fact. “I’ve worked for him for six months and he’s barely said five words to me outside of work stuff.”

“So then he’s an asshole to his employees?”

She mulls my question over for a second. “Asshole isn’t the right word. He’s decent enough, just sort of austere. Or maybe aloof is a better word. You know what I mean—you married the guy.”

I wish I could admit to her the entire truth, but I doubt he’d want one of his assistants knowing intimate details about his life.

I see my train pulling up to the platform, and I know I can’t linger on the phone much longer. I spout off my email

address quickly for April, who says she already has it. She was just calling to alert me that the documents are time sensitive.

“Right, okay.”

“Well...that’s all. I guess I should say congratulations?” she quips.

Yeah. Congratulations to me.

I don’t waste a single second back at the hotel. I scan my keycard, fling the door open, and grab my laptop off the bed. Sure enough, there’s an email waiting for me from Rupert Hirsch, Walt’s lawyer.

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Thank you!

Thank you to all my readers, especially the Little Reds. I know there are so many books to choose from these days, and I don't take it for granted that you all chose to spend a day or two reading mine.

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