



Let me tell you the story of how I came to be.

the Surviving trace

A SURVIVING TIME NOVEL

CALIA READ



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

To Joshua—

As of now, I've wrote over 300,000 words and none of that would be possible if it wasn't for you. To you, there's no such thing as limitations and you've helped me believe the same thing.

This book is yours.

Air five.



part one

I lavish unfailing love to a thousand generations. I forgive iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But I do not excuse the guilty. I lay the sins of the parents upon their children and grandchildren; the entire family is affected—even children in the third and fourth generations.

—Exodus 34:7 (NLT)



I'VE ONLY FELT the cold hands of death twice in my life.

The first time, I was fourteen. I watched my aunt die in a small hospital room. We were prepared for her death, but seeing her life slowly fade away was chilling. My parents, brothers, and I surrounded her bed, waiting in muted silence for her to take her final breaths. The heaviness of the situation bore down on me until it felt as if I were the one struggling to breathe. I had to say something.

“Aren’t you scared?” I finally whispered.

“Not at all,” she whispered back. Then she smiled. “I’m at peace.”

My mother stepped in before I could reply, but my aunt’s words lingered in my head. How could there be peace in death?

The second time is now.

The peace my aunt spoke of? It’s slowly wrapping itself around me. No wonder she was so relaxed. The knowledge that I am going to end my life is

dissolving and the only thing that seems to matter now is how I lived, how I loved, and what I sacrificed for that love.

That's how I know what I'm about to do is right. Good, in fact, because in less than a second, every single bad thing will end. All I have to do is pull the trigger.

That doesn't mean I'm ready. I still have so much to do. To say. But the edges of my life are burning, crumbling in on themselves.

I'm sitting, but the room feels as if it's stretching, trying its hardest to run from me. I exhale shakily and rest my head against the cold brick wall behind me. Water seeps between the bricks, dampening my hair. Directly above my head are wooden shelves with empty mason jars, cobwebs looped between the jars. Old, rusted out pipes run above my head, leaking water. The drops slowly fall onto the ground.

Drip... drip... drip.

The rickety staircase that leads to the basement door is barricaded as best as possible but that does nothing to alleviate my fears. Anyone could burst down here if they really wanted to.

The only light in the room comes from a bulb hanging directly above my head. Weak yellow light appears for a minute before it slowly fades away. On the opposite wall is a small excuse for a window. The glass is covered with grime and dust. Hardly any light comes through. The air smells musty, as though rust and the damp earth have come together to form their own scent.

My gaze drifts to the head on my lap. Gently, I brush his hair back from his forehead. I'm afraid to move. To breathe. Inside, I'm dying to hang on to him as tightly as I can. But I hold back; I've already done enough damage to him. To his life.

Blood mats his hair and drips down his face, mixing with the water leaking from his eyes. Colored tears. Even he knows what's about to happen.

His breathing is becoming slower, shallower, as if every breath is a chore.

Frantically, I turn toward the closed door. In a few minutes, someone will open it. I feel it in my gut. My time is running out. So I look back at him.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

My fingernails are caked with dirt, my hands filthy. That doesn’t stop me from brushing my fingers across his skin. I’m only spreading dirt across his cheek, but I can’t not touch him. My minutes and seconds with him are down to the wire.

Drip... drip... drip.

“You know the people who chose love over the world?” I say.

He nods.

“I can’t do that.” My voice breaks as a tear slips down my cheek. “It’d be one of the most selfish things I’d ever do.”

Footsteps sound above our heads, rattling the floorboards so hard, dust rains down on us. My hands shake as I reach for the cool metal object to my left. It’s almost time.

This is the right thing, I tell myself.

So why are the walls around my heart crashing down?

“I brought you to this point,” I whisper.

This is our last moment of peace.

Fists pound against the basement door. A voice shouts. My heart accelerates. I gaze down at him. His eyes are pleading, desperate for this to not be the end.

But it is; I’m all out of options.

The door breaks open. Pieces of wood tumble down the stairs. Yellow light pours in, outlining a figure. Heavy footsteps reverberate through the room, matching the rapid pounding of my heart. The mason jars behind me

rattle and shake. A few give up and fall to the floor. The glass shatters, breaking into millions of pieces.

We're tucked away in the corner. It's only a matter of seconds before he sees us.

So I touch him one last time. "I'm so sorry."

I'm doing the right thing. But I hold still because if I think about this, I'll fear what lies in wait for me—a life without him.

Fresh tears fall, trailing down my cheeks and landing on his forehead.

Truth be told, I think I've always been slipping away. I've been walking the tightrope between all the yesterdays and tomorrows for a long time. At some point, I was bound to fall. In a few seconds, everything will be over.

In a few seconds, his pain will disappear.

With a shaky hand, I raise the gun and press it against my temple. He makes an odd choking sound, and the person directly in front of us appears momentarily shocked. But that person's shock only lasts for a second before they raise a gun of their own.

I squeeze my eyes shut right as they shout his name.

"I love you," I whisper, then I pull the trigger.

Then I'm outside, falling from a second-floor balcony. The world moves about in a gnarled shade of gray and onyx. Air whooshes around me as I wildly claw for something to grasp. In front of me is a black outline of a body. It's the man who was in my lap moments ago. He holds out a hand and tries to grab me, but I slip farther away, sucked into a vortex, pushed by gravity. I open my mouth to scream for help, yet no sound comes out.

My voice may be on mute, but I hear him screaming. He's calling my name.

"Serene! Serene!"

My vision blurs, and before I know it, a dense fog slowly curls around his

body until poof. He's gone, yet I can still hear him calling my name.

Frantically, I glance behind me. I'm seconds away from hitting the ground. I close my eyes and pray for the world to swallow me whole.

And then it does.



“SERENE!”

My eyes fly open. I blink rapidly, trying to adjust to the bright light.

“Turn it off,” a male voice groggily says.

I jolt in shock and turn to my left. It takes me a minute to realize it’s Will lying next to me and everything I experienced was only a dream.

That’s it.

Slowly, I sit up and turn off my alarm then fall back onto the mattress. Staring at the ceiling, I take a few deep, calming breaths. The worst dreams are the ones that take you outside of your mind. The ones that feel so real, you question if everything you experienced indeed happened. I lift both arms, expecting to see goose bumps from the cold air. But there’s nothing.

In this dream, it’s not the falling that scared me. It’s the fear. I’ve never felt anything like it.

Will rolls over and slings an arm around my waist. His dark brown hair is

in complete disarray. A few seconds pass before he lifts his head and looks at me. “Your heart is pounding,” he says in a deep rasp.

I’ve woken up to his face for the past two years, and it still hasn’t gotten old. I met Will at Penn State. I was in my second year; he was in his third. We were both in the library. It was the week before Christmas break, and everyone was cramming before finals. All the tables were packed, but there was one lone seat right next to him.

As quietly as possible, I placed my bag next to the seat and sat down. No one at the table lifted their heads in acknowledgment. No one but Will.

He didn’t say hi. Or speak for that matter. But he gave me a shy smile before he went back to studying.

I sat by him the next day and the day after that before he finally gathered the courage to say something to me. It took him a week to ask me out. His shy, quiet demeanor immediately pulled me in. He wasn’t cocky and sure of himself, and for those reasons, I said yes.

And now here we are, newly engaged with our future spread out before us. I lift my left hand and watch the diamond sparkle in the light. I take another deep breath. “I had a weird dream.”

“What was it about?”

I drop my hand and stare at the ceiling. “It’d take too long to explain. Besides, we have to get up.”

Will groans and rolls over. I lean toward him and kiss his right shoulder.

“If we don’t get up now, we never will,” I say.

The two of us rise out of bed like zombies. Will goes to the kitchen to make coffee while I head straight to the bathroom to shower. We have our morning routine down pat. After I’m finished getting dressed, we switch places, and I go to the kitchen for some coffee.

We’ve lived in our small one-bedroom apartment for so long that I easily

navigate through the rooms without any of the lights on. Sunlight streams in through the cracks in the blinds, trails across the wood floors, and slashes across off-white walls.

I'm on autopilot as I enter the kitchen and go through the motions of starting my day, continuing to analyze my dream and what it could mean. I believe that some dreams have no rhyme or reason. You can overhear a conversation or see something on TV and think nothing of it, yet it still manages to slip inside your mind. But some dreams have a deeper meaning.

All I can think is one thing—who was that man from my dream?

I would remember a face like his. His eyes are what pulled at me. They were desperate, never straying from mine. Not for a second. He stared at me as though I held all the answers to life. More than that, he stared at me as though he loved me. The strange part? I seemed to have loved him too.

Merely thinking about it makes goose bumps break across my skin.

“Uh... I think your mug is full.”

I jump and turn at the sound of Will's voice. He nods toward the coffee cup in my hand, making me realize I'm still pouring coffee into an already full cup. The brown liquid trails over the rim and onto the counter before dripping onto the floor.

“Shit.” Hastily, I put the coffeepot down, grab a towel, and sloppily clean it up as best as possible.

“What are you thinking about?” Will asks with a smile.

I hurry over to the sink and wring out the towel. I grab my coffee mug and glance at Will. “Just thinking about my dream.”

“You're still thinking about it? Now I have to know what happened.”

I take a tentative sip of my coffee before I put a lid on my mug and lean against the counter. “It was random. I was in a basement with a guy on my lap who was bleeding everywhere.”

“Was the guy me?” Will teases.

“He wasn’t. But someone was after us. They busted down the door, came running down the stairs toward us, and then I woke up.”

Okay, so I left out the part where I was willing to take my own life to save him, but I told the majority of the truth.

Will raises both brows. “What kind of dream is that?”

“I know, right? It was intense.”

“Intense, but fictional.” He stands in front of me and places his hands on the counter behind me, effectively caging me in. “The chance of that happening is incredibly low.”

Smiling, I lean against him and wrap my arms around him.

“But since I love you, I think it’s fair that I give you a word of advice.”

Curiously, I lift my head and meet his solemn gaze.

“Steer clear of basements.”

I roll my eyes and gently shove his arm.

Will chuckles softly. “It’s all that old junk you’re surrounded by. The antique fumes are going straight to your head.”

“Don’t insult my passion,” I tease back.

“If you had to choose between me or an antique, which one would it be?”

I tap my index finger against the corner of my lip and pretend to think over the question. Seconds tick by, then I snap my fingers and point my index finger at him. “Antiques.”

“I knew it,” he replies, deadpan. “Do you have a busy day at the shop?”

I grab my purse from the kitchen table. “I’ll probably be working late tonight.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Will replies with a grin.

“Liz said she found a lot of good stuff at a few estate sales and flea markets over the weekend. We’re going to try to inventory all of it,” I say as

we walk toward the front door.

“You spend so much time at the shop you might as well put a cot in your office.”

“That’s not true,” I protest weakly.

Will opens the door and gestures for me to go before him. “It is. I can’t remember the last time we had a night out.”

I stop in the middle of the hallway and grab his arm. “I know I’ve been busy, but once everything calms down, we can spend all the time in the world together.” I slip an arm around his waist as we head down the stairs. “And while we’re spending all that time together, we can finally settle on a date for our wedding.”

Six months ago, Will proposed to me in front of my family while we were home for the Fourth of July. Saying yes was a no-brainer. He’s driven, smart, and most importantly, one of the kindest guys I know. To put it short, he’s everything I want. I love him and can’t imagine spending my life with anyone else.

“We don’t have to wait to spend time together to set a date. That decision can happen at any moment. Here’s a date off the top of my head—June 7th.”

“I’m not going to pluck a date out of thin air. I want a date that matches my vision of our wedding. Take flowers, for example.” Will rolls his eyes, but I continue. “They have to be everywhere at our ceremony and what if I want a specific flower that isn’t in bloom in June?”

“It will be June. I think every flower is in bloom in June,” he says dryly.

We stop at the landing of the stairs. Will grabs his keys from his back pocket. I snatch them from his hands and hold them behind my back to keep his attention. “I know you mean well, but I’m not picking a wedding date at random. *But* I will pick one soon, okay?” I say with a small smile teasing the edges of my lips.

Will holds my face between his hands. “As I’ve said before, I don’t care about the date. I just want to marry you.” He gives me a quick kiss. “I’d love to continue this conversation, but I have to go or I’m going to be late. I have to meet a client in thirty minutes.”

Will is a pay per click specialist. He’s in charge of advertising campaigns. Typically, he works from home, but there are times when he meets with clients to form a new campaign to best suit their business.

Deftly, he reaches behind me with one hand and snags the keys. He tosses the keys in the air once and gives me a crooked smile. “Love you.”

He whistles as he walks outside, and I watch him walk toward his car, a small smirk playing on my lips. I brace myself for the cold waiting to greet me the second I step outside. It’s been a pretty tame winter, all things considered. A few snow flurries here and there. That can be deceiving though, because you look outside and think it’s pleasant enough, then the minute you walk out the door, a wall of frigid air hits you, stealing your breath.

I sling my purse over my shoulder and bury my mouth into my coat before I hurry across the road. I dodge the piles of slush still lingering on the sidewalk and grab my keys from my purse. It’s so cold that my hands slightly shake as I unlock the front door to my store.

Over a year ago, I opened Past Repeat with my closest friend, Liz. I knew after I graduated college that I wanted to open a store. Specifically an antique shop.

Like Will, I met my business partner in college. Liz shares my passion for history and taking old relics and breathing new life into them. Everyone, including our families, assumed we were crazy; most businesses fail within the first year. Even so, the two of us refused to let the statistics deter us.

Liz grew up in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. When she brought me here for

the first time to show me around and suggested we open our store here, I instantly agreed. The city isn't overly crowded, yet it comes alive during the day.

So far, the decision to start our business here is paying off.

We have slow days, but we have regular customers who come in daily to see if we have any new stuff. During the weekends, things pick up. By no stretch of the imagination are we making a generous amount of money. Hell, we're barely breaking even. But we're still in business and happy.

The smell that greets me when I walk through the door makes me smile. It's a collective scent from having so many pieces of furniture and items that have been tucked away in boxes, attics, and basements. It's a strong smell, but one I quickly adapt to. Some people can't tolerate it, and because of that, we use air fresheners and everything we can think of. But the scent always comes back.

I turn on the light switch to my left. One by one, the rows of fluorescent lights turn on. I scan the shop with a keen eye, as I do every morning.

I've been to plenty of antique stores stuffed with so many items that it's practically impossible to walk down the aisles without becoming inundated. Past Repeat has a healthy balance. There's enough space for the customers to move around without feeling as though they'll bump the items. But the shelves have plenty of pieces, so people are lured to walk down each aisle to see if we have anything that interests them.

And hopefully we do.

I walk toward the back of the store. We don't open for another thirty minutes, but Liz and I like to get here early and go through the new items either of us have found. We go through the bills and update Past Repeat's social media pages and post anything we have for sale. It's surprising the number of things we sell online.

Unsurprisingly, I'm the first one to arrive. I sit down and boot up my computer. One of my favorite things to do is look online for potential finds. I don't care if it's furniture, clothing, or old books. If it has history, I want it. But finding quality items for the store takes a lot of work. Most of that work extends outside of the store; potential buys are all around us. You just have to search for them.

I answer a few e-mails and scan a few sites to see if there's anything new, but I find nothing that interests me. As I hunt, I hear the bells on the front door chime. I listen to the sound of Liz muttering to herself.

"Have I got a find for you!"

I look up in time to see Liz walk in, carrying three large boxes. She drops them onto the floor in front of my desk, wipes her hands, and takes a deep breath.

We open in less than twenty minutes, but you'd never know by Liz's jeans and baggy sweatshirt. She looks as if she rolled out of bed and grabbed the first thing she saw. Her hair is in a ponytail, and her face doesn't have a stitch of makeup. She always has a smile ready and waiting though. I don't think she's ever met a person she didn't like.

I peer over the desk at the boxes. Liz finds some great things, but a lot of times, she'll go overboard and purchase everything in sight. Sometimes I think she's more of a die-hard antique finder and collector than I am. Her garage borders on being a scene from *Hoarders*. It's filled to the brim with broken furniture and objects she thinks will sell in the store. Once she fixes them up of course. She always manages to see the beauty in the old, the stories behind simple discarded objects.

She's my kindred soul. The closest thing I'll ever have to a sister.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Open them up and find out." Liz is practically bouncing up and down

with excitement. The last time I saw her this excited was when she salvaged a fireplace mantel circa 1880s from a trash pile.

I walk around my desk and kneel next to the boxes. I open the one on the top. A stack of *LIFE* magazines. An old Zenith radio. Wrapped in newspapers are a set of plates. A glass vase. A small pile of vintage books. The spines are cracked and torn in a few places, but these will sell quickly.

“Nice find,” I say.

“I know, right?” Liz peers over my shoulder as I sift through the box. “I went to the flea market early yesterday morning but wasn’t finding anything. I was getting ready to leave when I noticed a lady setting up her booth. I stopped by and found”—Liz gestures to the boxes—“these.”

As she continues to ramble, I move to the second box. Like the first, it’s filled with random items that make it seem like Liz visited an estate sale rather than a flea market.

The third is different though. It’s packed to the hilt with nothing but leather-bound photo albums and pictures in gilt frames that need a good wipe down to bring them back to their former glory. “Did you look through this box?”

“Of course.” Liz kneels next to me and smiles. “You saved the best for last. While you’re going through that box, I’m going to open up the shop.”

Some of the photo albums are so old, I’m afraid if I open them, they’ll fall apart. I gingerly place them on my desk to go back to at a later time. The ones that are in better shape, I quickly skim through. The black-and-white photos flash by in a flurry. Adrenaline and excitement over this discovery make it impossible for me to settle on one picture. I want to see them all in the span of seconds.

To someone else, photos of virtual strangers might mean nothing, but I love them. Pictures from the past give me a thrill, make goose bumps appear

on my arms, because I believe that relics from the past show what life truly is—they start out so beautifully, but slowly fade with time.

As with most antiques and pictures we uncover, I find myself thinking about these pictures. Where are the owners? What happened to them? How did these memories end up in a flea market?

Before I know it, the box is empty save for one framed photo. It lays flat, its stand broken. I flip it over, but layers of dust conceal the picture. I wipe the dust away with the hem of my sweater. The picture is a black-and-white photo of four men standing in front of a beautiful mansion so large that only half the house is seen in the photo. Two men sit on the steps, arms resting on their knees. The other two lean against the stumpy brick pillars flanking the stairs. I stare at every face carefully but stop short at the man second from the right.

My heart stutters for a second because he's the man from my dream. Impossible, yet there he is. My hands shake as I make quick work of removing the photo from the frame. I need to get a better look at this picture.

In my dream, his face was smeared with dirt and blood. The dim lighting made it impossible to see his features, but I know it's him. I recognize those eyes. They're sharp and challenging, almost daring the photographer to take the photo, and his even sharper cheekbones could cut glass. His hair is shoulder length. In my dream, there was blood caked through his strands. In this type of picture, everyone has dark hair, but it's easy to tell this man's hair is lighter. Blond, maybe?

He's far from being the best-looking man in the photo. That award goes to the guy on his left.

No, this mystery man's face is a bit too harsh. His Grecian nose is slightly crooked at the tip. Either he was born that way, or he was in one too many fights. His facial hair is one day away from becoming a full-fledged beard.

The rest of the men are dressed impeccably. He looks as if he just rolled out of bed, his wrinkled shirt tucked hastily into his pants.

He looks a bit scary and unhinged, as though he's seconds away from ripping every person in the photo from limb to limb. I'd never been with a man like him. Not my type. The fact that he was in my dreams makes me relieved that it was only a dream.

I pull my gaze away from him and squint to get a better view of the rest of the faces. No one is smiling. Except for the other man sitting on the steps. It seems like a fleeting smile that the photographer caught by pure luck. The men standing are closed-lipped in a way that's all too common for the era.

I flip the picture over for more information. Maybe a name or location. In faded black ink is the year 1912 and the letters *E, L, E, A*. Presumably those are the initials of the people in the picture.

To me, these letters are clues dropped into my lap, and I hate clues. They only give me a small portion of the answer when I want the whole thing. Almost immediately, my imagination gets to work and picks them names based on the letters.

I tap my finger against the first man. "Your name is Eric." I tap the next man. "And you are... Luke." When I get to the scary, ugly guy, I pause. "You're Ezra." The second the name slips from my lips, I know I'm wrong. He's no Ezra, but I continue to the last guy. "And you're Adam."

Feeling pleased with myself, I lay the picture on my desk and continue to inspect the albums, but my attention keeps going back to that photo.

I stand, cringing at the mess I've made, and pick up the picture. I know it's not uncommon to dream about people who are virtual strangers. But what are the chances of dreaming about some stranger, only to find a photo of them the next day?

"Serene?"

I drop the picture on the desk and discreetly cover it with some random paper. “Yes?”

Liz leans into the room, drumming her fingers on the doorframe. “You ever coming out of here? We’ve been open for almost an hour.”

In shock, I glance at the clock. I’ve spent an hour staring at this photo? “Sorry. I got distracted. These boxes you brought in were great finds. Let me just clean up this mess, and I’ll be right out.”

“No problem. Take your time. I knew you would like those boxes,” Liz replies, and then she’s gone.

I feel like an ass for lying, but it’s instinct. My dream was weird, but finding a picture of the person from said dream is just creepy and bizarre. I make quick work of placing all the albums back in the boxes. Then I stack the boxes and push them against the wall, telling myself I’ll inventory them later today.

Before I leave the office, I grab the photo of the mystery man and slide it into my back pocket.



“HEY, YOU’RE HOME.”

I set my bag and purse on the kitchen table and walk back into the living room to kiss him. He’s sitting on the couch with his laptop resting on his thighs.

I drop into the spot next to him. “Got distracted at work.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. Liz found these boxes at a flea market with some amazing stuff inside.”

He groans; he's all too familiar with Liz's habit of buying anything that appeals to her. "What did she get?"

"A lot of stuff. But you have to see this. Wait right here!" I jump up from the couch and hurry back to the kitchen. I grab the picture from my purse and run to Will, holding the photo toward him.

He gives it a cursory glance before he looks at his laptop. "What's this?"

"You see the guy second from the right?"

Once again, he looks at the picture, only this time he narrows his eyes and leans in. "The angry, ugly guy?"

"Yep."

"What about him?"

I pause dramatically. "He's the guy from my dream."

He immediately sits up and places his laptop on the coffee table. "Gimme that picture."

I hand it over and fight the urge to reprimand him for getting fingerprint stains all over the image.

"Holy shit." He hands it back, and I hold it gingerly. "That's weird."

"I know, right? This was in one of the boxes Liz brought in."

Leaning back on the couch, he shrugs. "Odd, but stranger things have happened." And then he grabs his laptop again.

That conversation was more abrupt than I anticipated.

"Will, think about it. I dream about this guy, then the next day I find a photo of him? It's creepy."

"Yeah, I know. It's creepy."

For the millionth time, I stare at the photo. "What do I do with this?"

"You throw it away."

I can't throw it away. That feels wrong, like I'm throwing away a piece of history. Evasively, I shrug. "Yeah. I guess I should."

Suddenly, I feel stupid for showing this to him. Will sees the world with logic and facts. In his mind, there's never a reason to dream.

As if he can read my thoughts, he rubs his hand up and down my thigh. "Relax, baby." Normally his touch relaxes me within seconds, but tonight it doesn't. "You're giving this way too much thought."

I flip the picture over and trace the writing. "It's so old. Someone must be missing this picture."

"Don't worry about it. There's nothing you can do." Will closes his laptop and stands. "It's getting late. I'm heading to bed."

"I'll be in soon," I reply, my eyes never leaving the picture.

Will walks away. Our bedroom door clicks softly behind him.

I'm surrounded by silence, yet I'm immersed in the picture. Resting my chin on my palm, I peer closer, wishing it were possible to slip into the image and see these people alive. How did they live? What were they thinking? Why does the man from my dream seem so angry in the picture?

Sometimes I think I'm strange, being obsessed with the past. But I believe that the past defines us. It's what brings us to now.

"What happened to you?" I ask the man from my dream.

I will him to step out of the picture and whisper it to me so my curiosity can be put to rest. But he never does, and I'll never know what secrets this man carried.



DAYS HAVE PASSED since I first saw the picture, and I can't get it out of my mind.

Whenever I have free time, whether I'm at home or work, I find myself pulling it out of my purse, staring carefully at each individual until my vision goes blurry. I don't know why I'm so fixated on a simple photo. I feel their eyes looking back at me, begging me not to forget about them.

Especially the one in the middle.

It sounds crazy, but I feel a strange sense of rapport with the men, almost as if I'd been right there with them. I can feel the breeze against my skin and the sun blazing down on us. I can hear the birds chirping in the trees and the gravel crunching beneath the men's feet as they shift back and forth, anxious about having the picture taken.

This bizarre connection is so strong that I've given each man made-up biographies to go with their made-up names.

I am more than aware that this is more than a little crazy.

Eric, the one on the far left, is the friendly one. I bet he has small wrinkles around the corners of his eyes from laughing so much. If you wrong him, he'll more than likely give you another chance. And another. And another. He's lean, with his hair slicked back and old-school wire-rimmed spectacles that scream out the era of the picture.

Then there's Luke, second from the left.

Luke is definitely single. He has no interest in marrying or having children. His biggest responsibility is himself, and he wants to keep it that way. Yet that doesn't stop women from chasing after him. With his devilish grin, he dares them to come forward and try to tame him.

To the far right is Adam. From the stubborn tilt of his chin, I peg this guy as the cocky one. He gets what he gets because no one has ever told him no. He's the most cunning, used to getting his way no matter the cost.

The one in the middle, Ezra... he's trickier. I've changed his name a handful of times and nothing seems to fit. So I've started to call him mystery man.

Mystery man is the leader. Whereas every other person in the picture stares at the photographer with genial expressions, he looks as if he's barely tolerating the photographer. His shoulders are stiff and his mouth is unyielding.

It's obvious that mystery man and Luke are related. They don't look alike, but the way they hold themselves is eerily similar.

This is the type of thing crazy people do—create lives for strangers who are probably dead and have been dead for a while. Yet this whole process is thrilling for me. I feel as if I'm reconstructing the past one piece at a time.

I don't have time for this though. My kitchen table has been transformed into a makeshift desk. I'm supposed to be paying bills for the shop, and then,

after I'm done, put them in their proper file. It's tedious, but I know how forgetful I can be, and when it comes to the shop, I don't want to leave any room for error. There's already so much stacked against a business the first few years.

Simply thinking about it brings on a massive headache. I close my eyes and gently rub my temples.

"You've been sitting here for hours," Will says as he comes up behind me. His hands curl around my shoulders.

I rub both hands down my face. "I feel like I'm behind on everything."

"I doubt it." Gently, he tugs me back until my head rests against his stomach. "Let's go out tonight. You need to regroup and clear your head."

What I need to do is stop thinking about the damn picture. That's why I can't get any work done. Every second of the day, it's been on my mind, yet I can't throw it away. The thought makes me cringe. To me, that feels borderline sacrilegious.

"What do you say?" Will says.

I tilt my head all the way back until I meet his eyes. I know sitting around isn't going to help anything. Will is right. What I need to do is get out of the apartment, get some fresh air, and give my mind a break. "Let me get dressed."

He leans down and kisses me. "Sounds perfect."



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, the two of us are out the door, my heels rhythmically hitting the sidewalk. Going through inventory isn't exactly glamorous, and it feels nice to shed my jeans and bulky sweater for a pair of

black stilettos and a sleeveless, turtleneck plum dress, that hugs my curves.

When I stepped out of the bedroom, Will whistled and asked why I'd been hiding this dress from him.

We're going to his favorite restaurant, Heirloom, which doesn't exactly have a fancy dress code, but I can count on one hand the number of times in the last year when I truly took the time to dress my best. Tonight, I can say that.

I feel good. Even the cold air against my skin feels good. My hand around Will's arm feels good. Being out in the real world shows me how much I hole myself away in the back of my store.

"What are you smiling about?" Will asks with a grin.

I squeeze his arm tighter and look at him. "Just happy to spend some quality time with you."

"It's about time. I feel like I hardly see you anymore. You're always at work or thinking about work."

"Well, I'm not at work now and I'm definitely not thinking about work," I reply with a smile. Which isn't exactly the truth. That damn picture isn't at the forefront in my mind, but it's there in the background, taunting me.

"Good," Will says as the restaurant comes into sight. "Because it's time we catch up."

He holds the door open for me. Almost instantly, I'm flooded with warmth. The foyer of Heirloom is dark and, with the dim light, almost gloomy. Yet I think the ambiance is created that way so you lean a bit closer to the person you're dining with. It's definitely not a family restaurant. At least not at night.

Will's hand settles on the small of my back as he guides us toward the hostess.

"Hello," the small brunette behind the maître d' station says. "Welcome

to Heirloom.”

“Hi. I have reservations under Myles. Some people from our party might already be here.”

As the hostess views the schedule, I look at Will. “We’re not eating alone?”

“I thought it’d be fun to get out and meet up with our friends.”

That doesn’t sound promising to me. Probably because Will and I don’t have a lot of mutual friends.

Before I can reply, the hostess smiles at us. “Yes, they’ve already arrived.” She glances behind her and signals to one of the waitresses. “Will you show them to table seventeen?”

Will takes my hand as we follow the waitress toward the back of the restaurant. I catch sight of a few of his friends and my happiness plummets a bit.

“Why didn’t you tell me they’d be here?” I ask out of the corner of my mouth.

His friends glance our way and smile. Instinctively I smile back. “I thought it’d be a fun surprise,” Will replies.

Fun for whom exactly? I like his friends, but I have to take them in small doses. Anything more than that and I start to find them uptight, and snobbish. It’s as if I’m beneath them because I didn’t become a curator or art buyer. When I first told them I was opening up an antique store, they all smiled, but I saw the truth in their eyes. *An antique store? How nouveau riche.*

“You finally showed up!” Brent, the loudest of the group, says.

His wife, Julie, is so quiet and mousy, I always wonder if she’s ever given a chance to voice her thoughts and opinions. She’s sitting at the table, staring at us with her diamond necklace gleaming in the light and her hair perfectly straight and swept away from her face with a black headband.

“I had to talk this one out of the house,” Will says.

Brent turns to me. “Busy at the shop?”

It’s impossible not to hear the slightly mocking tone in his voice. I shrug it off, reminding myself it’s the start of dinner. Suddenly I’m regretting this impromptu night out.

I take off my jacket and drape it across one of the free seats. “It’s going great. Busier than ever.”

“Really?” He appears genuinely shocked that anyone would find my shop interesting.

Before I can reply, Will speaks up. “Business has been good for her. Especially because of the holidays. I hardly get to see her anymore.”

“That’s great to hear,” Brent replies. It’s hard to figure out whether he’s being sincere or not.

I sit down and stare at the other faces around me. Will’s college roommate, Sean, sits to my right. He’s a blond of average height with a smile so brilliantly white it looks as though he belongs on a Crest Whitestrips commercial. He’s a stockbroker and probably the most successful out of this group. He’s not a trust-fund baby like the rest. He had to work hard for everything. If I have to talk to anyone, it’ll be him and his girlfriend, Sarah. Across the table from me are Brent and his wife, and beside Will is Heath and his wife, Michelle.

This particular group of people reminds me of my parents’ friends back home. All the false smiles, air kisses, and phony conversations easily chip away at my energy. But I try though, because I love Will and for whatever reason, he likes these people.

“How have you been?” I ask Sarah, thus beginning a long, long night.



THREE HOURS LATER, we're finally walking through the front door.

"That was fun," Will announces as he locks the door.

I flip on the light and give him a look. "For who exactly?"

He arches a brow. "Oh, I saw you talking to Brent and his girlfriend."

"Yeah, because it would've been incredibly boring if I'd sat there and said nothing for three hours!"

"They're not that bad."

I slip out of my heels and all but moan with relief. Tomorrow I'm going to have blisters on my heels. I just know it. "To you, they're not, but for me, they are. I have to take them in small doses. *Really* small doses. Besides, I wanted to spend tonight with you."

Will takes off his coat and hangs it on the coatrack before he heads to the fireplace and lights a fire. When he's done, he dusts his hands off. "Typically when I ask you to go out with me, you say no."

"So your friends were a backup plan?"

He smirks and walks toward the kitchen. "Honestly? Yes."

I trail behind him and lean against the doorframe. Despite the fact we just had dinner, Will is already rummaging through the fridge for something else to eat.

"Next time we go out for dinner can it be the two of us?"

He pulls his head out of the fridge and gives me a quick peck on the cheek. "Deal."

While he makes a sandwich, I move toward the mess that is our kitchen table and try to organize things.

"Leave it. It'll be waiting there for us tomorrow."

“I know,” I reply as I sort through the paperwork. “But now that I’ve seen it, I won’t be able to sleep until it’s picked up.”

I throw away a stack of a junk mail and create a small pile of mail that belongs to Past Repeat. I put a Post-it note on the top to remind myself to take it with me the next time I go to the shop.

Then I come across the photo that’s been torturing me for days. I pick it up as I sit at the kitchen table and stare at it carefully. It’s amazing how you can stare at something a thousand times and still find something new with each glance. This time, I notice their hands. It seems like such a strange thing to notice. Eric and Adam have their hands tucked into their pockets. Luke is leaning back, his elbows resting on the step behind him. Mystery man’s forearms rest on his knees, his hands dangling between his legs. Seems innocuous, right? But when I peer closer, I see the ring on his left hand. He’s married, which I didn’t expect. He appears to be a man who would much rather spend his life alone. The kind of man who has no room for love. I snort. Good luck to the woman married to him.

Will comes up behind me and peers over my shoulder. “You still have that thing?”

I shrug, feeling my defenses rise. “Yeah.”

“Why don’t you get rid of it?”

“I don’t want to.”

“You’re acting like a crazy person, staring at it whenever you get the chance. We had a great time tonight, but now you’re ruining it by gawking at that photo.”

I arch both brows.

“Fine. *I* had a great time tonight,” he says. “The last thing you need to be doing is driving yourself crazy over this stupid picture.”

“It’s not stupid,” I say defensively. I point at the photo. “You can’t tell

me you're not the slightest bit curious about the people in the photo."

"I can honestly tell you there's not a single part of me that cares."

"How can you not? It's history. There's a story behind the picture, behind each person, and I want to know each one."

"That's the thing—it's not *your* history. So why bother obsessing over something you'll never get?"

Any sane person would agree with Will. And a strong part of me does, but the other part fiercely disagrees with him. There's no way I can explain to Will, without appearing nuts, that the picture feels like one big puzzle I'm dying to put back together.

"You're a buzzkill," I mutter.

"Nope. I'm simply a realist." And then, he plucks the picture out of my hands and walks into the living room.

I'm up and out of my chair, hot on his heels. "Give it back."

"Sorry. No can do."

I have no idea what he plans on doing with the photo, and that's what worries me the most. "Seriously, give it back."

He stops in front of the fireplace and holds it above his head as he moves the fireplace screen. He lowers his hand and I try to grab the photo. But I'm too late. I watch as the picture lands on one of the burning pieces of wood. I stare at Will, completely stunned.

He dusts off his hands. "There. Now you don't have to obsess over it any longer."

"What the hell?" I push him aside and grab the fire poker, trying to guide the picture out of the flames. I finally succeed, and the picture falls to the floor.

Blindly, I grab a book from the end table and snuff the remaining flames.

After a few seconds of whacking the picture, I toss the book aside and

exhale loudly, my gaze on the picture. Within a few seconds, the fire took an already old photo and turned it into a charred memory.

I lift my head and stare at Will with disbelief. “I can’t believe you did that.”

He stares at me as if I’ve grown three heads. “Take it easy, okay? It’s only a picture.”

“To me, it’s not. And you know that.”

Will’s smile fades once he realizes I’m more than pissed off. Red stains his cheeks. “You know what? You can mourn the loss of your precious picture, but I’m going to bed. I’m done.”

He walks away. Seconds later, our bedroom door slams shut.

Heavily, my hands drop onto my lap. I take a deep breath, ignoring the deathly silence in the apartment, and pick up the picture. Or what’s left of it. Half of the picture fell off in the fireplace. All that remains is the upper right portion, revealing the second-story windows of the mansion.

One of the things I love so much about my job is finding furniture and belongings that most people think are garbage and bringing them back to life. But there’s nothing I can do to fix this picture.

I walk over to the couch. The silence is starting to get to me, so I turn on the television to keep me company. The headache I had hours ago returns with a vengeance, so I go to the bathroom for some Advil then lay down on the couch.

Listlessly, I stare at the TV. Pretty soon, my eyelids flutter before they close altogether.



I DON'T KNOW what time it is when I wake up. I only know that a loud noise yanked me from my slumber.

Sitting up, I see the television is still on, playing a late-night talk show. I push my hair away from my face as the host makes a joke. The audience loudly laughs. I reach for my phone to check the time. Midnight.

Next to my phone is the photo. Right where I left it. I pick it up and glare at the fireplace.

Will might be right. I'm wasting too much energy on this photo—a photo that has no connection to me. Sighing loudly, I stand and move toward the fireplace to drop the final remains of the picture into the fire. The flames aren't as powerful as before, but it'll still devour the picture until there's nothing left.

I go to throw it in—and I hear feminine laughter and murmurs of conversations.

I freeze in place.

It's a small noise, practically indiscernible, but it's there. I turn around and look at the television. It's still playing *The Tonight Show*.

"I'm losing it," I say, because that's a helluva lot better than trying to figure out what I'm hearing and why I'm hearing it.

I turn back toward the fireplace. The laughter and voices don't fade. If anything, they grow stronger with each passing second.

This time, when I face the television, the room becomes colorless. One by one, the living room furniture disappears. The walls collapse as if they weigh less than a feather. The ceiling is yanked upward as the floor drops away. Then a marble floor replaces my wood floor. New white walls connect to the floor. Antique sconces adorn the walls. To the left is a large white marble fireplace. My own fireplace is gone, only to be replaced with white pillars.

The ceiling comes back down, complete with beautiful chandeliers

gleaming brightly. The floor seems so spacious, almost as if my entire apartment could fit in this one ballroom.

People are all around me, dancing and laughing. I turn in a circle, feeling overwhelmed but taking in everything.

This is impossible. I'm only dreaming.

I rub my eyes, yet the image is still there. My heart pounds in my ears as bright lights make my head ache. I rub my temples. That only makes the pain increase until it becomes so unbearable, I can barely stand.

The picture slips from my hands right before I fall—only I never touch the floor. I'm sucked into the ground. A black haze surrounds me. Wind whooshes past me, pulling my hair back from my head. My legs wildly kick, like I'm underwater and trying to reach the surface. I can see my apartment above me, but it's quickly becoming farther away until it's a small white speck in the distance. Within seconds, it's the size a needle prick. Then it disappears altogether.

My stomach lurches as I'm sucked deeper into this strange vortex.

I open my mouth. I try to scream. Nothing comes out. All around me, I hear laughter and music playing. The sounds grow louder and louder, making me wince.

Down, down, down I go until finally... I stop.



IN DREAMS, THE moment before you slam to the ground, you wake up.

Then you all at once sit up in bed, sweat coating your body and your heart ready to burst out of your chest.

None of that happens to me.

Instead, the darkness that swallowed me whole recedes into a murky gray before I can see clearly. My bones ache as though I've been in a violent fight. My skin tingles and I can still feel the air rushing past me.

I lie there, panting until I have to remind myself to take deep breaths. I lower my palms onto the floor, and for the first time, take in my surroundings. The ballroom I saw moments before is nowhere to be seen.

I have no idea where I am. Slowly, I stand.

The apartment I share with Will is so compact there's barely enough room for the two of us. Yet this room is bigger than our kitchen and living room put together.

The dark mahogany floors gleam in the light. Directly in front of me is a looming marble fireplace mantel well over six feet high. To my right are built-in bookshelves that practically reach the ceiling. I twist around and see a large desk. All the papers on the polished desktop are organized into three small piles. A nickel-plated lamp in pristine condition sits on the far corner of the desk, shining directly on a Corona typewriter. And to the left, straight in front of me, is a candlestick telephone. The kind I would die to have at my store. The difference between the candlestick telephones I've seen at auctions and this one is this appears brand new.

One by one, my fingers curl around the lip of the desk as I lean closer to read the documents. Reading everything written on the pages is difficult. Not because it's messy. In fact, it's the opposite. This handwriting appears pretty close to calligraphy. If my dad were here, he'd say it was the Palmer Method, popular in the nineteenth century.

A frisson of alarm dances down my spine.

I pull away from the desk and look at the windows. Heavy, striped navy drapes are closed. I pull back one curtain to peer outside. Two cast-iron lamps flank some kind of pathway.

Sometimes when I can't sleep, I look out of my bedroom window and survey the world around me. I'll watch the cars drive by, their taillights blinking in the distance. There will be the sound of honking horns or sirens going off. On the weekends, people stay out late. Occasionally a couple or group of friends that have had too much to drink will walk by, laughing and talking too loudly. But I see none of that right now. Instead, I'm staring at a circular gravel driveway. The apartments I usually see across the street are gone, replaced by large oaks.

A car pulls into the drive, its headlights splashing across my face for a second. I press my face against the glass to get a better glimpse. From here

it's hard to be sure, but it looks like a Model-T. The apprehension I've felt since the moment I opened my eyes quickly escalates into fear. Like the telephone, the car is in pristine condition.

A man walks down the front steps and opens the passenger side door. He offers his hand, and a lady dressed in a high-waisted chiffon gown, complete with full-length white gloves, takes his hand and steps out of the car. She turns, and I'm afforded a view of her wavy blond hair styled in a loose bun with a jeweled headband.

A handsome man wearing a black waistcoat walks around the car. He offers his arm to the woman, and the two of them walk toward the house. I watch as they walk up the flight of steps and disappear from view.

My hand drops to the side, and the curtain falls back into place. Turning in a circle, I drag my hands through my hair. What is happening? And how do I stop it?

The simple explanation is I'm dreaming. Yes, that's it. This is only a dream. But never have I experienced a dream so... real. So visceral. I brush my fingers across the surface of the desk and shiver.

I keep moving because if I stop, I'll crumble. And if I crumble, I don't know what will happen. I walk toward the door and stop short once I see the silver ornamental doorknob with a lock that probably requires a skeleton key to open.

Briefly, I shut my eyes and whisper, "This is only a dream. This is only a dream."

Carefully, I open the door and peek out into the hall.

At first, it appears to be a regular hallway. The same hardwood floors run the length of the hall. Wall sconces emanate a soft glow. The walls are covered in Fresco damask wallpaper. Although the hallway is empty, I'm still hesitant as I step out of the room. The sounds of faint laughter, the same

sound I heard in my living room, echo around me.

I step forward, using the laughter as my guide. The hallway makes a sharp right, opening to what appears to be a foyer. The damask wallpaper is gone, replaced by cream-colored walls and marble floors so clean, I can see my reflection. From here, I have a bird's-eye view of the front door. I freeze as another couple walks through the front door. This pair is in the same fashion as the couple I saw outside.

The woman's jewels sparkle as she smiles at whatever the man escorting her has said. They haven't noticed me, and that gives me the courage to creep forward. If this is a dream—which it has to be—then what's stopping me from following them? I grow bolder and am almost to the staircase when one of the men standing by the front door sees me. I freeze. He freezes. We stare at each other. I wait for him to say something. His eyes widen imperceptibly. Then he acknowledges me with a slight dip of his chin before he directs his attention to the front door. It's almost as if I don't exist.

See? my mind whispers. All a dream.

Should I go forward or walk straight back to the room I came from? I battle with myself for a moment, but ultimately, my curiosity gets the better of me. I step out of the shadows and walk into the massive foyer as though I own the place.

What I see is extraordinary. It's nothing but opulence. From the ornate ceilings that soar past the second floor and have such beautiful detail, they look as though they belong in a palace, to the Baccarat chandelier hanging directly above me. Wainscoting lines the walls. Corinthian columns six feet high flank the closed doorways around me.

For me, what steals the show is the double curved staircase behind me. I turn and gape at it. The steps are marble. The iron railings are topped with a wooden banister that gleams in the light.

Lingering on the second floor are a handful of men and women quietly conversing.

“Ah, there’s our hostess!”

The source of the voice is a blond male with slicked-back hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. He leans against the mahogany banister. He has a cocky grin, revealing he’s used to female attention.

I twist around to make sure he isn’t talking to someone else, but no, he’s coming straight toward me.

“Are you gonna join everyone or hide all night?” he asks.

“Ah... uh...”

He stops in front of me and takes a sip of his drink while he waits for me to answer. Frantically, I try to think of how I know this man, but I’m drawing blanks. After a few seconds pass and I still don’t reply, the man gestures for me to go before him up the stairs.

Giving the men behind me one last glance, I follow this stranger. Might as well. I planned on going up here anyway. My hand curves around the railing. For a second, I feel a trickle of excitement rush through me. It’s almost as though I’m touching something, experiencing something I shouldn’t be. That’s the beautiful thing about dreams. They create a scene you would typically never have a chance of encountering and make it come to life.

“Everyone has been searchin’ for you. Especially me,” he says in an intimate voice. Once we reach the top of the stairs, he stops me and leans in. “We aren’t supposed to meet until later, but if you’re ready, so am I.” A wolfish smile spreads across his face.

What the hell is this guy talking about? My feelings must’ve been written across my face because he steps back with a small laugh, completely unruffled.

“You need a drink,” he announces soundly before he stalks across the room.

Hesitantly, I step forward. A dense cloud of smoke swirls in the air, mixing with the scent of women’s perfume. Light from the chandeliers reflects off champagne glasses.

Everyone around stops and stares at me. I glance down at myself and realize I’m still wearing the dress and black tights I wore to dinner. The only thing missing is my sky-high heels. Compared to everyone’s gowns and jewels and tuxes, I seem practically naked.

I smile nervously and try to find a familiar face, but there’s no one I recognize. A few people step back from me. I can’t tell if it’s because they’re so repulsed by me or are curious about my dress. Some women lean toward the person next to them and whisper frantically, their eyes rooted on me. Some call out my name. I’m so overwhelmed, I couldn’t speak even if I wanted to.

I walk deeper into the room, eager to get away, but stop short. This is the ballroom I saw in my living room. It’s utterly breathtaking. The multiple arch-shaped entrances are surrounded by marble columns like the ones downstairs. At first glance, the room appears all white, but on closer inspection, the walls are painted ivory. Another Baccarat chandelier hangs from the ceiling. In the middle of the left wall is a hand-carved marble fireplace. Heavy ivory curtains are tied back from the windows.

“Serene!” a girlish voice says behind me.

I glance over my shoulder as a small woman walks up to me. Her brown hair’s cut in a bob. She has a face bordering on angelic, with hazel eyes fringed with thick black lashes, and a small nose. But she has a mouth too full for her face. Somehow, it offsets the perfection.

Like the rest of the ladies, she’s wearing a long gown. It’s a deep teal

with elaborate lacework around the sleeves. Unlike most women, she doesn't wear gloves. Pearls are strung around her neck. She appears to be around my age, maybe younger.

She grabs my hands and gapes at me. "What are you wearin'?"

I smooth my hands down the little material of my dress.

"Is this some new fashion from abroad you didn't tell me about?" she asks.

"Yes?" My reply sounds more like a question.

"Your dress is risqué." She leans in and lowers her voice to a conspiring whisper. "If Étienne asks, I told you I'm stingily opposed to this entire outfit. But in truth, I'm dyin' to know where you got it." She winks at me as though we're best friends with hundreds of inside jokes and years of history between us. She looks down at my feet, her face inches from mine. "Where are your shoes?"

I can't help it. I veer back. She's way too close for my liking.

She frowns at me. "You seem a bit dazed. Have you been drinkin'?"

Words are being thrown my way like bullets, each one ricocheting off of me. "I—"

"It doesn't matter," she continues. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

I'm speechless, but it doesn't seem to matter because this stranger is doing the talking for the both of us. She raises herself on her tiptoes and gently picks up a strand of my hair. "Is this a new hairstyle you're trying out? It's pin straight. How did you get it that way?"

"Straightener?"

My answer makes her frown. "What's a straightener?"

I want to laugh, but warning bells are going off in my head.

When I don't reply, the woman finally stops talking long enough to notice my silence. "Serene? Are you okay?"

She pats my arm in concern. It's obvious she thinks we know each other. Besides the fact she knows my name, I see our familiarity in the openness with which she speaks to me. But I have no idea who she is. That's okay because this is a dream. Right? In dreams, anything goes.

I paste on a bright smile. "I'm fine. Never better."

She hesitates for a second but finally drops her hand.

"Nathalie! Nat, over here!" a person shouts behind her.

The girl, who thanks to some nameless person I now know is named Nathalie, glances over her shoulder. I close my eyes in relief that the attention is off of me for a moment before I turn around and scan the room; I need to find the quickest escape route. This dream started out fun, and it still is, but it's slightly unnerving having everyone speak to me as though they know me. It feels like they're all privy to a part of my life I don't know yet.

There are multiple exits, but the door to my left might be my most straightforward chance at a quick departure. But before I move toward the door, I feel someone staring at me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I scan the faces around me, but the feeling of being watched never lets up.

When I pivot back around, I come face to face with Nathalie and another man. I gasp and step back. "Holy shit. You can't sneak up on me like that."

"Somethin's wrong with Serene," she announces. "She's usin' such crass language."

The man beside her slings a friendly arm over Nathalie's shoulder and tilts his head as he gazes at me. "Really? How so, Nat?"

Nat? If that's what everyone calls her, then Nat it is.

"Well, besides the darin' dress, which, by the way, I am scandalized she would even think of wearin'"—she gives me a small wink—"it's somethin' else. She seems... different."

"And that's strange?" the man asks.

She elbows him. "Livingston, I'm serious."

"So am I." He smiles at me, revealing a row of straight white teeth. Unlike the man from earlier, his smile is nothing but playful and friendly.

Something about his smile is familiar. Ignoring boundaries, I step closer, my eyes scrunching as I stare at him. "Have we met before?"

"Oh, only a few times," he remarks drolly.

I tilt my head. "I mean it. You seem extremely familiar."

The jovial smile he wore seconds before slips away. He glances at Nat. "Perhaps you're right. Something's wrong with her."

All of a sudden, it comes to me. He's one of the men from the picture. Not the mystery man. But the one standing to the left of him.

Impossible. Seeing this man in person is even more proof this is a dream. A slow smile spreads across my lips. This is amazing. So vivid and real.

In person, his hair is coal-black. Beneath the candlelight, his skin looks like the color of honey. His eyes are hazel, but still hold the mischievous gleam captured in the photo. Every time he smiles, a dimple appears on his left cheek. With him standing next to Nat, it's easy to see these two are related.

"What's your name again?" I ask.

He glances between Nat and me. Quickly I realize it's the wrong thing to ask; he thinks we know each other too.

"I'm Livingston," he says deliberately slowly, as though he's talking to an infant. "And you are Serene."

It takes me a minute to reply because all I can think is that I finally have a name for one of the faces from the photo. "Oh, I am," I rush out.

He shakes his head and stares at me in an odd way. "Truly. Are you all right?"

Again, I nod. I'm starting to feel like a bobblehead doll.

“There you are.” A heavy arm curves around my shoulder. The man I bumped into earlier is back. “I was beginnin’ to think you’d run away.”

“Uhh...” I stare at him in confusion.

I’ve stared at the photo so many times that Livingston is familiar to me. Seeing him makes sense. This man doesn’t. I glance between Livingston and Nat for some confirmation they know this man.

Livingston nods, but there’s a strain to his smile. “Johnathan.”

“Do you want to dance?” the man called Johnathan asks me.

“I—”

Before I can respond, he sweeps me up in his arms and guides us toward the middle of the ballroom, even though I’m still barefoot. He’s so drunk that I don’t think he notices. He turns me in a circle, and I see Nat and Livingston in the same spot where I left them. Livingston’s attention is on a blonde standing next to him, but Nat stares at Johnathan and me with something close to disappointment.

I want to know why, yet I don’t. When I wake up, the trivial details won’t matter.

With my attention elsewhere, I end up tripping. Everybody around me is doing a dance I’ve only seen in old movies. Really, really old movies. All the ladies dancing have their left hand resting on their partner’s shoulder. I follow suit. Part of me feels ridiculous, and the other is downright giddy. How many times will ever I experience something like this?

The answer is simple—never.

My partner laughs off my awkwardness and holds me closer. I try to make room between our bodies without drawing attention to myself.

Johnathan pivots on one foot, changing directions and moving in time with everyone else. I scramble to keep up with him even though the dance mainly involves easy walking steps.

“I have to say, you’re dressed... darin’ tonight.” He looks me up and down. And it’s right around then that the feeling of someone staring at me slams into me. Goose bumps prickle my skin, making me feel as though I’m on fire. I whip my head around, expecting to find a pair of eyes staring at me, yet no one is looking this way. I turn back to Johnathan. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Your outfit,” he repeats. “It’s darin’.”

This dress is formfitting but daring? Hardly. Not compared to some of the dresses in the stores or online. And what is with everyone’s slow drawl? I know it’s a Southern accent, but that doesn’t make sense. Nobody speaks like that in Pennsylvania. Where did my dream take me?

“Oh, well, I like it,” I reply, slightly defensively.

“Oh, well, so do I,” he retorts with a devilish smirk.

There’s no question this man thinks we have some relationship. Although I have no idea why. The cocky, arrogant guys are not my type. Never have been. Never will be.

We move toward the opposite side of the room, and my steps continue to be awkward. My brain and legs can’t seem to work together.

“I have to ask, are you wearin’ this for my benefit or to spite him?” Johnathan asks.

I cock a brow. “Spite him? Why would I spite Will?”

He frowns. “Who is Will?”

I assumed he was referring to Will. Because who else would there be? Apparently someone.

“Wait,” I say as we continue to move. I trip slightly and he instantly rights me. “Who are you talking about?”

Right then, someone places a hand on my arm. I turn and see Nat. Her eyes are wide with panic. “Étienne is here.” I stare at her blankly, and she

frowns. “Did you hear me? I said Étienne’s here. He’s livid.”

Judging by Nat’s frantic expression and tone of voice, I know this Étienne is someone important. But I don’t know who the hell he is or why I should be the slightest bit nervous.

I’m getting ready to say that when she plants her hands on my shoulders. It’s impossible to tell if the gesture is more for her benefit or mine. “You’re in no shape to see him. I’ll distract him. That should afford you some time to hurry to your room.”

Before I can reply or ask who in the hell this Étienne is, the whispers start. Word spreads like wildfire until conversations practically cease.

“Go,” Nat pleads.

No sooner has the word escaped her mouth before the doors at the far end of the room slam open. People stop what they’re doing. Even the musicians appear unsure and stare at each other in confusion.

Nat and Livingston move in front of me like a pair of bodyguards. I stand on my tiptoes and try to peer between their shoulders, but all I can make out is a stark white shirt. I’m confident it’s the Étienne man Nat was talking about.

In the hushed silence, I can distinctly hear his powerful steps. People inch toward the walls or the double doors.

“What are you still doin’ here? Go!” Nat whispers to me.

Why would I go? It’s just getting interesting. A thrill courses down my spine and spreads throughout my body. Minutes ago, I wanted to leave, but the dramatic reaction elicited from everyone and the giant question mark stamped over this mysterious Étienne makes me stay put.

Plus, this is a dream. Right now, I’m merely a cat with nine lives. If danger comes my way, I’ll survive. By the ninth, I’ll wake up.

For now, I’m safe.

The closer he gets, the louder his footsteps become. My heart pounds in sync with his footsteps. When he stops walking, Nat and Livingston's shoulders are practically fused together. All I can see is the man crossing his tan arms.

There's a beat of silence before Nat speaks. "Étienne. This is a pleasant surprise. I didn't know you'd be here."

"I live here. This is my home." His voice is laced with the same slow, Southern drawl as everyone else I've heard speak tonight. But I think it's the deep timbre that makes my pulse jump. Yes, that has to be it. "Who's behind you?"

"No one," Livingston and Nat say in unison.

"Are you sure? Because I swear I see the top of Serene's head behind your shoulder."

He knows my name. How does he know my name? Once again, I remind myself that anything goes in dreams. But something about this isn't sitting well in my gut.

Livingston and Nat turn at the same time. They wear expressions of pure shock, as if they had no idea I'd been standing behind them.

"Oh, it's Serene." Livingston shares a well-practiced look of confusion with Nathalie. "I didn't know she was there. Did you, Nat?"

"I did not."

Damn, these two are good. If this were real life, we'd be fast friends. From how they play off of each other's body language and words, I know they're siblings; my brothers and I covered for each other the same way.

I can't see the man's expression, but I'm willing to bet he's not buying anything they're saying.

"Step aside. I need to talk to her."

No one makes a sound. My legs shake.

When Livingston and Nat don't budge, he says, "Move. Now."

Nat's shoulders slightly sag in defeat. I'm half-tempted to tell her not to give in to his demands, but my tongue becomes three sizes too big for my mouth.

As she steps to the right, she gives me a quick once-over and whispers, "I tried to warn you."

They move away, and it feels as if I've been thrown to the wolves. Now I'm facing the leader of the pack. The first thing that comes to my mind once I see him is, *Shit. I should've listened to Nathalie.*

Because this isn't the good ol' boy every mother wants their daughter to end up with. No. This is the man every mom has warned their daughters about. You run, not walk when you encounter someone like him.

I stand there as though I'm nailed to the floor and watch as the man gazes around the room. He sighs as if everyone is wasting his precious time.

Then he turns his eyes to me, and when he does, the realization hits me like a bolt of lightning.

It's my mystery man.

The man from my dream.

The man from the picture.

Standing inches away from me.



“COME HERE,” HE says, barely containing his fury.

Wordlessly, I shake my head. Pictures, to some degree, show you how someone looks. But they’re not one-hundred percent accurate. And in this case, the precious photo I obsessed over is no match for the flesh-and-blood version of this man.

My picture couldn’t reveal how genuinely terrifying he is in person. How his razor-sharp cheekbones create a hollow space around his lips. His crooked nose is the same, but what wasn’t apparent in the picture is the white, jagged scar that runs from the top of his forehead, dips all the way down to his right brow, and stops near his temple. His dirty-blond hair is shoulder-length, disheveled, and streaked with golden strands. Stubble a shade darker than his hair is scattered across his cheeks and chin.

The most prominent shock is his chartreuse eyes. They’re hard and intelligent, showing that he misses nothing.

Most men in the room are wearing waistcoats and have their dress shirts perfectly pressed. But not him. He's wearing black trousers and a simple white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal golden forearms.

Everything about him screams masculinity and power.

At five feet ten, I'm far from short. In heels, I'm the same height as Will's six-foot stature, but standing next to this man makes me feel like a grasshopper. The top of my head grazes the underside of his chin.

Fight or flight instinct finally kicks in, and I quickly take a step back. Then another. And another. He anticipates my movements, and with lightning-quick reflexes, reaches out and grabs my arm. His lips go into a flat line as he all but drags me through the crowd. My heart furiously pounds as we pass everybody. Some people wear sympathetic expressions, and others stare at me smugly, as though I'm getting what I deserve.

This can't be happening. The grip on my arm and the pain shooting through it tell me it is.

And it's that discomfort that helps me find my voice. "Get your hands off me right now."

He ignores me.

Before we exit the room, he abruptly turns around and faces the crowd. He doesn't let go of me, and he doesn't squirm or become embarrassed with all eyes on him. No, he's comfortable with having all the attention. All the power.

"The party is over." His voice carries across the room like a roar. All eyes veer his way before they drift past him to me. "You all need to be out of my house within five minutes."

Two. That's the number of seconds it takes for people to scatter across the ballroom like ants on a sidewalk. I hear hushed tones all around me. Ladies I've never seen in my life pass me and tell me they'll see me soon.

Some of them give me small pats on the shoulder, almost as if to say, “Sorry for what you’re about to go through, but glad it’s you and not me.”

A few minutes later the last guest is rushing down the stairs. There are four people left: Livingston, Nat, me, and my mystery man who now has an actual name.

Étienne.

Étienne.

The name suits him.

He glances around the empty, trashed room with barely disguised contempt, then he looks back at me. His expression never changes. “You’ve outdone yourself. Torn curtains, broken wine glasses. A room trashed all in hours. I think this is your personal best.”

“Étienne, maybe you should have this conversation in—”

He whirls around. “Nathalie, that is enough!”

The room becomes deathly quiet. Étienne exhales loudly, turns on his heels, and leaves the room. His fingers are still firmly wrapped around my arm. As we move down the hall, I elbow him in the stomach as hard as I can, but other than a soft grunt, he’s unmovable.

It’s only when we’re halfway down a dimly lit hallway that he lets me go. There’s no warmth in his eyes. He watches me with barely restrained fury. I have a feeling that if he could, he’d have his hands around my neck.

Instinctively, I step back and turn in the other direction, intent on getting the hell out of this place. At first this dream was fun, but the second this man came into the picture, everything went downhill.

I’ve worn out my welcome. It’s time for me to wake up.

He bands an arm around my shoulders, pressing my back against his front. “Oh, no you don’t,” he says against my ear. His voice is low, almost hypnotic, and he has an accent that I want to say is Southern, but I can’t place

it.

“Let go,” I snap.

“If I do, will you run?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’re at an impasse, aren’t we?” He turns me around and holds me at arm’s length, looking me in the eye. “Do you not remember our last conversation?”

There’s no way to describe how bizarre it feels to be this close to a complete stranger, only to have him speak to me as though we share a broad history.

He waits for my answer. I’m so scared and confused though that I can’t utter a single word. A muscle along his jaw jumps. Finally, he shoves me away. I stumble a few steps back and lay a palm on the wall to steady myself.

With his hands on his hips, he paces. Furtively, I look over my shoulder, trying to gauge how quickly I can get away from this whack job with him distracted.

“Are you gonna play dumb tonight?” he asks. I say nothing, and he snorts. “Very well. I told you there would be no more parties that’d smear our last name and under no circumstances were they to be held here. Does that sound familiar?”

I shake my head. My mind can hardly keep up with everything he’s saying. But what I can pick up on is the fact he’s barely keeping his temper in check. He’s like a bomb, seconds away from going off. I need to treat him with kid gloves. That’s my only chance of escaping.

“We may not act like husband and wife, but this is still our home, Serene. Can you give me some respect?”

I stare at him in disbelief. Everything comes to a grinding halt.

Our home.

Husband.

Wife.

I finally find my voice. “What did you say?”

He snorts. “What is wrong with you? How much have you drunk tonight?”

I advance on him. “Did you call me your wife?”

He closes his eyes and squeezes the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and takes a deep breath. “I’ve had a long night, and I don’t have the patience for you right now.”

His hands heavily fall to his sides as he gives me a blank stare. Then he turns and walks down the hall.

I stare at his retreating form, feeling sick to my stomach.

He said wife. I know he did.

Someone comes up behind me, yet I remain frozen in place.

“It is gonna be okay,” Nat says. She puts her arm around me and gives me a small squeeze. “Whenever my brother gets like this, it’s typically best to give him some space. He’ll calm down in a few days.”

“Wife,” I say faintly, looking at Nat with wide eyes. “He called me his wife.”

She smiles. “Yes, wife. Have been for three years.”

“Three years?”

She guides us down the hall, and I’m too fixated on everything Étienne said to protest. My fingers and legs are going numb, and the feeling spreads throughout my body. Somehow my heart is furiously beating. I wonder if this is the beginning of a panic attack.

Wife. That man called me his wife.

Nat leads us down the hall. We pass pictures of old, unsmiling people who have to be ancient family members. If I weren’t so freaked out, I

would've stopped to get a better glimpse. We make a sharp right and enter the first door to my right.

"Here we are," she says.

I stop in my tracks because this isn't my bedroom. Nat immediately goes to the bed and pulls back the covers. Closing my eyes, I drag my hands through my hair. Taking deep breaths isn't helping. I doubt counting to ten will either. I can pinch myself, but that will only give me a bruise. I'll still be stuck here because something is seriously wrong with this entire situation.

When I open my eyes, Nat is standing by the bed. "You don't look well."

"I don't feel well."

"I think you should lie down. Tonight has been overwhelmin'."

But I don't give in and stand still. "What's today's date?" My voice is barely above a whisper.

"Excuse me?"

"Today's date. What is it?"

"April 12th."

Her reply feels like a punch to the gut. When I fell asleep on the couch, it was December 20th.

But strange things happen in dreams. Impossible things. Stuff that when you think about it the next morning makes you laugh and wonder why that cycled into your dream to begin with.

So why don't I feel reassured?

Asking the year is on the tip of my tongue, but I'm almost afraid to hear the answer. Why is my dreaming starting to feel like such a nightmare? Maybe Nat's right. Perhaps I do need to lie down, and then I would wake up and this would be over.

I nod. "You're right. I need to lie down."

She smiles brightly and leads me toward the bed. "Sometimes a good

night of sleep is what I need to make me feel better.” Nat interprets my silence as compliance and continues to fill the quiet. “Étienne will be okay tomorrow. You’ll see.”

With my hands in my lap, I replay Étienne’s words in my head. “We may not act like husband and wife, but this is still our home. Can you give me some respect?”

He has it all wrong. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

“I should open the windows. Some fresh air might help!” Nat hurries over to the windows lining the other side of the wall.

I glance at the end table and see a picture of myself. I quickly grab the photo, holding the frame so tightly my fingertips turn white. The photo is black-and-white, and it’s my profile. My dark green eyes look toward the distance. A half-smirk plays at the corner of my lips. My hair is swept up in a large bun. The wavy strands appear full at the sides, and there are short curls around my ears. I see a smattering of freckles sprinkled across my cheeks and nose.

This is my face. However, it isn’t me. I think I’d remember taking this picture.

Dream. This is all a dream, my mind urgently reminds me.

My hands shake, so I gingerly set the picture back on the end table and pick up the magazine next to the photo. In caps is, *THE PERSONAL NUMBER* and directly below, *THE LADIES’ HOME JOURNAL*.

The cover has a red background and features a woman dressed in all black. A hat with a huge black feather is perched on her head. Her elbows rest on a white desk as she leans into a candlestick phone, her mouth close to the mouthpiece while holding the receiver to her ear.

To the far left is the cost of the magazine—fifteen cents. Above the price is the date the magazine’s publication—February 1912.

For a second, I feel as though my heart has stopped beating.

“1912?” I whisper.

“The year of Serene,” Nat remarks.

I jump once I realize she’s standing beside me. “What?”

“Durin’ the New Year’s Eve party, when the clock struck midnight, you announced 1912 was gonna to be the year of Serene,” Nat smirks then shrugs. “Granted, you say that every year, but you were quite adamant about it this time.”

“1912,” I repeat. “It’s not possible.”

“I’m afraid it is.” Nat’s eyes can’t conceal her worry. “The bed is right behind you. Sleep this all off, and everything will be okay.”

Numbly, I watch as she fluffs the pillows. I lie down and allow her to draw the sheets up to my chin.

1912.

No matter how many times I try to wrap my brain around the year, it doesn’t sink in fully. But does it matter if I believe it or not? Hopefully, within a few minutes, I’ll wake up and be back in my bed with Will.

Will.

I don’t care that he tossed the picture into the fire. I desperately want to see him and be consoled by a familiar face and arms that know how to wrap around me just right.

Nat walks away, and I’m tempted to ask her to stay; I’m scared. Scared of what’s happening and what will happen.

Before she shuts the door, she gives me one last smile. “In the mornin’, everything will be fine.”

The door quietly clicks shut, yet her words linger. Not for a second do I believe her. Deep in my gut, I know something isn’t right.

“Sleep, Serene,” I whisper.

My eyes flutter shut once, twice, and a final time before I slip under, Nat's words lulling me to sleep.



A SOFT, WARM breeze caresses my skin, making me sink deeper beneath the sheets. I know it's time to wake up and start the day, yet this bed is so comfy and I'm so tired. But a small humming noise is pulling me out of my blissful sleep.

Instinctively, my hand slips out of the sheets, reaching for my phone on the nightstand; there's nothing worse than being half-awake and your alarm blaring in your ear. I keep reaching for my phone, but my hand repeatedly swipes at thin air only to hit the side of the bed.

That's when my eyes fly open. In one big rush, the night before comes back to me. The ballroom was overflowing with people. The angry man who thought he was my husband.

1912.

1912.

19 fucking 12.

This isn't happening. Last night I told myself it was a dream—an elaborate dream that only a crazy imagination could spin. But I'm still here.

No dream can last this long. What's happening right now is real.

"What is happening to me?" I whisper.

When I was a kid, my family used to tease me for being a daydreamer. My mom was convinced that I was a lucid dreamer who could control the narrative of my dreams. If that were the case though, I'd be lying in my bed right now.

"Wake up, Serene," I say. "You have to wake up."

Movement coming from the other side of the room yanks me out of my panic. I sit up in bed and see a woman quietly moving about. She's wearing a black cotton dress with a white collar and a white apron tied around her waist. There's not a trace of makeup on her face, and her light brown hair is pulled back in a loose bun. She can't be a day over eighteen.

Once she sees me staring at her, she gives me a small smile. "Good morning, Mrs. Lacroix."

My heart beats against my rib cage as I watch this small woman. My ears ring, and I'm pretty sure that what I'm feeling is the beginning of a heart attack.

Good morning, Mrs. Lacroix.

Her words echo in my ears, gaining momentum with each passing second until it's all I can hear. With both hands placed over my racing heart, I stare blindly at the stark white sheet draped across my legs.

I went to bed convinced that when I woke up, everything would be back to normal. In the harsh light of day, everything seems worse. I feel as though I drank all night long and now have the world's worst hangover.

My thoughts are running at lightning speed. *What am I doing here? How did I get here? And the best of all—how do I escape this nightmare?*

What I need to do is take a deep breath and think things through. Panicking and freaking out won't get me anywhere. Last night, in my own time, I argued with Will. I remember him tossing the picture in the fire. I remember trying to remove it but being too late. I remember sitting on the couch and getting up to throw the charred remains of the picture back into the fire. That's when I blacked out.

And then I was here.

And then I met Étienne.

And then he told me I was his wife.

It can't be right.

When I glance at my left hand, I see a massive diamond on my ring finger. I'm one hundred percent sure that wasn't on my finger when I went to bed. Besides, this monstrosity of a ring would be damn near impossible to ignore. My engagement ring from Will doesn't come close to this thing.

If that's changed since last night, what else has?

I look down and see that my dress is gone, replaced with a long, pink nightgown with lace trim. I grab the thin material and pull it away from my body. Pink? I hate this color and don't own a piece of clothing in that shade.

I don't remember changing myself. Who did then? Nat?

Last night, I was in such complete shock over Étienne's words that I didn't take in the room. Glancing around, I notice I'm in a mahogany bed with a half canopy and ornate crown molding. The bed's so high there's a small step stool next to it. On the end table is a lamp with a stained-glass brickwork shade. The same magazine and picture I saw from last night are still there.

With the pink walls and pink ruffled comforter, it looks as if a bottle of Pepto Bismol blew up in here. The only items in this room that aren't pink are the black marble fireplace, the furniture, and the heavy pale green curtains

that are tied back from the windows. They're half open, making the sheer curtains hung behind the drapes blow into the air.

I get out of bed and walk to the closest window. Curling my hands around the lip of the window frame, I stare outside. It's nothing but green plush land as far as the eye can see. There are no blacktop roads with cars flying by. What I thought was a circular drive last night is confirmed in the daylight. A water fountain stands proudly in the middle of the drive, trimmed shrubs surrounding it. The circular drive connects to a mile-long driveway that weaves in and out of a heavily wooded area. But the most beautiful sight is the Spanish moss and the live oak trees that hug the gravel road.

I continue to stand there and observe everything for a few minutes, noticing how the only things that can be heard are the birds chirping and the wind making the leaves rustle. The lack of honking horns, car doors slamming and voices should be harmonious. Soothing. But all it does is make the hairs on my arms stand up. It only magnifies my situation and highlights how far out of my element I genuinely am.

With a shaky sigh, I turn around and run straight into the lady who's been in here since I woke up. She takes a quick step back and nervously holds out a pale pink silk garment. Almost in supplication.

I stare at it in confusion. "What's this?"

She frowns. "Your dressing gown."

She calls it a dressing gown, but to me, it's a pretty version of a robe.

We watch each other warily, neither of us saying a word. After a few seconds, I reluctantly put on the robe. The woman briskly turns on her heels and opens up the narrow closet doors and the armoire on the opposite side of the room. I peek into both closets. They're packed to the hilt with clothes.

I step back from the closets and let the lady go about her business. How can I ask her what her name is without sounding like a complete moron?

Then I think of something, “Is... Nat up?”

The lady whips around and gawks at me with wide-eyed fear. “No, ma’am. Not that I’m aware of.”

“Oh.”

She stands there, her back ramrod straight and doesn’t say another word. Neither do I.

Then a short, sturdy woman comes barreling into the room with folded white sheets in her arms. She gives the maid a once-over and her already thin lips flatten into a thin line. “Hannah! What are you doing standin’ there? Help Mrs. Lacroix!”

Hannah. So she does have a name.

When the haggard older lady looks my way, she gives me an apologetic smile. “I’m so sorry, ma’am. She’s new. This won’t happen again.”

I’m hardly coming to terms with what’s happening, and everything coming from her mouth sounds like a different language. It takes me a few seconds to reply. “She’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

The lady appears taken aback before she quickly says her goodbye. She leaves the room, but not before she casts Hannah a murderous expression.

The second the door closes, Hannah turns to me, her eyes watering. “Ma’am, I’m so sor—”

“It doesn’t matter.” Hurriedly, I rush forward and grip Hannah’s hands. “I need you to answer one thing for me.”

She nods warily.

“Where are we?”

She frowns. “Excuse me?”

“Where are we?” I enunciate carefully. “Pennsylvania, right?”

Desperately, I wait for her to reply. All I need is a simple nod from her so I can feel marginally better. I might be in a place I’ve never been, but at least

I'll be in the same state—hopefully, the same city—as when I left. It'll be a good start.

She shakes her head, and my heart drops to my stomach. “No, ma'am. We're in Charleston, South Carolina.”

Charleston, South Carolina?

I've never been there. Not once.

I drop her hands and step away. A stronger breeze comes through the window, carrying in the faint smell of flowers and fresh air.

Fresh air that you have no chance of getting in a city.

And out of everything that's happened to me over the course of the past few hours, that's the one thing I react to.

I slap a hand over my mouth. “I'm gonna be sick.”

Hannah rushes forward, concern written across her features, and guides me toward a closed door. The whole time I breathe through my nose and fight the urge to dry heave. After she opens the door, I run straight toward the toilet and vomit. Not once, but twice.

Even when there's nothing left in my stomach, I hover above the toilet, body shaking and my eyes clenched shut. How the hell is this possible? Something like this shouldn't happen. But it is. Sure, I can continue pretending this is all a dream, but it's time to face the truth.

“Ma'am? Are you okay?”

I lift my head and swallow, ignoring the burning sensation lingering in my throat. “I'm fine.”

But I'm not fine. In fact, I'm so far from fine that fine is a black speck to me. I feel lost. Like a tornado picked up my entire life and randomly dropped me in some unknown place where I'm surrounded by people I've never met. And the fact that those people think I'm someone else makes it worse.

Thinking about the entire situation makes me want to vomit again. Taking

a few deep, calming breaths, I finally push away from the toilet.

“Would you prefer to lie back down?” Hannah asks.

I try to blink the maid into focus, but there’s so much running through my mind it’s impossible. “If I lie down, I doubt I’ll get back up.”

That might be the most honest thing I’ve said in hours.

“Are you ill? I can send for the doctor if you’d like.”

“No,” I reply. “No. I’m good.”

A wet washcloth dangles in front of me. I grab it and croak out thanks before I place the warm rag on my face. After a few seconds, I lower the rag and take another deep breath.

Beside me, Hannah fidgets, shifting from foot to foot. She probably thinks I’m insane. Hell, even I feel crazy. She never says a word though. I observe the bathroom. The toilet has a wooden rim seat. The tile floor is a black-and-white checkerboard. The walls are painted a pale pink to my horror.

A claw-foot tub on the other side of the room has a circular iron rod above it. A pink bath curtain is hooked around the rod. A full shower head descends from the ceiling. Next to the tub are white handles for the shower. A medicine cabinet is directly above the white sink.

Curved windows on the opposite side of the room present another stunning view of the outdoors.

“Do you need my help?” Hannah quietly asks.

Gripping the rag tightly in both hands, I shake my head and get up.

Wordlessly, Hannah leaves the bathroom with me following her. She goes back to the closet while I survey the vanity against the wall. Perfumes bottles are lined up in a neat row. A gold gilt comb and hairbrush are angled to the side. Perched on the edge of the table is a vintage curling iron that resembles a pair of gardening shears rather than something to wrap your hair

around.

“Is this on?” I ask.

The maid shakes her head. “Do you want your hair curled today, ma’am?”

“No. I...” With one quick glance in the mirror, I see that my hair resembles a rat’s nest. It’s a disaster, but there’s no way in hell I’m letting her get near my hair with that fire hazard. “I’ll put it in a ponytail.”

Again, with the funny look. I’m starting to think that’s the only expression Hannah is capable of giving.

“What would you like to wear today?”

“I’ll wear my dress from last night.”

Hannah’s cheeks turn bright red. She turns back to the closet for a moment, then twists around, two hangers in her hands. A cream blouse hangs on one hanger while the other has a long navy skirt perfectly pressed. “This gored skirt came in yesterday. I think this will be very flattering on you.”

I don’t know what the hell a gored skirt is. All I can think is that I should be wearing my clothes, not someone else’s. “Where are my clothes?”

She lowers the hangers and stares at me with wide, fearful eyes. “I only did I what I was told, ma’am!”

“What happened to my dress?” I repeat.

“Étienne took it,” Nat says as she breezes into the room.

At the interruption, Hannah appears so relieved, I’m convinced she’s going to pass out.

“What do you mean he took it?”

Nat cocks her head to the side. “Exactly what I said. He took the dress and ordered it to be destroyed. Which is a shame; the design and straight lines were simply flawless. Even Hannah was fascinated. Weren’t you, Hannah?”

Hannah nods rapidly, resembling a bobblehead doll. At this point, I think

Hannah would agree to anything just to leave this room.

Nat grins mischievously and leans in toward me. “I helped change you and we must talk about your undergarments. Wherever did you get that corset?”

“Uhh...” Pulling the nightgown away from me, I glance at my bra and then Nat. I drop the material and struggle to come up with an answer. “I bought it in France?”

“What is it called?”

“A bra?” I reply, uncertainly.

Nat looks fascinated, but I have more pressing matters to focus on. Like my getting my clothes back. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know about the bra, but first, you need to tell me why Étienne took away my clothes.”

“I know you like to push boundaries, but last night’s outfit was too much for him. So he got rid of it,” she explains cheerfully.

This man. Oh, this man. Not even hours after meeting him, I already I hate him. “Where is he?”

“He’s downstairs eatin’ breakfast.”

I charge out of the room, but at the last second, Nat jumps in my path.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“I want my clothes back.”

She laughs and gestures to the open closet bursting at the seams with dresses. “Silly, they’re all right there.”

I shake my head and walk around her. “You don’t get it.”

I have no idea where I’m going. But that doesn’t matter. I have anger as my compass. I’ll find this man one way or another.

I know I’m overreacting. It’s a simple dress that I wasn’t particularly attached to. But that dress was mine. Better yet, it was one of the only links to my time, and he took it away as if my possessions are his.

The second floor is bigger than I anticipated. I get lost twice before I find the staircase. My robe billows out around me as I fly down the stairs.

The same man who stood at the front door last night is back again, only this time he notices me. Shock is written across his face.

“My lady, Hannah is more than happy to help you get dressed,” he says.

“I’m already dressed.” I glance down at the nightgown and keep walking.

“I think it—”

“I’m fine,” I cut in.

In all actuality, I’m not. Once again, I become lost, moving in and out of rooms larger and grander than the last and all decorated in Louis XVI style. After the fourth room, I return to the man in the foyer.

He points toward my left. “The dining room is that way. Four doors down. I believe you’ll find Mr. Lacroix.”

“Thank you.” I pause, waiting for him to give me his name.

“The name is Ben, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Ben.”

Finally, I find the dining room. For a second, I stand in the massive doorway and take a deep breath and stare at the room in awe. Wainscoting travels the length of the entire room. The rest of the walls are covered in gold-embossed wallpaper. It’s offset by cream-colored silk curtains layered in swags and jabots. They’re pulled back, letting in sunlight. It bounces off the polished oak table large enough for forty people. It’s set for only four.

Reality comes slamming back into me as the person at the head of the table lowers a newspaper.

“Ah, the lord of the manor!” I remark dryly.

Étienne arches a brow. “Good mornin’.” There’s nothing pleasant about his greeting.

“You and I need to talk.”

He deliberately inspects me, a muscle in his jaw ticking. Sleep did nothing to ease his anger. If anything, he seems further enraged. “Couldn’t find anythin’ to wear this mornin’?”

Ignoring his question, I hurry forward. I don’t stop until I’m right next to his chair. “Give me back my clothes.”

“My darlin’ wife,” he drawls, “you have to be more specific.”

I swallow down the urge to snap at this man. “The dress I wore last night. I want it back.”

He snorts loudly and goes back to scanning the newspaper. “That wasn’t a dress. More like a piece of cloth stretched over your body.”

“I happened to like that piece of cloth. Now give it back.”

“I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“Why?”

He turns the page. “I had one of the servants burn it.”

“You moron!”

Étienne drops the newspaper on the table. If I weren’t living off of adrenaline, I would’ve shrunk away from the dangerous gleam in his eyes. Instead, I stare right back, refusing to back down. Étienne looks like the kind of man who feeds on fear.

Usually, I’m not this bold. But the anger and frustration of being trapped in an unknown place have been simmering inside me. And Nat telling me that Étienne took something of mine has finally given me a channel to direct my anger at someone.

“Excuse me?” he finally asks.

“Are you deaf? I called you a moron. That was my dress, and you had no right to take it away, let alone burn it.”

“Technically, it was my dress because I paid for it.”

“No, I paid for it,” I shoot back.

He closes his eyes and rubs his upper lip. “God. Can you please get dressed?”

“I’m trying, but you’re making it hard for that to happen.”

“You have closets filled with clothes. I’m sure you can find somethin’.” He lifts the newspaper as though the conversation is effectively over.

I’ve never had someone so blatantly dismiss me. Forget taking a deep cleansing breath or counting to ten. This dude is an asshole. I snatch the newspaper out of his hands. His eyes turn murderous.

Slowly, he leans back in his chair. “What has you so bothered this mornin’? Are you upset your party ended early?”

“That wasn’t my party.”

He tilts his head back and laughs loudly. My anxiety only heightens. His laughter fades and there’s the smallest trace of a smile on his face, but his eyes are cold as they sweep over me. “Who knew you could be so funny?”

“I’m not being funny. I’m telling the truth.” I take a deep. There’s going to be no opportune time to tell him the truth, so why not now? “Look. I get that you think I’m your wife, but the truth is—”

“What are you two hollerin’ about so early?” Livingston says as he breezes into the room.

“It’s eight in the mornin’,” Étienne points out.

“For me, that’s early.”

“Some people are already up and gettin’ ready for work, Livingston.”

Livingston winces. “Don’t say that vile word.” He snatches a piece of fruit from the middle of the table and walks past me, but not before he musses my hair and smirks. “Serene. You’re lookin’ ravishin’ as always.”

I can’t tell if he’s being serious or not. I continue to glare at Étienne.

Livingston sits to my left and stares between Étienne and me. “Does either of you care to explain what you are arguin’ about?”

“No,” Étienne says at the same time I say, “Yes.”

Livingston grins wickedly. I point at Étienne. “I need to talk to this douchebag, but he won’t listen.”

Livingston’s brows raise. “I’m not familiar with the term douchebag, but it doesn’t sound nice.” He turns to Étienne. “Does it, brother?”

Étienne ignores him and stands. I take a small step back. I forgot how tall he is. Last night, he was a hot mess. This morning he’s a bit more presentable. He’s wearing navy striped worsted trousers and a waistcoat and tie in the same color. His white shirt is perfectly pressed, the cufflinks gleaming in the sunlight. He’s freshly shaved, which only reveals how pronounced his cheekbones are. He’d be handsome—gorgeous even—if it weren’t for that hawkish nose and scar.

“I need to go; I’m late for work.”

I follow him. “Forget the dress; I have something more important to talk to you about.”

Abruptly, he turns around, making me run straight into him. I stumble back a few steps. Instead of reaching out to steady me, Étienne remains perfectly still. He raises both brows and glances at me impatiently. “Well?”

I know what I need to say. I just don’t know how to say it without coming off as a complete psychopath.

“I think I know what you want to talk to me about,” Étienne says arrogantly. He pulls a wallet out of his back pocket and sifts through the bills as though they’re a deck of cards.

I gently push his wallet toward his stomach. “I don’t want your money. I already told you this isn’t about the dress.”

Étienne appears momentarily shocked, but quickly his mask of indifference is back in place. “Then there’s nothin’ to discuss.”

He tucks his wallet back into his trousers and walks away from me. It

takes me a few seconds, but I manage to block his path. Étienne dodges right. So do I. He feigns left. I follow. I become his shadow, matching him move for move until he grips my shoulders painfully and turns me until my back is against the wall. Étienne's chest brushes against my own. The scent of his aftershave wafts around me. I gasp for breath. Only because I'm scared.

That's it.

"Stop it." He dips his head until our eyes are level. "I'm leavin' for work. I don't care what tricks you have up your sleeve. All right? I don't care."

My mouth opens. All I need is a few seconds to explain that what's happening is all a giant misunderstanding. I share his wife's likeness and name. That's it.

But he holds up his hand and quickly speaks. "Go. Leave my sight."

Étienne's hands drop to his sides like dead weights. He gives me one last cold stare and walks away.

"Don't look so sad. He'll get over it in a few days."

Turning, I see Livingston leaning against the wall, casually eating an apple. He appears nonplussed by what he saw.

"We fight a lot," I say bluntly.

"All the time," Livingston replies jovially.

"And he always leaves."

"That depends on how bad the fight is. The two of you like to go back and forth—sometimes he leaves, sometimes you leave. Well... you more than sometimes leave." He arches a brow. "You leave a lot."

Why do I feel like *leave* is a word for something else entirely?

Livingston doesn't necessarily seem angry with me, but he isn't happy. I don't want to think about what this other Serene has done.

I want to tell him that I'm not like this person he's describing. Not even close. It's not in my nature to do those things.

But there's no time to explain that to him.

At that moment, Nat comes down one of the staircases. "Mornin', everyone," she says in a sing-song voice. She smiles at Livingston then glances at me before she does a double take. "Oh, my. I see you're still not dressed."

What's with these people? Could they not see I was wearing clothes? Frustrated, I drop my face into my hands.

She comes up to me and places a palm flat against my forehead. "Are you not feelin' well?"

"I'm fine. Just pissed off."

Nat appears confused by my words but doesn't comment. She pats my back as if I'm a child with a stomachache. "You know what I do when I'm upset?"

"What?" I say into my hands, not bothering to lift my head.

"I like to say out loud all the good things I have in my life." She stands in front of me. Raising my head, I look at her. "Repeat after me. I'm Serene Lacroix."

My blood goes cold, yet I find myself repeating her words. "I'm Serene Lacroix."

"I'm married to Étienne, the man I've been married to for three years."

I stumble over those words, finding them impossible to believe.

"I have friends who care about me."

"And I have a wonderful sister-in-law, Nat." She winks and steps back. "There. Don't you feel better?"

"Oh, just peachy."

Nat gives me a bright smile. "Well, why don't you get dressed and we can have a lovely breakfast together?"

Getting dressed, having breakfast, and pretending that everything is okay?

Not going to happen. Time is passing me by, and I'm so afraid that if I don't try to find a way back home, I never will.

Bottom line, I need answers.

Fast.

"I'm gonna go talk to him," I announce.

The smile vanishes from Nat's face. "What?"

"I have some things I need to say to your brother."

"Which brother? Livingston?" she asks hopefully.

"No. Étienne."

Her face falls. "That's what I was afraid of. Whatever it is, don't you think it can wait until later? If you go to his office, it's only gonna make matters worse."

Her reasoning doesn't sink in for me because I don't plan on being here long enough to watch this unhealthy marriage further crumble.

"No. It can't wait." I hurry up the stairs. "I'm getting dressed, and I'm gonna go talk to him."



I TAKE THE skirt and blouse Hannah suggested earlier this morning. To Hannah's horror, I forgo a corset.

Hannah tries to lure me toward the vanity so she can put my hair in a beautiful updo. Instead, I grab the brush on the vanity and run it through my hair. With a few pins, I'm able to put my hair half up.

She insists on me wearing opaque stockings. They're not as uncomfortable as I imagined. She hands me a pair of shoes with a low heel and multiple buckles. Out of all the things I've put on, these are the most comfortable.

She tries to give me jewelry, a large hat that looks as if it can swallow my entire head, and a purse. I say no to all three and firmly draw the line at the kid leather gloves she offers as a last-ditch attempt at "making me presentable." Her words, not mine.

I'm already sweating to death, and I haven't left the room.

Finally, after three thank yous, I escape and hurry back down the stairs. Livingston and Nat are waiting for me. If they thought I would calm down in the time it took to get dressed, they were wrong. The rage inside me feels like a beast growing in my belly with each passing second. It wants to rip the front door off the hinges and follow Étienne. It doesn't matter that I have no idea where to go; I just need to get him to listen to me.

"I'm leaving," I announce.

Nat stares at me in confusion. "I implore you to reconsider this idea."

I plant my hands on my hips. "Why not? I'm his wife. Wives visit their husbands."

"But that's... that's not the relationship you two have."

"I understand that," I say patiently, "but if I wait for our relationship to get better before I talk to him, I'm going to be waiting for a long time."

"He left in a foul mood and you going to visit him will only make it worse." Nat stares at me with worry in her eyes.

"Everyone else in this family might be scared of him, but I'm not. I need to talk to him, and if he doesn't listen to me, then I'll make him listen to me."

"I understand my brother may be... difficult. Believe me. But you can't go."

"He didn't leave me any other choice, now did he?" I toss over my shoulder as I walk toward the door.

Nat is hot on my heels, pleading for me to think rationally. I walk right past Ben and open the front door. But once I'm outside, I stop in my tracks, making Nat collide with my back.

"Perhaps you should wait until he..." Nat continues to speak, yet I tune her out because it's occurred to me that I have no idea how to get into town. Or where Charleston is located.

I face Nat. She stares at me hopefully, as if there's still a chance that I

might change my mind. Without a word, I brush past her, back into the house.

“I want to go into town,” I announce to Ben with more bravado than I have.

“Of course. Warren would be happy to take you.” Ben doesn’t blink an eye. I could probably demand an ice sculpture in the design of a unicorn, and he’d have it delivered within the hour.

“You can’t go into town by yourself,” Nat says.

“She’s not going by herself. I’ll take her.”

I smile with relief at Livingston.

“I thought today would be uneventful, but Serene gave a fantastic show this mornin’. I would be bothered if I missed the encore presentation.”

I give him a smack on the shoulder. “I promise not to disappoint. Now let’s hit the road!”

“Oh, this is gonna be bad,” Nat groans.

Livingston and I walk down the flight of steps side by side. Before I go any farther, I turn and stare at this monstrosity of a house. House is the wrong word. More like a mansion. It has a theatrical glory that makes me feel as though I walked onto the set of *Gone with the Wind*. The enormous portico boasts four fluted Corinthian columns. They soar past the second-story balcony to the entablature. From here I can see the porch ceiling is painted the signature haint blue you find in most plantations.

“Havin’ regrets? Please don’t. Belgrave will be waitin’ for you after you speak with Étienne,” Livingston says.

There’s a delicacy to the name Belgrave that somehow fits this grand site.

“I’m not nervous,” I reply, still gawking at the house.

“Then what are we waitin’ for?”

He curls his hand around my elbow and ushers me into a Model-T.

Before I step in, I notice the black exterior with red pinstripes. The seat and backrest are diamond tuft. The convertible top canvas is down, allowing the bright sun to bear down on us. Livingston tells the driver, whose name is Warren, to take us to Étienne's office.

The man turns in his seat, bushy white brows lifting. "Yes, sir."

Warren's face immediately becomes calm and collected. He nods once and faces forward. The car moves with a small lurch. I slam my palm against the seat in front of me and wait a few seconds before I sit back.

The live oaks and Spanish moss trees that embrace the driveway, block out the sunlight. For minutes, we're shrouded in darkness. I twist around in my seat and watch the dust being kicked up behind us, and the mansion becomes a speck in the distance.

At the end of the drive, Warren makes a left and pulls out onto a road that isn't much better than the gravel driveway. There's nothing but endless green grass and trees peppering the landscape.

By no means is Greensburg a vast city, but it's bustling, with people coming and going. The town is only quiet at night, and even then, there are still people out. But what I see now? It feels almost surreal.

The bumpy road is flanked with tall marsh grass. Most of the fields are vacant, making them appear vast and never-ending.

The ride to Charleston isn't pleasant. I jostle back and forth in my seat, and there's an incessant rattling that makes my ears ring. I distract myself by watching the group of kids we pass on the dirt road. One is holding a pail of water and another a fishing rod. A few wear denim overalls, and the only girl has on a summer dress. One kid has a pair of shoes; the others walk barefoot. Whenever I've walked across gravel barefoot, I winced with every step, but these kids are skipping and jumping as though nothing is wrong.

I sit forward, smiling faintly. With no cell phone or clock dashboard in

the car, it's impossible to gauge how much time passes by. The green scenery seems to be endless until finally, the trees break apart. Sweet grass becomes interspersed with the marsh grass. I hold my breath as we cross a truss bridge that would probably be falling apart in my time.

"Are you gonna enlighten me on why we're rushin' to my brother's office?" Livingston shouts over the wind and the loud motor.

I glance at him, grateful for the distraction. "It's complicated."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the best you're going to get from me right now."

Warren's oblivious, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel.

To my right, the Charleston harbor appears. Vessels line the port as rough water slams into the shore; it doesn't stop people from walking on the docks and going about their day.

The road becomes a bit smoother as houses appear. Electrical lines hug the side of the road. Warren takes a left on a road called Cumberland. I look at the homes and cars and people, astonished by the lack of glamor.

"Wow."

Warren solemnly nods. "The hurricane did a number on Charleston, that's for sure."

Hurricane? I turn toward him, making sure to keep my face passive. "Hurricane," I repeat somberly, as though I know what he's talking about.

"We thought everythin' was ruined, but we're slowly cleanin' up."

"It's certainly getting there," I say. Not because I believe it, but because it seems like the right thing to say.

In the country, the dichotomy between the two eras is hardly recognizable. In town though, it's obvious I'm in 1912.

The buildings are small in width, but tall. They're all connected. I can see bricks and mortar in between. We take a right onto King Street, passing more

buildings. A huge sign looms above a corner business—L.P. Towlston Co. Hardware.

Directly above the sign is a hanging street lamp gently swaying back and forth. Tracks for a streetcar run through the road. Overhead lines are directly above it. I watch as people walk down the cobblestone street. A few people hurry across the road, causing loud car horns to sound.

We pass a hardware store. A furniture store. A sign says Kerrigan's Shoe Store. Another sign says Victory Market.

There's a hotel with a bellhop opening doors. Ladies step out with gloved hands.

We pass cars and even buggies. The ladies walking in and out of stores are dressed to the nines. The hats on their heads are giant monstrosities. And few curl their glove-clad hands around the knob of pristine white umbrellas.

I feel as though I've stepped into an old black-and-white picture. Except this one is in color. Bright, vivid colors that make my heart thump with excitement.

Warren slows down, and we stop near a row of businesses. I have no idea where we are.

"Here we are," Livingston says as he rubs his hands together for the show he anticipates.

Warren opens the door for me and holds out a hand. I gladly accept it, because moving in this skirt is awkward. I hop out, and Livingston joins me. He takes a few steps in front of me and opens the office door. I walk into the building with my heart stuck in my throat.

A man behind a desk gets up and immediately speaks with Livingston. I tune them out and try to think of what I'm going to say to Étienne. "Hey, I know you think I'm your wife. But I'm not. Oh, and by the way, I time traveled!" No. That's all wrong. Maybe I need to go about it a different way.

Perhaps I should try to be sweet and kind? No, no, no. I'd rather eat glass than make nice with Étienne. There's something about that man that gets underneath my skin.

"Mrs. Lacroix!"

Livingston and the man standing next to him stare at me expectantly. I look behind me, but no one's standing behind me.

"Mrs. Lacroix?"

I finally realize the man's talking to me. "Oh! Oh. That's me."

The man smiles. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm here to see my—" I almost say husband, but it's too damn weird. "I'm here to see Étienne."

"Yes, Edward, you heard her right. I was as stunned as you are," Livingston chimes in dryly.

"Is he in?" I prod gently.

Edward nods and points at the door to directly ahead of me. "Yes. He's in his office. Although he has a meetin' in fifteen minutes, so I don't know if now's a good time for—"

"I won't be that long," I say as I brush past him.

Instead of knocking as most people would, I barge on in. My abrupt entrance makes Étienne's head snap up. He stares at me with blatant shock then groans. He leans back in his chair and rubs both hands down his face.

"Don't tell me you're still upset about that damn dress?" He doesn't give me time to answer. "Very well. How much was it? Twenty? Thirty dollars?" He pulls out a brown, worn wallet, grabs a wad of cash, and sifts through it before he pulls out two twenties and tosses them at me.

I stand stock-still as the money softly lands on the floor, several inches in front of me. Is this how he usually treats his wife? Just tosses money (literally) at her and expects her to go away? No wonder she's a Grade-A

bitch.

“Um. Once again, I don’t need your money. But thanks for the offer, Daddy Warbucks.”

Étienne frowns. “Daddy Warbucks?”

My shoulders slump as I sigh. If Will were here, he would laugh at my joke. Thinking about him brings a fresh wave of pain. I miss him so much.

“Never mind.” I wave my hands in front of me, as though trying to erase all conversation up until now. “I need to talk to you for a moment.”

“Can this wait until later?”

“As I was trying to tell you earlier before you rudely walked away, this can’t wait.”

“Well then. I would hate to keep you waitin’,” he remarks dryly, eyeing me sharply. My heart is thumping a mile a minute because I’m not the one with the power. Right now, Étienne has all the control. He knows it, and I hate it. I take a deep breath and tell myself to calm down.

As he rests his elbows on his desk, I see that his jacket is draped over his chair. His waistcoat is unbuttoned, revealing black suspenders and a tie. I never thought suspenders could look good on a man, but apparently, Étienne’s here to prove me wrong.

“Well? What is it you need to talk about?” He stops moving paperwork around on his desk and impatiently looks at me, and it’s then that I notice he’s wearing a pair of wire-rimmed glasses.

Glasses.

I’m of the belief that glasses look damn good on men. They’re my weakness, directly behind a sense of humor and strong hands. On Étienne, they’re endearing. They almost make him look... cute.

Étienne now has two out of three traits. Something tells me he’ll never grow a sense of humor.

I think my staring is making him uncomfortable because he looks away and slips the glasses off. Thank God. Now he's back to looking like the douchebag I'm familiar with.

He glances behind me and narrows his eyes. "Livingston, I can't thank you enough for bringin' Serene here."

"My pleasure. Before the two of you begin shoutin' at each other, I need to make an observation."

Étienne and I stare at him.

"Why are you speakin' so oddly, Serene?"

I suppress a groan and count to ten before I exhale. "I'm not speaking oddly. If you want to get technical, you guys are the ones who are speaking oddly, with that slow Southern drawl you have going on."

"We've always spoken this way. Haven't we, Étienne?"

"Yes, to my knowledge this is the only way we've ever talked."

"And you have talked this way your whole life too," Livingston says.

"No, I haven't. Not once." They both stare at me as if I'm crazy. "You know what? This whole conversation is a perfect segue into what I've been trying to tell Étienne all morning." I take a deep breath. "I'm not who you think I am."

That's not exactly the first thing I pictured myself saying, but I see no right way to ease him into the story. I don't think there's an easy way to tell someone, "Hey! I'm not from this time!"

Étienne snorts and riffles through the paperwork. "I know that better than anyone."

"No, you don't get it," I say slowly.

Say it! my mind chants. Rip off the Band-Aid and tell him the truth!

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I straighten my shoulders and walk toward the desk. Placing my palms flat on the desk, I lean in until we're mere

inches apart and he's forced to acknowledge me.

He studies me from beneath his lashes. My heart picks up.

"I'm not your wife," I say carefully.

He blinks. Once, then twice. It's impossible to tell what he's feeling with his blank, shuttered expressions. Without breaking eye contact, he says, "Get out of here, Livingston."

"What? Now? I didn't escort her into town for nothin'."

"Out," Étienne barks.

Livingston grumbles, but he leaves, promising to return in five minutes to retrieve me.

Once the door is shut and we're all alone, Étienne stands. He mimics my posture—palms flat on the desk, head leaning forward, green eyes furious. If you weren't prepared for this man, he could plow right over you; he has this potent energy that consistently throws me off guard.

"Pardon me?" he says, sounding deathly calm.

"I'm not your wife, and up until last night, I've never seen you before in my life." With the picture not included, of course. "Last night, I time traveled."

"This is ridiculous." He doesn't attempt to hide his disgust. "Ridiculous." He walks to the door.

Once again, I'm being dismissed.

Before I walked into his office, I told myself I was going to be rational and calm. A fat lot of good that did. I go into panic mode; I know my chances of getting Étienne to help me are slipping away like sand through my fingers.

"Étienne!" I call. "Stop."

Abruptly, he turns. His eyes are blazing, and his lips are pulled into a taut line. Instead of yelling, like me, he walks back toward me and doesn't stop until his left shoulder touches my right. He dips his head and speaks in a

deliberately quiet voice. “Everythin’ is a game to you. For the past three years I’ve put up with your antics, but now you’re bringin’ it to my work. I won’t stand for that.” He pulls back, curls his hand around my arm, and guides me toward the door. “You need to leave. Go have lunch with your friend, spend my money on dresses. Go buy a whole new wardrobe. I don’t care. Leave.”

I’ve never had someone gaze at me with such disdain and hatred. If a raging lunatic came barging into his office with a gun, the chances of Étienne using me as a human shield are incredibly high.

So not only do I have to convince him that I time traveled, but I have to convince someone who hates me with a fiery passion to believe me and then help me.

This is next to impossible. But what other choice do I have?

Like last night, I fight back. I elbow him hard enough in the gut that he lets go. I smooth out my skirt and glare at him. “Don’t ever touch me like that again.”

One second I’m opening the door, my dignity intact, and the next I’m jerked back into his office. The door slams shut before my back slams against the door.

Étienne grips me by the forearms and dips his head, so we’re eye level. “Don’t you ever come into my office demandin’ a thing. I let you cheat. I give you money. I give you a home. I allow you to have parties filled with debauchery. All with one rule—that you never involve me.”

I’d love to tell him to fuck off. I’d love to tell him that I’m not involving him, but that’s precisely what I’m doing. I stand on my tiptoes until we were eye to eye. “You do not own me, and you don’t *allow* me to do anything.”

His finger brushes against my jaw. “That’s where you’re wrong.” His voice is deceptively low. “I paid a lot to give you the Lacroix name.”

I don't know how to respond to that.

"If you're done, I need to get back to work. Tomorrow, be ready at twelve sharp."

"For?"

"What do you think? Your parents are havin' some ridiculous brunch."

I swallow. I have a family here?

I want to ask him so many questions. Questions he thinks I already know. There's no time to ask him or to say anything because he all but shoves me out of his office.

The door slams behind me.

Livingston gives me a sympathetic smile while Edward pretends nothing is amiss.

I clear my throat and give Livingston a weak smile. "I think I'm ready to go."

He gestures for me to walk ahead of him and I do, my head held high when all I want to do is hang my shoulders. I feel so defeated.

"How did it go?" Livingston asks as we walk out the front door.

"Oh, amazing," I reply, deadpan.

Tears well up in my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall down my cheeks. I will not cry over that asshole.

Étienne dismissed me today, but he can't reject me forever. I'll find a way to make him believe me.



WHEN I WAS fifteen, I had the bright idea to try out for the school play. I wasn't particularly dramatic, although I did have my moments. Typically, I clammed up in front of a crowd. But my friends were trying out, so I thought, "What the hell?"

The play was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I was trying out for the role of Hermia—a girl caught in a love triangle between Lysander, a man she loves, and Demetrius, who loves her but she doesn't love back.

It seemed simple enough. I studied the lines over and over. I had the script down pat. The day of tryouts, I walked up on stage nailed every line. I stepped off the stage feeling pretty damn confident in myself. This acting thing? A piece of cake.

Two days later, the roles were announced. My name was not across from Hermia. Or any character for that matter. I was more embarrassed than anything else. Why didn't I get it?

I was competitive by nature and couldn't stop myself from asking one of the teachers directing the play what I'd done wrong.

She sighed and smiled gently at me. "It wasn't a matter of you not knowing the part. It was us believing in you as Hermia. There was no conviction or feeling in your words." She patted my shoulder. "Acting might not be for you."

Her explanation never resonated with me. But it does now, more than ever, because I've been forced into playing the role of Serene the socialite, wife of Étienne and best friend to Nat, and it feels all wrong. It's day two of being in this time, and already I'm questioning everything I do, everything I say. I feel as though my actions are scrutinized by everyone. Which is impossible. But my mind is screaming at me that I'm playing a role I don't understand and never will.

The only person who notices is the one person who goes out of his way to ignore me—Étienne.

Last night he came home, but instead of having dinner with Nat and me, he had his dinner in his office. Afterward, I knocked on his door; he didn't answer. I pounded on the door, but that didn't earn a reaction. After a few minutes, my arm became sore, and my fist ached. I gave up pounding and grabbed a chair from the receiving room—whatever that means—and planted myself right in front of Étienne's door.

I stayed there for so long that my butt went numb. It's almost as if he knew I was stubbornly sitting outside his door, because not once did he leave the room. While I sat there, fuming, I decided that until I found a way to get back home, I would refer to the Serene I'd replaced as the Old Serene.

Eventually I nodded off and was awoken by Nat gently shaking me. The house was shrouded in darkness and Nat was dressed for bed.

"He's not gonna leave his office," she whispered sympathetically. "Why

don't you go to bed? You can speak to him tomorrow.”

It had to be the sleep-induced haze that made me agree. I left the chair in the middle of the foyer and went to bed.

I went downstairs the next morning, and the chair was gone. The office door was cracked open, but there was no Étienne in sight.

What I wanted to ask him, more than anything was this—what happened between you and your wife that made you hate her so much? I knew the chance of me ever getting an answer was incredibly slim. Besides, right now, I have more pressing matters.

“Please, Mrs. Lacroix. Put this on.” Hannah holds up the corset and gives me a pleading look.

I point at the corset as though it's a rabid dog. “No way, no how.”

Getting dressed in this era is an event all of its own. Women change up to three times a day. No wonder Nat lies around all the time; she's too exhausted from all the changing. Even now she's on the bed, arms flung over her head, staring at the canopy.

With a loud sigh, she jumps off the bed and snatches the rib killer contraption from Hannah before waving it in front of my face. “This is what women wear.”

“No, this is going to be what kills me!”

“How do you think you get your tiny waist?” she challenges.

“It may look good, but I've decided I don't want my organs smushed together.”

Nat stands beside me and lays the corset flat against my waist. “Beauty is pain.” She stares at me in the mirror with imploring eyes.

The only reason I'm entertaining the idea of wearing Old Serene's clothes is that I had to relinquish my underwear to be washed. I want to keep all my clothes, but I also prefer to be clean too. Hannah reassured me twenty times

over she would clean them and bring them back to me.

Now I'm stuck in a pair of underwear Nat keeps calling drawers.

"I'm not going to be able to breathe with that thing on."

"Serene, no one is arguin' that it's comfortable. But it is... it is necessary."

"Why?"

"Because it's feminine," Nat whispers as though letting me in on a little secret. "Without a corset, the jewels, the hat? Why, I daresay, no one would know who you are."

With a deep breath, I snatch the corset from her and give it to Hannah. "Put it on."

Nat smiles gleefully and claps. "Wonderful."

What I'll never tell her is that with every tug of the laces, with every breath stolen from me, I'm reminded I'm on borrowed time. The seconds, minutes, and hours are slipping away. I can feel it. And I know, with every fiber of my being, these are minutes I can never get back in my own time.

By the time Hannah's finished lacing me up, my waist is so narrow that when I place my hands on it, my middle fingers practically touch. I turn to the side. Plus, it does wonderful things to my breasts.

But it comes at a cost. I'm confident this corset is crushing a few ribs.

"I'm so excited I hardly slept a wink last night," Nat confesses.

"Because of a brunch?"

"Of course! Why else? Your parents' brunches are by far the most entertainin' events to attend."

I nod as if I know exactly what she means.

Outside comes the faint sound of a car pulling up. Nat pushes back the curtains and squeals. "Étienne and Livingston are here. I'm going to say hello and let you finish up."

I wait for the door to click shut before I look at Hannah. “What time is it?”

“Twelve.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

There’s a stubborn side of me. In my own time, it rarely shows up, but around Étienne, it rears its ugly head, and right now, it’s telling me he can take his, “Be ready at twelve sharp” and shove it.

At the last minute, I tell Hannah I want my hair down. And curled. Definitely curled. I figure that will tack on an additional forty minutes, but Hannah owns that iron and has my hair done within twenty minutes. She wants to put my hair up and demonstrates the style, but it looks like two oversized buns attached to my head. I look like Princess Leia after a massive rager.

No, thank you.

Instead, we agree to style it with combs that hold my heavy hair back from my face. Hannah strategically places a few curls around my face. Once she’s finished, I don’t look half bad.

“Serene! I know you’re up there. Come down here! *Right. Now.*” Étienne’s bellow travels like a gunshot through the house. I swear everyone within a mile just stopped and held their breath.

“We best hurry, ma’am.”

I smile. “We’re not going anywhere. Mr. Lacroix can suck it.”

Hannah looks confused by my words, but the implication is there. Her cheeks turn beet red.

“Besides,” I say, “I still haven’t figured out what to wear.”

There are so many dresses in the closets, but they’re not my taste; the Old Serene loved bright colors. More importantly, she loved pale pink. I hate that color. Nevertheless, the detail that went into each of these dresses leaves me

slightly awestruck. Not to mention the designers: Callot Soeurs, Jeanne Paquin, Paul Poiret and that was to name a few.

I was touching items that are preserved in museums in my time.

Hannah selects an ivory dress with navy stripes with a sash in the same color. Her hands shake as she buttons me up.

“Take your time. There’s no need to rush.”

“But Mr. Lacroix. He—”

“Leave Lacroix to me. I’ll take the blame for being late.”

She nods mutely and ties the sash around my waist. She selects a pair of ivory lace-and-kid gloves. This time, I accept them. Then comes the most dreaded part—the hat. The Old Serene has a ridiculous collection of hats. Massive hats piled with flowers, feathers, lace, and so much more. I pick out an ivory one with a medium-size brim and a small cluster of flowers. Even so, it seems gaudy to me.

After that, I can’t stall any longer. I thank Hannah as I leave and take my sweet time walking toward the stairs. Am I being a little bitch by purposely being late? Yes. But I have no control here. In this time, I’m vulnerable to everything around me, and I hate that feeling. Being late and defying Étienne is the only way for me to feel any control over my life.

I stop in front of the photos hanging on the hallway wall. They’re mostly old, stern-looking Lacroix ancestors. All of them seem pissed off. Can you blame them? They lived in sweltering heat, wearing layers of clothes, and there was no air conditioning. I wouldn’t smile either.

Toward the stairs is a portrait of a little boy. I’ve passed the portrait a few times but never really stopped to look at it. The boy has brown hair, neatly swept from his face. His eyes are the same color as Étienne’s. Unlike the solemn faces in the other portraits, this boy smirks. It’s the same smirk Livingston gives when he’s about to say something inappropriate. He has to

be their sibling.

“Can you tell me how to handle Étienne?” I ask the boy.

He stares back.

“Come on,” I coax. “Give me anything, because I am drowning here.”

“Are you talkin’ to my brother?”

I jump and look over my shoulder. “God! Nat! You scared me.” She stands a few steps away, impeccably dressed for brunch. When these people dress up, they don’t play. Nat looks as though she’s dressed for her wedding instead of going to have lunch.

“You look wonderful,” I say.

“Thank you.” She gives me a meaningful smirk. “I believe you’re evadin’ my question. Were you talkin’ to my brother?”

I want to ask if this boy is her brother, but the Old Serene should know that. I nod sheepishly. “You caught me.” I glance back at the picture. “I don’t think anyone has ever told me how old he was here,” I say, carefully phrasing my words.

A far-away look clouds Nat’s eyes. “I believe Julian was nine in that portrait.”

Julian.

Was.

Something obviously happened to him. Something that I should know, but won’t uncover right now.

Nat looks away from the portrait. “Are you ready to go? Étienne sent me to retrieve you. He’s furious now that we’re gonna be late.”

I let her link her arm with mine as we walk down the stairs. She talks nonstop about people I don’t know and places I’ve never been. I feel like a bobblehead doll because all I do is nod every few seconds and paste on a smile.

Once we reach the foyer, I stiffen up; Étienne and Livingston are quietly talking. Étienne glances at his sister for a second before he regards me. He holds my gaze then looks me up and down with nothing but contempt in his eyes. What else did I expect though? Him to stare at me with stars in his eyes, tell me I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever seen, and profess his undying love for me? This is Étienne we're talking about. I may have arrived here a short time ago, but a blind kitten can see he hates me.

He brushes past me as though I'm invisible. I'd be lying if I said it didn't sting. "You look beautiful," he tells Nat.

She smiles and takes his offered arm. "What about Serene?"

Étienne turns and gives me another once-over before he nods. "The dress is beautiful."

That's the most passive-aggressive dig I've heard in a long time. I open my mouth, ready to tell him to go fuck himself, when Livingston steps in between us. "We're gonna be late if we don't leave."

I let my anger simmer in my eyes as I glare at Étienne. He narrows his eyes. If I were a weaker person, I'd be thrashing on the ground in pain from his gaze. I think the fact that I'm not backing down pisses him off.

Bring it on.

Étienne's nostrils flare before he looks away. I feel as though I've won a small battle. "The driver is waitin'," he says curtly and walks past me toward the front door.

Livingston sighs at his brother's retreating form, then glances at me. He holds out his arm for me, and I take it.

"I see things are going great between you and my brother," he says out of the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, it's going swell," I reply without missing a beat.

"Were you purposely late?"

We walk down the front steps. The sun slashes across my face. I put on the dreaded hat and feign indifference. “Huh? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Livingston chuckles. “I think you do.”

“He can’t tell me what to do.”

Livingston is quiet for a moment, then he shrugs a shoulder. “This is how you two are. You have your spats. Retaliate. He’ll get over it.”

His words make me freeze. That he views my actions as normal, that he puts me in the same box as the Old Serene should be a victory. I’m acting like her. But that’s the problem—I’m acting like her. I don’t want to be her. Old Serene sounds like a bitch.

“Have I always been awful to Étienne?”

Livingston peers at me curiously. “Of course.”

“This is your brother you’re talking about.”

“I know that.”

“Shouldn’t you and Nat hate me?”

“Why are you suddenly so concerned about our relationship with you? Would you rather have us despise you?”

“No, no,” I rush out.

He gives me a devilish grin. “But to answer your question, no. I don’t hate you. You’re not my wife. I don’t have to live with you.”

“Fantastic,” I mutter.

“Why are you askin’ all of this?”

“Just curious.”

We’re steps away from the car. Livingston stops and stares at me curiously. “Have you been takin’ some laudanum? You’re skittish.”

Laudanum? I frown, trying to figure out how and why that word is familiar. It finally dawns on me. I snap my fingers and point at Livingston.

“By laudanum, you mean drugs?”

He slowly nods.

“No. I haven’t been taking anything.” Although I wish I were. Might make this all a bit bearable.

Livingston’s brows form a tight V. “I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t be. I’m fine.” I smile, hoping that will be enough to placate him.

He continues to watch me, and I meet his gaze. Perhaps I could tell Livingston the truth. He seems understanding and caring. Besides, what do I have to lose?

“Can I tell you something?” I ask.

Livingston shrugs. “Depends.”

“On?”

“Is it about my brother?”

“Not really.”

“You’re bein’ evasive,” he remarks.

“I’m in a difficult position.”

“Because?”

My mouth opens. “I—”

“Serene!”

I jump away from Livingston.

Étienne’s standing next to the car, wearing a furious expression. “Can I speak to you for a moment?”

“About?” I challenge.

Étienne’s eyes cloud over with anger. “It is private.”

Being alone with the man is akin to being alone with a master manipulator. I don’t know what he’s going to do, how he’s going to react. I walk on pins and needles around him, and it’s getting tiring. Fast. I stand up straight and tilt my chin up.

“Anything you have to say to me you can say in front of Livingston.”

Livingston clears his throat. “I don’t know if I necessarily agree with that.” He inches toward the car. “I think I’ll keep Nat company.”

He walks away without a backward glance, and I’m left alone with the only man in this time who can help me but won’t.

I watch Étienne cautiously. He strolls closer with that loose-hipped stride of his. I don’t like his personality and he’s not even good-looking, but he executes powerful masculinity that makes me feel unbalanced.

He stops a few inches away, towering over me. In the sunlight, his scar is more pronounced and I can spot several black specks swirling within his green eyes.

“You were gonna tell my brother that ridiculous story of yours,” he says.

“It’s not ridiculous.”

He arches a brow and leans in until our noses are inches apart. I suck in a sharp breath. “You think I don’t know you, but you’re forgettin’ I’ve had time to learn all the tricks up that sleeve of yours. Once you become bored, you create a scene, whether it be a man of your choosin’ or at one of your many parties.”

“Is that what you think I’m doing now?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

My hands curl into fists. “I can promise you that the last thing I want to do is create a scene. But if that’s what I have to do to get your damn attention, then so be it.”

He narrows his eyes. “Is that why you were late? I told you to be ready at twelve sharp.”

The damn hat is in my way. I take it off and bat my eyelashes at him. “I was gettin’ ready,” I say in my best Southern accent. “Wanted to look presentable.”

“Liar,” Étienne growls.

“I would never lie to you, husband.”

Bleh. That word tastes like bile.

Étienne’s eyes flare. “Do not test me, Serene.”

I step forward until my breasts brush against his chest. He tenses up. “Likewise, Étienne.”

We stand there, both of us refusing to back down until Livingston tells us to hurry up. Étienne steps back. Another small victory for me.

“Let’s go.” He has me walk in front of him.

Livingston holds the door open to the Model-T. I gather the hem of my dress in one hand and my hat in the other and lift my leg to get in when Étienne’s hands span my waist, scaring the crap out of me. I have multiple layers on, but I can feel his touch like fire. With ease, he places me in the car as though I’m a rag doll. Because of the stupid corset, my breath becomes stuck in my throat. My hands are shaking as I scramble to sit next to Nat. The door slams behind me.

“Are you all right?” Nat asks.

I try to laugh, although it comes out choked. “Never better.”

Étienne takes the seat next to the driver, and away we go.



I STEP OUT of the car, staring at the house in front of me, and take a deep breath. Livingston is quick to escort Nat up to the front door, leaving Étienne no choice but to walk with me. Reluctantly, he holds his arm out. I subtly brush past him and say, “I’m perfectly capable of walking by myself.” I make it three steps before I’m grabbed from behind. My entire body goes rigid.

“We will walk together,” Étienne says against my ear. “All of Charleston knows we’re not in love, but basic civility is nice.”

I turn toward him. “Is this what this is? Basic civility?”

Étienne stares at me and doesn’t say a word.

“If you want basic civility, treat me with a bit of respect,” I say.

He snorts and tucks his hands into his pockets.

I advance on him. “What’s so funny?”

“You mentionin’ the word respect. I’m surprised you even know what it means, considerin’ you haven’t respected our marriage since day one.”

I want to scream at him that I have no idea what he’s talking about and what he’s accusing me of are things I’ve never done. But I don’t, because we’re already earning curious glances from fellow guests walking up the steps.

Étienne notices too. He straightens his shoulders, holds his arm out, and waits for me to grab it. A few seconds pass, but he stubbornly stays put. I give in and hook my arm around his. He tucks it close to his side as though I’m a toddler that keeps straying from its parent.

I grind my teeth as we approach the front door.

A slight breeze lifts the hem of my dress, and it brushes against Étienne’s black slacks. My heels echo on the brick pathway toward the back of the house. The sound of voices mingling with laughter makes my heartbeat pick up. If Étienne notices my apprehension, he doesn’t show it.

You can do this. All you have to do is pretend you belong and no one will look twice at you.

Brave words, almost encouraging, but there’s not a single thing I can tell myself that will prepare me for this brunch. What am I about to walk into? This is supposedly at Old Serene’s parents’ home, and since I’m her, will my entire family be here too?

God, I hope so.

We round the corner, and I almost stop short; there's a massive white-tablecloth-covered table that looks as if it can fit up to fifty people. From where I'm standing, it appears that's how many people are here, and it's clear they're the elite—part of a social circle that most never have the chance of entering.

As Étienne directs us around the guests, I spot waiters in tuxes, holding silver trays with glasses filled with champagne. We pass the table, and I admire the white wicker chairs around it. The colorful flowers in vases decorate the middle of the table. Fine china is placed in front of each chair. The silver is wrapped in ivory cloth napkins and put sideways on each plate.

We move away from the table and merge into the sea of people.

“Where is your damn mother?” Étienne grumbles.

I swallow. “I don't know.”

I'll know my mom when I see her, and so far, she's nowhere in sight. Neither is my dad or brothers.

“There she is.”

Panic sets in because I have no idea who he's referring to. *Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Oh, shit. What do I do?*

We stop beside a woman with a crowd surrounding her. She's beautiful—slim, dark hair, and pale skin. She laughs softly at something someone said. A sharp pain lances my heart because she's not my mom and I want her to be; I want to see a familiar face.

She glances my way and smiles broadly. “Darling! You look...” This fake mom looks me up and down, making me feel as though I'm a breakable trinket that could be damaged. “You look lovely.”

She kisses my cheeks. Stiffly, I mimic her actions. She's oblivious to my discomfort because she's too busy trying to flag down a waiter. One is by her

side within seconds.

“Would you like a glass, dear?”

I’m not a big drinker, but I find myself nodding and accepting a glass. I down the champagne so fast that I place the empty glass back on the silver tray.

Fake Mom’s eyes widen slightly. Étienne frowns. If they were in my shoes, surrounded by complete strangers, I bet they’d be doing the same thing. Liquid courage is precisely what I need.

I smile apologetically. “Sorry. I’m thirsty.”

“That’s fine. Please try to pace yourself though.” She turns away from me and directs her charming smile Étienne’s way. “It’s wonderful to see you, Étienne.”

“The pleasure is mine, Delia.”

Her name is Delia. It fits her well, but to me, she’s merely Fake Mom. Nothing more, nothing less.

Étienne and Fake Mom have a polite conversation. As I listen to them, I quickly learn that the stocky man next to Fake Mom is Fake Dad. His name is Frederick. From his thinning hair to his permanent scowl, this man is nothing like my real father.

These two people are frauds. Fill-ins. Actors playing a role. Just like me.

A stranger comes up and speaks to Fake Mom. The stranger calls her Mrs. Quentin.

Delia and Frederick Quentin. I add the names to the ever-growing list of things that don’t make sense; I’ve never heard those names before. My last name is Parow. My parents are Katherine and Daniel.

The stranger and Fake Mom chat for a few seconds before Fake Mom glances my way. “Where are my manners? Serene, this is a new acquaintance of mine I’ve been telling you about. Stella, this is my daughter.”

Stella smiles, so I smile back. It's instinctive.

"Lovely to meet you," she says.

"Likewise," I say. Although it comes out more like a question.

"Serene is a unique name." Stella turns to Fake Mom. "Is it a family name?"

I open my mouth, ready to tell the story I've heard my whole life, but Fake Mom beats me to the punch. "It's an interesting story. Originally, Frederick and I said that if we had a girl her name would be Serena. If we had a boy, he would be named Christopher." Fake Mom smiles at her husband affectionately. "But our baby arrived and here she was. Our little girl. I told the doctor what her name was. She didn't hear me clearly though and wrote down Serene. Once I saw it, I knew it wasn't a mistake. That was her name."

Everyone "oh" and "ahh" and smiles at Fake Mom and me.

But I'm frozen. I think my heart stopped beating for a second.

Every single word she said has come out of my mom's mouth... a century later. Nothing that's occurred since I've arrived here has made much sense, but this takes the cake. These parents are not mine, but it's almost as though time has plucked specific memories and moments from my real life and shot them back through time with me.

My hands are shaking so much I have to cross my arms to conceal them. It takes someone coughing for me to realize I'm still staring at Fake Mom.

She smiles, and for the hundredth time, I'm asked the question I'm beginning to hate. "Serene, are you all right?"

No, no I'm not all right. I'm shaken to my core.

I don't say that. Instead, I smile like a good little actress and say, "I'm fine."

My performance is convincing enough because she nods and smiles at the people surrounding her. "Brunch is almost ready. Shall we head to the table?"

Étienne surprisingly escorts me. He shoots speculative glances my way. Doubt lingers in his eyes.



THIS ISN'T A brunch where people sit down, eat their food, talk a bit, then get up. No, these people do not play around when it comes to brunch. There are so many courses, I lost count around the sixth plate of food placed before me. There are oysters, roasted pigeon, filet mignon, and other dishes I'd never seen before. Everyone seems content to have so many courses. Probably because their food is only in front of them for a good five minutes before it's whisked away.

Servants move back and forth between the house and the table. I'm tempted to beg one of them to let me join them; I don't belong at this table.

From Nat, I learn that these social gatherings—or soirées, as she calls them—have many activities: croquet, polo matches, archery, and the most popular activity of them all, drinking.

Lots and lots of drinking. If I wasn't bound and determined to snoop through Fake Mom and Dad's home, I could've finished off an entire bottle of wine myself. Instead, I listen to the insipid conversations that make me want to nod off right there at the table. How can they tolerate this farce? It's almost as though everyone here shares an inside joke I don't understand.

But I have discovered one important thing. Southern people have a special way of pronouncing certain words and sayings. It takes me a few seconds to realize that the woman on the opposite side of the table is calling the man next to her sugar. It sounds like sughah.

They join words together and stretch out the vowels, and they do it all

with a smile, making you unsure if they love you or secretly want to kill you.

Across from me is Étienne. He gives noncommittal smiles and politely speaks to the men and women around him. He nods as if what they're saying matters to him. As he talks to everyone, his gaze always finds its way back to me.

A few chairs down, two men are talking about how after lunch, they'll participate in a game of archery. What about the women? I want to ask, but I don't feel like having everyone stare at me as though I've grown three heads. Besides, I already know the answer—the women will probably sit and watch and quietly talk to each other. At this point, I don't care. I just want to get away from this table because Johnathan keeps leering at me.

The creepy factor for this guy is at a ten. I shift in my seat, subtly turning away from Johnathan, but I can still feel his gaze on me.

I can't take another second of this. I'm frustrated, and my butt is numb from sitting on this uncomfortable chair. I need to get inside the house directly in front of me to see if I can find anything that might lead me back to my time.

Abruptly I stand, making heads lift. Including Étienne's. He barely raises his head my way, but I feel those hooded eyes follow me as I walk toward Fake Mom.

I bend down until our faces are level and tell yet another lie. "I need to use the restroom."

Conversations come to a grinding halt as everyone glances at me. Nat coughs into her hand, and Étienne takes a long swallow of his drink.

Fake Mom's cheeks turn pink, but she smiles and pats my hand. "Of course, dear."

Another faux pas on my part? More than likely. But I don't know what they call the bathroom in this time or how they announce they gotta go. It

was either that or just get up from the table and walk away. That seems far ruder.

With my head held high, I walk toward the back staircase, feeling a pair of eyes burning holes into my back. I fight the urge to quicken my pace; I have to look as though I know where I'm going. In reality, I have no idea which doors to enter. First, I'll try the French doors directly in front of me, and if those are locked, I'll search for a second way in. The smallest part of me wishes to be back at Belgrave. Ridiculous. In the short time I've been here, I've come to think of that home as a safe zone.

The doorknob easily turns, and I slip inside. From the chintz-covered wicker furniture and potted ferns, I realize this is the sunroom. Another set of doors in front of me leads to the rest of the house. My footsteps reverberate through the narrow hallway.

This home is beautiful and tastefully decorated, but it doesn't have the grandeur of Belgrave and far fewer rooms to navigate. If my father were here, he would say I'm in the tail end at the age of opulence. If he were here, he would examine everything in amazement, furiously scribbling notes and trying his hardest to take everything in.

I find the library instantly. It resembles the Lacroix's library in one way—both spaces are well used. The shelves aren't perfectly stacked with books. The settee against the window is well-worn, the cushions lumpy in some areas. A blanket has been draped over one side of the settee, but it's only to hide a tear on the cushion. I can see the fluffy contents threatening to spill out.

I walk past the shelves. Some books are hidden by picture frames of Fake Mom and Dad and an assortment of people I've never seen before. Even so, I peer carefully at each one; I might see a close relative or someone I recognize. Anything.

One photo makes me stop and stare. It's Étienne and me on our wedding day. We're standing in front of a brick building. Étienne is dressed in a tux. Even though he's cradling my hand between his, there's still a reasonable distance between us. He looks miserable. I'm wearing a white lace gown and a scalloped-edge cathedral veil. I look miserable.

This doesn't make sense. Even if I attempted to make sense of this entire situation, I'd become so overwhelmed and frustrated that I'd give up. No, at this point, it's better to push aside everything that's unsettling me and focus on one thing—getting the hell back home.

On the other side of the room is a drop-front desk flanked by two bookcases. I gently lower the hinged panel, only to reveal a network of shelves and small drawers. I go through the compartments and find an assortment of items: receipts, blank papers, writing utensils. There are a few letters written to Delia by someone named Alma. That name doesn't ring a bell, so I continue searching.

There's nothing here. Nothing of use to me at least.

"Why is it so hard to get you alone?" a voice says behind me.

I turn around, and my stomach sinks. Johnathan is standing in the doorway. I suppress a groan and stare at the desk with longing. I can't search with him here, and judging from the gleam in his eyes, he won't be leaving soon. "Why do I feel like I'm in a really bad Lifetime movie?" I mutter.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." I face him. "What do you want?"

The first time I met Johnathan, he was barely tolerable. Now he's annoying. He's like a fly you keep swatting away but continues to come back.

"We haven't seen much of each other," he says.

Everything about my body language screams "back off." Johnathan must

know it, yet he moves deeper into the room, directly toward me.

“Believe me, there’s a reason we do not see each other,” I comment.

His arrogant smile never wavers. “Did I do somethin’ to offend you?”

I give him sickly sweet smile. “No. I just don’t like you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I should probably get back outside.”

I step to the left, trying to get as far away as possible from him, but this isn’t a big room. I still have to brush past him to get toward the door. I’m mere steps away from freedom when he grabs my arm, spins me back into the room, and slams me against the wall. Pain reverberates through my skull.

A red veil of rage covers my eyes. My heart pounds in tandem with the one thought echoing in my mind—*beat the shit out of him*. Once I can get his hands off of me, of course.

Until then I stay perfectly still. We’re the same height, and I don’t want to look him in the eye. I don’t want to give him that satisfaction. Defiantly, I stare at the opposite side of the room.

Johnathan stands so close I can smell alcohol on his breath. “Serene, you’re not going anywhere.”

If I’m honest, I’m a little scared. But the adrenaline rushing through me is all-powerful and refuses to let fear take over.

“What has become of you lately?” he asks gruffly. “I haven’t heard a word from you in days.”

“Take the hint.”

“No.”

I take a deep breath. “Look, I changed my mind. I have a lot of things going on. Probably best if we don’t see each other. Ever again.”

Johnathan stands frozen in place. He doesn’t let go. His brows become furrowed as he absorbs my words. He’s not used to being rejected.

When he presses closer, my panic grows. “You need to let go.”

“No.” He tightens his grip until his fingers are digging into my skin, and it takes everything in me not to wince. That’s what he wants—for me to react. He wants to see me in pain.

“Let. Go.”

He leans in closer. “Or you’ll do what?” His lips tilt into a cocky smile.

We’re alone, and he’s banking on me putting up a struggle, with him ultimately getting his way. He’s the kind of man I hate. The kind that makes my flesh crawl.

Yes, he’s arrogant, but also very, very stupid; he’s underestimated me. He has no idea I have two brothers who taught me how to fight back.

He paws at my body, and my nails claw at his face and any available piece of skin. I draw blood on his neck, but I keep him back with strength I didn’t know I had.

I forcefully hit my palm against the top of his nose. He rears back and clutches his nose with both hands. Blood trickles between his fingers, but there’s no time to savor the moment. I remember my brother Ian’s advice, from all those years ago, that if I’m ever in a dangerous situation with a guy, I should knee him in the groin as best as possible.

Johnathan’s guard is down, and I use that to my advantage by wedging my knee between his legs and shoving it upward as hard as I can. Seconds later, he collapses. Panting, I stare at his limp body in shock. His hands abandoned his nose and are now in between his legs. He’s making noises that would usually make me feel sympathy. Instead, a shocking burst of laughter escapes my lips because I can’t believe I did it.

My muscles are coiled tight, waiting for him to stand back up and try something else, but he remains on the floor, eyes shut and an expression of agony on his face. He mutters curse words and groans that he’s never going to be able to walk again. That’s a stretch; he may be down for the count, but

he'll be okay.

“I was gonna see if you needed help, but it's clear you don't.”

My head snaps up, and I see Étienne leaning against the open doorway. His hands are tucked into his pockets. He looks like a man of leisure, but his eyes are narrowed on Johnathan and his body is rigid. He looks seconds away from pouncing on Johnathan and beating the shit out of him.

“How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to watch you deliver a blow that, as a man, made me cringe.”

“He was—”

Étienne's eyes darken. “I saw everythin'.”

Pushing away from the doorway, he saunters closer. Once he reaches Johnathan, he stares at him as though he's an insect underneath a microscope. Étienne uses the toe of his boot to nudge him. Johnathan groans and attempts to bury his head into the carpet.

There's not an ounce of sympathy on Étienne's face. He's not furious though. Instead, he's incredibly calm. Which is almost more terrifying than seeing him angry.

His green eyes meet mine. “Sure you're okay?”

I nod.

He stares at me for a second longer before he looks away.

The last thing I want to do is spend another second in this room. “Escort me back. Husbands still do that, right?”

Wordlessly, Étienne holds out his arm.

Before I accept, I kneel next to Johnathan. “I'm not going to pretend I understand, but I hear it's incredibly painful to be hit in the family jewels, so nod your head once if you can hear me.” I keep my voice calm, as if I'm talking about the weather.

He nods once.

“Good. If you ever touch me again, speak to me again, or even glance my way, I will gut you like a deer. Are we clear?”

Johnathan, who’s still clutching his crotch, moans something unintelligible. I’m going to assume it’s an agreement.

I smile and stand. “Excellent. We have an understanding.”

Étienne continues to stare between Johnathan and me in complete disbelief. It’s the first time I’ve seen him appear dumbfounded.

“He’s a creep,” I say as I loop my hand into the crook of his arm. “I don’t want to see him again.”

“I do business with him,” Étienne remarks as we walk out of the room.

“After what you just saw, will you still be doing business with him?”

He pauses and glances at me. “I don’t believe so.”

“Good.”

Something passes between us. It certainly isn’t understanding or respect, but it’s pretty damn close. And I’ll take it, because hating Étienne is far more exhausting than I anticipated.

We walk down the hall, toward the patio. The two of us are quiet. “I have to know one thing,” he says.

“What?”

Étienne lowers his voice. “Do you honestly know how to gut a deer?”

“No, but if I’m truly your wife, you should know that... right?”

He never answers me.

That teacher was right—I wasn’t believable as an actress. But right now, that might be the very thing to work in my favor.



“SERENE. SERENE! WAKE up.”

I peek one eye open and see Nat looming above me. I brush my tangled hair away from my face to get a better look at her.

“What?” I say groggily.

It takes a few tries to blink Nat into focus. She looks panicked. Propping myself up on my elbow, I glance around my room. The maids are moving around, their lips tightly drawn. Their eyes share the same panic as Nat’s.

Outside my door are muffled voices and footsteps. Time travel or not, it doesn’t take a genius to know something is wrong.

“It’s positively devastatin’,” Nat whispers. “How could this happen?”

I sit up in bed. “What are you talking about?”

Nat brushes the tears from her cheeks and paces. “I can’t believe it,” she murmurs so quietly I can barely hear.

I try to catch the eye of one of the maids, hoping they might be able to fill

me in, but they won't look my way. "What are you talking about?"

A somber-looking maid gives Nat a newspaper. Nat then hands it to me. I read the headline. My heart sputters then stops before it starts pounding rapidly.

TITANIC RESCUED BY CARPATHIA. ALL PASSENGERS SAFE.

At first, I think I'm reading the headline wrong. My gaze never leaves the newspaper. I keep waiting for the letters to move around. My mind tells me it can't be. The *Titanic* sinking was over a hundred years ago. It's history.

But reality slams into me and I realize that I'm living history.

Shoving my face close to the paper, I read and reread the first sentence of the article. Toward the end, I read that the *Titanic* is being towed by the *SS Virginian*.

I lower the paper, knowing that the reports of the ship and passengers being safe are erroneous. It won't be until later that people will discover the *Titanic* was lost at sea.

I didn't learn all about the *Titanic* for fun. My dad is a lover of all history, but nothing fascinated him more than the *Titanic*. As a kid, he made my brothers and me watch every documentary about the ship. He has an entire shelf dedicated to books written about the *Titanic*. He dragged me to the *Titanic* museum in Branson, Missouri, and the one in Buena Park, California. Over time, I began to find it fascinating and would readily listen to him spout off facts about the tragic sinking.

Nat stares at me with a tortured expression. "Can you imagine what those poor people have gone through?"

How can I tell her the truth? How can I tell her that this newspaper is wrong and that more lives will be lost than saved? The answer is simple—I can't.

"I'm so relieved they're all okay," she remarks.

Although I know Nat will inevitably find out the news, I don't want to be the one to break it to her.

"Did you know anyone aboard?" I ask.

She nods rapidly. "A few. Étienne is friends with John Jacob Astor."

Then I see my opening, a way to prove to Étienne that I am who I say I am. For the first time in my life, I'm grateful for my dad's strange obsession. I may not want to tell Nat the outcome of this disaster, but with Étienne, this might be the very thing to save me.

"Does Étienne know?" I ask in a steady voice, trying to keep myself calm.

"I don't think so. The only reason I know is that I heard the maids talkin' about it." She wrings her hands. "He'll read about it soon enough, I'm sure."

That's all I need to hear. Without another word, I jump out of bed and run out of my room, the newspaper in my hands.

"Where are you goin'?" Nat shouts.

I don't reply because I know I only have a few minutes to intercept Étienne. Holding onto the railing, I fly down the staircase. I make a sharp left before hurrying down another long corridor. By the time I enter the dining room, I'm nearly out of breath. With my hands braced on my knees, I take a deep breath and look down the extended length of the table. My heart sinks when I see that Étienne is already sitting, his plate filled with food. A newspaper is spread out in front of him.

His coffee cup is halfway to his mouth when he lifts his head and sees me standing there. The look he gives me is filled with reproach. "Why do you continue to walk around the house with nearly nothin' on?"

Clothes are the least of my worries. Ignoring the question, I walk straight toward him. "The *Titanic* sank."

"No, it didn't. Have you read the headlines?"

“Yes. But the newspaper is wrong.” I snatch the newspaper from the table and toss it to the floor. Shock registers in those whip-smart eyes, and before he can say a word, I speak up. “The *Titanic* struck a glacier at 11:40 p.m. last night. They were warned to slow down, but it’s theorized the captain wanted to set a record. By 2:20 a.m. the ship separated and sank. What was considered the safest boat in the world ended up not having enough lifeboats.”

“What are—”

“This will become one of the greatest tragedies of the century. And one of the deadliest peacetime accidents in history. There were approximately 1,317 aboard, and that’s not including the crew. Seven hundred and ten people survived. Close to fifteen hundred people died.”

By now, Étienne’s palms are laid flat on the table as he stares at me.

“The RMS *Carpathia* will respond to the distress calls and rescue the survivors. The ship will arrive in New York on April 18th. Thousands of people will be waiting for the ship’s arrival. Later today, the truth about what happened will be confirmed.”

“You’ve gone mad.” His gaze darkens with every word that comes out of his mouth. But beneath his harsh words, I can feel the ripple of his doubt. He doesn’t want to believe me. He doesn’t want to listen to me. But whether he likes it or not, I have his attention.

I can’t stop now. I have to make him believe me. “Nat told me your friend John Jacob Astor and his wife, Madeline, were on the *Titanic*.”

Étienne’s face loses a bit of color. His lips go into a flat line, and that’s all the confirmation I need.

“She’s one of the survivors. They’ll find John’s body on April 22nd. In four months, Madeline will give birth to their son. She’ll name him after his father, and his nickname will be Jakey.

“You can go ahead and read the newspaper inside out. The information I told you isn’t known yet. The details that are released over the next few days will be the numbers of survivors and the body count from the multiple searches.” I take a deep breath. “Do you believe me now?”

There’s a crack in his armor. Every other time I’ve tried to talk to him, I was quickly dismissed. But I have him struck speechless, and we both know it.

He swallows loudly and watches me warily. “How did you know that?”

I lean in, our faces inches apart. “How do you think I know all that?”

Étienne’s nostrils flare, and he stands. I step back as Étienne tosses his napkin onto the table. “I have to go to work.”

He walks out of the room, but I’m not giving up.

“You still don’t believe me?” I shout to his back. “How can you not believe me after what I said?”

Étienne ignores me.

“Tell me,” I say with determination. “Tell me what I can do to make you believe me.” My voice takes on a pleading tone because this is my last-ditch attempt. If anything is going to pull him to my side, it will be this.

Abruptly, he turns and faces me. “There’s nothin’ you can do.”

There has to be something—anything—that will spark his attention. I step forward, a sense of desperation rising in me. And words pour from my mouth. “In 1985, they’ll discover the wreckage of the *Titanic*. But are these facts not enough? Do I need to give you more on what’s to come?”

He stares at me.

“In the 1930s there will be a Great Depression. If you have any stocks in the market, I would watch out if I were you.”

“What are you doing?”

“In 1914, World War I will begin. It will end in 1918. It’s considered one

of the biggest wars in history. Can't forget World War II. It'll start in the late thirties." Étienne backs up, and I advance. I have a power that comes from my words, and it makes my voice confident and strong. "Technology will advance. Women will earn the right to vote. Everything as you know it will change and—"

"Stop, Serene!"

"I can't stop! Can't you see that? I can't stop until you believe me."

Étienne stares at me, and I don't see the rage and disgust that was once there before. I see fear and unease. Those are two emotions I can relate to; they were all I felt when I first came here.

"What has gotten into you?" he demands.

My words have put me on a precipice. If I persist, Étienne will push me off and I'll be done for good. If I persist, he will finally believe me, and I'll have someone on my side. I know what I need to do, but it doesn't make it any less terrifying.

"It's not what's gotten into me and more like what's happened to me. I've been trying to tell you the whole time, yet you won't listen!"

Étienne closes his eyes and rubs the bridge of his nose. "It's too early in the mornin' to do this."

"What? To tell the truth?"

"What's happening with the *Titanic* just occurred."

"Exactly. Why would I make this all up?" I shout.

Right then, a maid appears in the foyer. She glances between Étienne and me and promptly hurries up the stairs.

"Keep your voice down," Étienne says through gritted teeth.

"I will if you stop and process my words. Deep down, you know I'm right."

Étienne stares at me with an unreadable expression. But he isn't walking

away, and that has to count for something.

We're standing in front of the doorway to the receiving room. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a gilt frame shining in the light. I walk over to the credenza and pick up the frame. Who has a self-portrait of themselves? Old Serene does apparently. I can picture the bold, narcissistic woman in the picture occasionally stopping in front of this photograph and admiring her beauty. We have the same face, but I don't recognize myself in those green eyes. I don't see me.

"I don't know who this woman is," I confess, my voice hollow. "We have the same body and name, but it all ends there. You don't get along with her, and you may hate her. I can see in your eyes that you do, but I don't know a single thing she's done because I'm not her."

His mouth opens, but I quickly speak up because I know he wants to believe me.

"You know I'm right, Étienne," I whisper. "You know it."

I stare at the photo for a few more seconds, feeling such a massive sense of resentment that I was placed in this fucked up situation. I throw the picture across the room. The frame hits the wall, and the glass breaks into millions of pieces.

Étienne stares at the picture and me.

I crumple to the floor. My back rests against the wall. "I don't care what you do anymore. I don't care what you say to me. All I want is for you to believe me."

He walks toward me, glass crunching beneath his shoes, and kneels in front of me. "How can I believe you? How? Everything you're saying it's... it's—"

"Crazy. Ridiculous. Impossible. I know it is. I get it. But I'm telling you, this happened. I time traveled."

Étienne looks away, jaw clenched. He stares at the picture across the room. Pieces of the glass nicked the picture in numerous spots, marring his wife's face. My face.

Time ticks by. I sit there, pleading with my eyes that he ignore logic and trust everything I've told him.

Étienne lifts his head and gives me a blunt nod.

I've only been here for a few days, yet I already know that Étienne is a prideful man. Never in a million years will he say he believes me. That nod is all I'm going to get.

The relief I feel is indescribable. Finally, everything has been validated and holds merit.

For the first time in weeks, I feel something blossom inside me. It's too soon to try to say what it is. Maybe it's hope. Or happiness. Perhaps it's both. Either way, I welcome the feeling. He sits next to me, his arms resting on his knees.

"You believe me," I whisper. More to myself.

Étienne shakes his head in disbelief. "I probably shouldn't, but I do. What you said is impossible to ignore, and your behavior the past few days has been... different. You're either the world's greatest liar, or you indeed did time travel."

"I promise you I'm not lying."

"I know you aren't."

Listlessly, I stare at the dust motes dancing in the air, inches away from my face.

"What's your real name?" he asks.

"Serene."

"I know that. But what's your real name?"

"Serene Parow."

He arches a brow.

“Is that her maiden name?”

“It’s Quentin.”

Makes sense, considering that’s what Fake Mom and Dad’s last name is.

His head tips back against the wall. “When’s your birthday?”

“April 6th, 1988.”

We sit there in silence, with only the sound of the grandfather clock ticking. “Shit,” he mutters.

“Do we share the same birthday?”

“No. Yours—” He stumbles over his words. “I mean, her birthday is September 9th, 1883.”

“It makes no sense.” I feel Étienne’s gaze on me. “Lately, I’ve been trying to piece together the events that have happened, and nothing will connect.” I twist to face him. “Her parents aren’t mine. They don’t even share the same names. I have two brothers, but they’re not here. Are they?”

Étienne shakes his head.

“I’ve been plucked from life as I knew it and dropped into this world. Your world. I don’t want to be here. I need to go home.” I drag all ten fingers through my hair and fight the urge to scream. “I don’t understand why this is happening, but whatever the reason is, I know it involves you. I dreamed about you. You were bleeding and battered, lying on my lap. You needed my help. The next day at work, I found a picture of you standing outside Belgrave. With three other men. Livingston was one of them. And then I arrive here as your wife. There’s a reason I’m here, and I know it involves you.”

For the first time since I’ve arrived, I look at him sincerely. I let my fear and anxiety show, and it feels damn good.

Out of nowhere, Étienne stands. “I have to go.” He strides toward the

door as though hell is nipping at his heels.

I run after him and block his path. “Stay. We need to talk about this. I need—”

His hands land on my forearms, locking me in place. He doesn’t glare at me with built-up resentment. He’s staring with stark desperation, as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders. “Give me a moment to process this, all right? Can you do that?”

I knew this would be a lot to take in. Hell, even I’m trying to come to grips with it. I nod. “When can we talk?”

“Tomorrow.”

After a few seconds, his hands drop away. I step aside and let him pass. Étienne visibly relaxes, as though he wants nothing more than to get as far away from me as possible.

Before he leaves the room, he glances over his shoulder at me. Those piercing green eyes rake me from head to toe, and for the barest second, his mask of indifference slips away and I see the smallest flair of interest and something else. But it’s gone before I can name it.

“Tomorrow we’ll start searchin’ for a way to get you home.”

I believe him; it’s only fair I return the favor.



“STOP STARING AT me,” I say out of the corner of my mouth.

It’s bad enough that every head turns as I walk down the street with Étienne. Perhaps I’m paranoid, but I swear every person who passes by knows I’m a fraudulent version of the Serene they know. We’re identical in every sense of the word. Hell, I’m even wearing her clothes. I stare down at the dress. This one has a palmetto design in dark red and black with a tiered hem in the same design. Breathing is easy, but that’s because I’m not wearing one of those stupid corsets. Maybe I should have though; there’s more blood flow going to my brain, making me feel paranoid.

Is there a broad, blinking arrow over my head? Or maybe it’s my body language? I don’t know.

The first time I came to Charleston, I was so determined to speak with Étienne that I didn’t get a good chance to take in everything. The charm of this era is undeniable, but there’s a stark contrast between the way of life here

and present day. The biggest is the class divide between the rich and the poor. The people of privilege walk with leisure as though time is not an issue for them. Their heads are held high because they rule the world. The same can't be said for the impoverished. Their eyes are perceptive, and the energy around them is frenetic.

I watch as a boy up ahead of me attempts to sell newspapers for the measly sum of fifteen cents apiece. There's a stack behind him. By the way he loudly asks every person who passes if they want a paper, and doesn't back down, I can tell he won't leave until every single paper is sold. His strong-willed determination belies his age.

"Forgive me, I'm in still shock," Étienne retorts, pulling my attention away from the little boy.

"You have questions," I say flatly.

"If the roles were reversed, what would you do?"

I glance at him from the corner of my eye. "I'd be demanding answers to the thousands of questions running through my head."

"Exactly."

"So ask," I say slowly. "But don't stare. The people around us are doing enough of that."

"Let me tell you a well-known fact about yourself, Mrs. Lacroix. You and I are hardly ever seen in public together, and the times we are, we barely look at each other."

"Should I push away from you and tell you I hate you?" I ask innocently.

He snorts and, still staring straight ahead, the smallest of smirks graces his face. "It might make me feel better."

A beat of silence passes by.

"I have a question."

Étienne lifts a brow.

“When was the last time you were seen with... her?”

He goes silent for a few seconds. “Two months ago?”

“Good Lord. Why are you two even married?” I blurt before I can think twice. Almost immediately, I want to take the words back, but it isn’t as if Étienne cares.

He remains stoic as ever and shrugs a shoulder. “I ask myself that every day.”

His words spark a series of new questions. I have to remind myself I need to pace myself and not ask everything all at once.

“Also, it may benefit you to know that people might be starin’ because you’re walkin’ down the street in the middle of the day.”

My head whips in his direction. “Did your wife break one of her legs or something?”

Étienne gives a hearty laugh. It’s loud enough to earn the stares of people walking past us and powerful enough to make my heart speed up. God, when he smiles, it’s something else.

“No, not at all,” he eventually replies. “People of wealth don’t walk unless it’s necessary. They take cars or horse and buggy. In fact, you see the buggy across the street?”

I crane my neck and see a buggy with a pale face staring out the back window. After the woman inside sees me staring at her, she moves away from the window. “Yeah?”

“That’s Lailah, one of your dearest friends. She probably thinks you’re gravely ill and have no idea what you’re doing right now, walkin’ down the street. I’m sure she’ll make a call to the house to see if you’re all right.”

“I can’t wait,” I say, deadpan.

Étienne stares at me with his brows furrowed as if I’m a puzzle he’s painstakingly putting together and he can’t seem to find all the pieces. I clear

my throat and look away. The way he's watching at me is unnerving.

The two of us become silent again. Fine with me; my eyes are drawn to the window display to my right. I slow down and watch as two women walk into the general store. There are handwritten signs in the window, and I stop long enough to read them. Coffee is only fifteen cents a pound, and eggs? They're fourteen cents for a dozen. Another sign promotes a new toothpaste. The most prominent sign is for Coca-Cola that says, "Relieves fatigue. Drink Coca-Cola." In a smaller font beneath, it says it's sold everywhere for only five cents.

Cupping my hands over my eyes, I press my forehead against the window pane and peer inside. I can't help myself. A huge part of me wants to go inside, but if I did, I wouldn't be content until I'd looked at each item. This is the second-best thing.

"Serene? Are you coming?"

I turn and see Étienne impatiently waiting a few steps ahead. Reluctantly, I look away from the display and walk toward him.

"What was so fascinating?"

"I was looking at the display."

"You don't have Coca-Cola in your time?" he asks.

"Oh, we do. Just not for five cents."

"How much?"

My eyes slide to Étienne; he stares at me with open curiosity.

"I don't know how much a single bottle is," I confess. "I usually buy a twelve-pack, and that's about four dollars?"

For once, it's Étienne's turn to look shocked. I smile because I recognize the hunger in his eyes. He has thousands of questions that demand answers.

He opens his mouth and idly looks to his left before he does a double-take and abruptly stops and gestures to the door next to him. "Here we are."

We stop in front of a door with textured glass. Embossed on the spotless, large window are the words E.A.L. Corporation.

“Obviously you remember where I work from the last time you were here,” he remarks dryly.

I nod. “I thought your family owned a shipping company?”

“We do. Livingston works in the main office near the docks. I started my own company three years ago strictly for investments and real estate ventures.”

“Are you any good at what you do?” I challenge.

Would I typically be this blunt? No. But things between Étienne and me didn’t change overnight. I see the mistrust in his eyes. When he looks at me, he still sees his bitchy wife. And that’s okay, because I have a fiancé back home, waiting for me. Being polite is a pretense that neither one of us wants to use right now. Saying precisely what’s on my mind is a bit liberating.

“I like to think that I’m mildly successful at investing.”

I narrow my eyes at him. He’s being modest, and I don’t know why.

Étienne goes to open the door. I place my hand on his arm, stopping him in his tracks. He looks at my hand, then my face with curiosity.

“Before we go in, I wanted to talk to you about something.” He says nothing, just stares at me with those whip-smart eyes. I take a deep breath and drop my hand to my side. “I can’t be like her all the time.”

“How so?”

“Oh, come on, you’re not blind. You saw how people were staring at us! It’s obvious that the two of you can’t stand the sight of each other.”

He reluctantly says, “Yes.”

“I know it’s probably in my best interest to keep up appearances, but I have no desire to go out of my way to be extra bitchy to you. I hope that means you won’t be a huge asshole to me.”

“Extra bitchy... has anyone told you that you have an amazing way with words?”

“I’m serious.”

His eyes rake me from head to toe in that ruthless, cut-throat way of his. “You understand that a decision like that will make people talk. Some might think we’re... happy.”

“Let them talk.” I shrug. “I want to go home. And I know you’re the key. Consider me your new shadow. Where you go, so do I.”

Étienne looks at me for a moment longer before he nods. “Very well. We shall be kind to each other from here on out.”

I hold out my hand. “Let’s shake on it.”

He stares at my hand warily before his hand curves around mine.

It would be cliché to say that the minute our hands connected, I became frozen in place or a shock of awareness rushed through me. But something did happen and it was none of those things. It started with a small twist in my gut that traveled up my body, grazed the delicate edges of my heart before it seized it all together. The feeling came out of nowhere. I look at our connected hands. His is large and calloused, swallowing mine whole. As tall as I am, dainty isn’t exactly the first word I’d use to describe myself, but that’s how I feel right now. I jerk my hand back.

Étienne’s hard and unyielding face makes it impossible to tell if he felt the same way. He clears his throat and wordlessly holds the door open for me.

I step through and take my time giving the place a once-over. With the exception of modern updates from my time, his office is typical. Rows of eighteen-drawer filing cabinets line one wall. There’s a desk directly in front of me, and another in the far-right corner. The wood floors are entirely bare, with small scuffs where furniture was once. The walls are off-white, almost

the same color of the roller blinds attached to the windows.

A man, dressed as sharp as Étienne, stands up from the desk in front of me, with a bright, sincere smile. “Good morning, Mrs. Lacroix.”

“This is Edward. I think you met him,” Étienne says into my ear.

“Hello.” I extend my hand, and Edward looks at it with confusion.

Étienne subtly shakes his head, and I know, for some unknown reason, I’ve made a faux pas. I lower my hand and stare closely at Edward. He’s gangly, with blond hair and clean-shaven. His jacket isn’t tailored to fit him like Étienne’s and practically hangs off him.

My body locks up as recognition floods me. He’s one of the men from the photo. The man standing next to Livingston. I feel a surge of triumph because that means I’ve met three out of the four men from my photo.

With a confident smile, Étienne slings an arm around my shoulder and presses me against his side. “I’m here to pick up some paperwork, and then I’ll have lunch with my... wife.” He gives me a meaningful look, and I know I have to play along.

I wrap my hands around Étienne’s narrow waist. Beneath my arms, I feel his stomach muscles tense. Pretending not to notice, I smile at Edward. “He’s always so busy working. I had to beg him to spend some time with me.”

Judging from the way Edward stares between Étienne and me, I know this whole facade of pretending we’re a happy couple will be a lot harder than it appears.

“That is... nice,” Edward finally manages.

I keep my smile in place as we walk away. The minute Edward turns his back, my smile fades.

As we walk through an elaborate doorway, I glance to my right into another office. A man is hunched over a roll-top desk, writing in a ledger. On his desk with a check protector, glass paperweight. Directly beside his desk is

a spittoon.

When Étienne closes his office door, I whirl on him. “Edward is one of the men in the photo!”

“What?”

“That man I shook hands with? He was in the photo!” I say happily.

My excitement doesn’t extend to Étienne. He raises both brows as if to say, “So?”

He says, “I have never taken a photo with Edward Hill.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think I would remember.”

I gesture to the framed photos that hang on the wall. Étienne sighs. “No, he’s not in those pictures.”

I walk over to the photos. They’re of large ships dockside with at least forty to fifty men proudly standing on the docks. I peer at them carefully, trying to see if I can find Étienne in the crowd. After a few seconds, I give up. “Is Livingston in any of these photos?”

“No.”

“What does he do for a living again?”

Étienne snorts. “My good-for-nothin’ twin brother works at our family’s shipping company, and I use the term work loosely. He mostly stops in from time to time to show his face and then entertains one of the many ladies he sees.”

To be honest, I stopped listening right around the part where Étienne said twin. “Hold up, Livingston is your twin? When were you going to mention that little tidbit?”

“I apologize. Sometimes I forget that you essentially know nothin’ about my family.”

“Fair enough.” I shake my head in disbelief; it’s obvious Livingston and

Étienne are related, but twins? I would've never thought that. "Who is the oldest?"

"I am. By seven minutes."

"That sounds about right," I comment.

Étienne doesn't reply. His attention is back on the paperwork in front of him. I've effectively been dismissed.

I go back to scanning his office. Unsurprisingly, Étienne's desk is meticulously organized. I catch a small copying press off to the side of the desk. On top of a stack of paperwork is a stapler. Embossed on the gray enamel are the words, STAR PAPER FASTENER CO.

There's a revolving bookcase off to the left. Two chairs are angled toward Étienne's desk. I can imagine him having many meetings, staring down some poor chump until they agree to do things his way.

A nameplate in front of his lamp faces the chairs. In capitalized letters is ÉTIENNE LACROIX.

"Interesting," I murmur.

Étienne gives me a startled glance, almost as if he forgot I was here. "What?"

I point at the nameplate. "How you spell your name. It's throwing me off."

"It's French," he says idly as he continues to scan the paper in front of him. "My father's family is from France, and it's a family name."

"Now that I've seen the spelling, I'm going to butcher your name."

He raises a brow and smirks. "Butcher?"

"Well, yeah."

Étienne lifts his gaze. "Say it with me slowly—Ay-T-yen."

I repeat it a few times in my head before I say it out loud. Étienne doesn't seem impressed. "Not quite there. But close enough. All throughout school,

my name was mispronounced.” He shrugs. “I’m used to it.”

I continue to pace his office. The whole time, I feel his eyes on me.

“You can take a seat,” he says.

I stop walking and face him.

“Unless you prefer to tread a hole in the rug,” he says.

I get overwhelmed easily. Instead of focusing on one thing at a time, I let all my jumbled thoughts mingle together, then my mind starts to feel like an overcrowded amusement park. Sitting still right now is the last thing I want to do, but we need to talk. We need to dive head first into this conversation because if I don’t, there’s an excellent chance I’ll never go home.

That thought makes me freeze in my tracks. My hands curl into fists before I take a deep breath and gingerly sit down. I glance across the desk at Étienne.

He signs his name at the bottom of a document before he pushes the contract aside. For the first time today, he looks at me for longer than a millisecond. “Where do we begin?”

Scooting forward in the chair, I rest my elbows on his desk and drum my nails on the smooth surface. There’s not a speck of dust on the shiny mahogany. In fact, I can practically see my reflection.

“Serene?”

I lift my head and see Étienne staring at me expectantly.

“I don’t know.” My hands drop onto my lap. “I’ve ransacked your entire house trying to find pictures or paperwork that would have some connection to my time.”

Étienne’s eyes narrow. “When?”

“Yesterday while you were at work. What else do you think I was doing?”

“A lot of things,” he mutters.

I bristle at his words and remind myself that this is just as much of a life-altering change for him as it is for me. And even though we may have come to a truce, it'll take a bit of time for him to not view me as enemy number one.

I take a deep breath. "The point is, I have no idea where to start."

Étienne stares at me long enough that I to squirm. To my relief, he looks away and busies himself with some paperwork on his desk. "It's overwhelming," he says.

My eyes widen imperceptibly, and my heart races. I'm excited because for the first time since I arrived here, I finally feel as if someone understands what I'm experiencing. "Yes. Exactly."

"We need to start from the beginnin'. You said that your last name is Parow?"

I nod.

"Yesterday I went through my file of clients, searching for the name Parow..."

I find myself leaning toward him. "And?"

"And I found nothin'."

I slouch and exhale loudly.

"What are your parents' names?"

"Katherine and Daniel."

"Mother's maiden name?"

"De Valc."

"The names don't sound familiar, but I'll check. What about your grandparents?"

At that, I hesitate. My mother's parents passed away before I was born, as did my dad's mother. His father's dad died when I was a kid, but I remember him being distant and aloof. "I'm not sure about my mom's parents. But I

know my grandpa on my dad's side is named Gregory. My grandma's name was Olivia."

If Étienne's shocked by my lack of a relationship with my grandparents, it doesn't show. He just continues to write everything down.

"What was Gregory's career?"

"He worked at our family's horse farm, Ravenwood Farms, in McLean, Virginia. My family still runs the business," I say with a hint of pride. "The business was started by my great-great-grandfather." I look at the ceiling as I try to remember his name. Nothing comes to mind. "I don't remember his name."

"Is it safe to say your family originated from Virginia?"

"Absolutely."

Étienne's hand glides across the paper from left to right as he writes everything down. When he's done, he stares at me expectantly.

There's so much I need to say, so I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "I have a fiancé."

Étienne blinks once. Then twice. "Who?"

"His name is Will Myles. I met him in college. He proposed this past summer."

He doesn't say anything. His face is impassive. What's running through that mind of his? He drops his pen and glances at me. It's not lost on me that he didn't write down Will's name.

"We'll start from there and find answers somehow. It's not gonna happen overnight." Étienne's voice is gruff. He doesn't smile encouragingly, but he doesn't need to. He says the word *we* as though we're in this together, and that's all I need.

I open my mouth to say thank you and that I appreciate him trying to help, but he shoots me an impatient glance. "You can go now. I'm sure

Warren is still in town and will pick you up.”

Asshole.

I cross my legs and make myself comfortable in my chair. “I think I’ll stay here.”

“Suit yourself,” he mutters then puts on his glasses and gets to work.

Minutes pass, even though they feel like hours as I grow restless. Étienne is in the zone, pouring over the document in front of him as though his life depends on it. In fact, I’m confident he’s forgotten I’m still in the room.

“What do you invest in?” I ask.

“Mainly real estate, but I’m willing to dabble in any industry.”

I stand; my back is starting to ache. To get a rise out of Étienne, I perch on the edge of his desk, and it works. His head whips up as he blinks rapidly. I see the shock in his eyes.

“What’s this?” I ask casually, gesturing to the papers in front of him.

“A few months ago, I invested in a new company.”

“What company?” I attempt to read the paper, but the cursive makes it impossible to make out the words.

“Chevrolet Motor Car Company,” he says idly. “But I’m unsure. There have been no production models except for one.”

My lips curve into a slow smile. “Something tells me that you shouldn’t worry about that investment.”

He cocks his head to the side and stares at me skeptically. “What do you mean?”

I hop off his desk and do a lap around his office. “This company you’re unsure of will merge with General Motors and go on to compete with Henry Ford. I only know that because my dad is a history junkie.”

“Amazing.” He discards the paperwork in front of him and peers at me with a new light in his eye. “What else can you tell me?”

I stop and look at him over my shoulder. “What do you want to know?”
“Everything.”

“If I knew everything, I wouldn’t be standing here in the same room as you. I would’ve figured out a way to go home.”

Étienne smirks. “True. But I simply want you to tell me about the economy, technology, and way of life in your time.”

“Are you asking because you’re genuinely curious or because you want to take my answers and apply them to your investments?”

“Both. I’d be a fool not to ask.”

What an idiot I’ve been. All this time I’ve been so focused on getting him to believe me that I never stopped to think what the aftermath would be. I never thought he would be so curious about my time.

“A huge fool,” I finally reply.

I walk back to his desk, sit on the edge, and tell him all about the incredible advancements made in the car industry. From the speed and radios to body styles. He lights up when I tell him that vehicles now come with backup cameras. Oddly enough, he finds the seat belt to be the most fascinating thing.

When I finish talking, I take a deep breath. Étienne leans back in his seat and whistles. I smile and feel a slight buzz from striking Étienne speechless. Something tells me that very few people are able to do that.

As he soaks in all the information, I look at his neatly stacked pile of newspapers and grab the first one I see. At the top of the front page, in old English font, is the *News and Courier*.

Beneath it, in a much smaller font is the price of the paper. A whopping five cents. Then there’s the established date of the newspaper (1803) and today’s date, April 16th, 1912. I’ve been here for four days now.

The front-page headline is about the *Titanic*. I’m not the least bit

surprised. It probably will be for some time. As the days pass more and more details will emerge. My gut twists at the thought.

“Do you always grab everythin’ in front of you?”

I lift my head. “Are you always such a control freak?”

“I have to be. If I weren’t, my business would be in shambles.” He flicks me a quick glance. “Do you have an occupation in your time?”

“Yes, I do.”

His brows rise in surprise. “And it would be?”

“I’m a porn star by day and moonlight as a stripper on the weekends,” I say without missing a beat. While Étienne struggles to form a coherent sentence, I pretend to inspect my cuticles. After a few seconds, I gaze at him innocently. “You do know what a stripper is, right?”

He closes his mouth and sits up straight. A red flush starting from his neck spreads up to his jawline. “Of course I do.”

“I’m sure you’re wondering about the whole porn star job title. That’s where you have sex on camera. It’s a very lucrative business,” I explain.

Étienne says nothing, and it takes everything in my power not to break my stoic facade.

“Do you...” He swallows. “Is that truly your occupation?”

I throw my hands up and laugh. “Of course not. But I have to say, it was amazing seeing the look on your face.”

He glares at me while subtly adjusting his collar. “Are you done jestin’?”

“Yes, I’m done.” I lace my fingers in my lap. “I run an antique shop with my friend. It’s called Past Repeat.”

Étienne seems more shocked by that than the whole stripper thing.

“This time, I promise I’m telling you the truth.”

“I know.”

“So why do you look so shocked? Didn’t think a woman can run her own

business?”

“I did not say that. A woman can do whatever she pleases. My wife is proof of that,” he adds bitterly. He claims he’s okay with it, but I can see in his eyes that he’s not one hundred percent sold on the idea of me running my own business.

“Well, I’m not your wife. In my time, I don’t sit around and spend money. I spend most of my time going to flea markets, estate sales, and anywhere else I can get my hands on antique items. Then I polish them up, fix broken pieces of furniture, and sell them.”

That grabs his attention. “Is it profitable?”

“Am I bringing in the money you are? No. But we’re breaking even, and I love what I do. That’s enough for me.”

There’s a small—practically microscopic—amount of respect in his eyes. “It took me a well over a year before my investments started to pay off.”

“What kept you going?”

“Probably the same thing that keeps you going. I love what I do,” he admits. He leans in as though we’re co-conspirators. I find myself leaning in too. “Whether it be real estate or companies that are just startin’, I find the entire process exhilarating. Investments simply center around timing and sheer luck.”

“Have you ever lost money?”

“Of course. But I look at those moments as invigorating because I learn from them and never make the same mistake twice.”

From the determination in his eyes and the stubborn set of his jaw, I believe every word he says. I love what I do, but I don’t think I’ll ever have the drive to succeed that Étienne has. Very few people do.

“I have to confess that my favorite part of running Past Repeat is go—”

The door opens, and a man barges in. “Étienne, we need to send a

telegraph to Kenworthy and let him know whether you're still interested in the property outside of Mount Pleasant.”

“Sure, I'm interested. But he's askin' too much.”

The man's head is bent as he scans the paper in his hand. “I've spoken to him twice about the price. I don't think—” He lifts his head and shuts up when he sees me sitting on the edge of Étienne's desk.

The minute I get a good look at him, a lightbulb goes off in my head. He's the fourth man in my photo. The one standing next to Étienne.

“I'm sorry. I didn't know you had company,” the man says stiffly.

“It's all right, Asa,” Étienne says, putting extra emphasis on the name Asa.

Asa gives me a cursory glance. “It's nice to see you, Serene.”

“Uhh... you too,” I say, although it comes out more like a question.

I wait for something to happen now that I finally know who each man in the picture is. Maybe that's all that I need to go back to my own time, but as the seconds tick by, nothing occurs. No headache. No feeling of falling backward. The room doesn't spin around me. It was wishful thinking on my part.

“Did you look over the Chevrolet Motor Car Company proposal?” Asa says.

“Yes.” Étienne sneaks a quick glance in my direction. “I think this would be a good investment opportunity.”

Frowning, Asa grabs the paper. He scans the words for a few seconds before he glances at Étienne. “Are you positive?”

“Yes. Why?”

Before Asa opens his mouth, he gives me a pointed look and waits. I know he wants me to leave, but there's no way in hell I'm missing what he has to say. Once he realizes I'm not going anywhere, his cheeks turn red. He

flicks his gaze back to Étienne. “I mentioned two days ago that this investment could be risky and that it might be a better choice to pass.”

“I know that, but I decided I want to take that risk.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“Me,” I cut in.

In unison, their eyes swivel my direction.

Asa crosses his arms. “What gives you the authority to hand out investment advice?”

“No authority. Only a gut instinct.”

“Really?”

I nod.

“Did your gut instinct also tell you to spend Étienne’s money on parties you have no business hostin’?”

“No. But my gut instinct is telling me that I should knee you in the balls.”

“I’m afraid she’s tellin’ the truth,” Étienne pipes in. “I’ve seen firsthand that she’ll make good on her word.”

Asa doesn’t lighten up. He obviously dislikes me because of the things Old Serene has done or said, but it goes deeper than that. He continues to glare at me. “Why don’t you busy yourself with plannin’ another party? Or maybe you’d be more interested in buying hundreds of dollars’ worth of clothes with money you didn’t earn.”

I open my mouth, ready to tell him to go fuck off.

“That’s enough,” Étienne says. His voice is quiet, yet commanding.

Asa’s eyes widen imperceptibly. He clearly can’t believe that Étienne didn’t come to his defense. Seconds later, Asa leaves the room.

I don’t know what got into me. I’m the type of person to shy away from conflict, but the way Asa looked at me as though I was the dirt beneath his fingernails made me furious and reminded me that I’m currently trapped in an

era where women are objects and never a man's equal. They have no choice but to be subservient.

"You can't speak to him like that."

"Why? Because I'm a woman?" I challenge. "And what's his full name?"

"No. Because that's not how the other Serene would speak. And his name is Asa Calhoun."

"And how would she have spoken?"

"That's the point. She wouldn't have. She and Asa never interact," Étienne replies.

"After that encounter, I can't say that I blame her." With my arms crossed, I pace the room to stop myself from walking out of Étienne's office, finding Asa, and whacking him over the head with one of my shoes. "Besides, it shouldn't matter how the Old Serene reacted because I don't want to be her one hundred percent."

"You will not talk to him like that again," Étienne commands.

I arch a brow. "You can't control me and tell me what to do."

"I can try."

"And you'll fail. If I needed controlling, I would've come with a remote and an instruction manual."

Closing his eyes, Étienne pinched the bridge of his nose. "My God. You are insufferable."

I shrug a shoulder and become silent. After a few seconds, I say, "I don't like that man."

"I can tell. But you have to realize I've known Asa my whole life. He's a childhood friend."

"Does he work for you?"

Étienne nods. "He's my accountant. Along with Edward."

I think I'm more upset over the fact that Étienne and I were having a rare

conversation where we weren't lunging at each other's throats, and Asa burst into the room and ruined that moment. I was given a brief moment of what it was like to be friendly with Étienne, and I want more.

"I'll talk to him today about how he spoke to you, okay?"

I give a small smile. "You don't have to do that."

Étienne shrugs. "He was rude. Keep in mind that he's someone I have to work with on a daily basis."

"I know." My shoulders slump in defeat. "I just want to go home. That's all."

"I understand. We'll continue to find a way the best way we know how. Continue to search through Belgrave. I'll look through my files and ask around town if any of the names you gave me sound familiar, okay?"

Mutely, I nod.

"Excellent."

Étienne stands, grabs his jacket from the coat rack, and puts it on. For a second, I admire the way his biceps strain against his shirt before they're covered up. Before he turns around, I quickly look away. I'm engaged. Not blind, yet I still feel a strange sense of guilt because I wanted to keep looking.

Étienne's oblivious to my thoughts and walks toward the door. "I have a meeting in thirty minutes." He arches a brow. "I presume you don't want to come along?"

"No. I'll go back to Belgrave."

I'm no closer to finding a way home. Right now, all I feel is defeat piled on top of more defeat. I know it shows in my eyes. I don't try to hide it.

Étienne's mouth opens and closes a few times. Patiently, I wait to hear what he has to say, but nothing comes out. In the end, he opens the door and gestures for me to go before him.



“YOU CAN DO this,” I whisper to myself. “You’re going to find a way back to your time.”

Pretty words, almost encouraging, but when I look around and think of all the things I’m up against, it overwhelms me and steals all of my hope. More than anything, I want to walk out of this room and suddenly be in my world. A place that is not unknown. It’s been a week since the *Titanic* sank. A week since I’ve finally earned Étienne’s trust. The two of us have tried to think of anything and everything that could bring me back to my time. He’s searched through his files for any of my family member’s names and has asked around Charleston, but he’s come up empty. Things aren’t better on my end. I’ve practically ransacked his office, library, and even Old Serene’s room for a note or picture. Still, there’s nothing.

I’ve never backed down from anything, but for the first time in my life, I’m scared. Scared because I’m unfamiliar with my surroundings. Scared

because I have no idea what today will bring.

Doesn't help that my thoughts are a jumbled mess. And when I try to separate one question from the rest, five more appear. But each one always reverts to the same one—what is the reason for me being here?

Right about now would be a good time for my iPad to appear. If it did, I'd Google until I got the answers I needed. I could search my heart out, find all the facts about this era, but I'd never discover a logical explanation as to how this happened.

I firmly believe that Étienne has something to do with it. The dream, the picture, and the fact that I'm his "wife" are not coincidences.

That feels like the only reliable fact out of all of this.

"Ma'am, are you okay?"

I blink, bringing Hannah into focus. She's standing behind me, staring at my reflection with concern. I wipe my cheeks for any stray tears and take a deep breath. "I'm fine. Just stressed, that's all."

In my mind, I pictured getting Étienne to believe me as the hardest task. Anything after would be a cakewalk. I envisioned him pulling out a significant document. Or perhaps it'd be as simple as him saying, "I believe you, Serene." And *poof!* I'd be back in my own time. As simple as that, right?

Oh, how wrong I was.

The problem is Étienne's as lost as I am. The only thing that linked us is the picture. That's the only clue we have to go off of. I've described the photo to him numerous times in great detail, and he swears that he has never taken a picture in front of Belgrave with Livingston.

I'm at a stopgap. I'm trying to think of ideas and ways to go home, but nothing is sticking. My anxiety has been growing like a giant beast, and now it's making me a shaking mess.

Is this what a nervous breakdown feels like?

I mutter a quick goodbye to Hannah and leave my bedroom. I can't be in there. I need to move. Moving helps me breathe better. My feet propel me forward, and even though I've become more familiar with this enormous mansion, I typically stick to the east wing and downstairs. Each room is different from the last, each designed to take your breath away. In total, there are three floors and seventy-five rooms. The house is one big optical illusion—right when you think there's no more room, you walk down another hallway and see more doors. I've spent the past two days going through every one, including the “maids' quarters,” as Nat calls them. However, right now, I walk past the stairs, moving toward the other side of the house, toward Étienne's room.

At least I think this is where his room is. A few times, after dinner, I've seen him turn in this direction and go to the second door on the left. I hesitate in front of that door, and instead of knocking as I should, I walk right in.

“I need to talk to you,” I say with authority I don't have.

Étienne, who's standing in front of a mirror, jumps as though I've struck him. “What are you doing?”

“I need to talk to you,” I repeat.

The man helping Étienne get dressed gives me his back and continues to polish Étienne's shoes in silence.

Étienne turns toward me, but not before I see him discreetly button up his black slacks. “Right now?”

“Yes.”

“I'm changin'.”

“Are you self-conscious changing in front of me?”

Because he didn't need to be. At all. He isn't gorgeous, but his body is perfection. His white shirt is unbuttoned, and his black bow tie is draped

around his neck, begging for a woman to loop the material around her hands and tug him toward her.

My pulse increases at the thought.

“No, I’m not self-conscious,” he snaps. “I’m simply used to getting dressed in private.”

“Then why is that guy in here?”

Étienne glances at me from the corner of his eye. “He’s my valet. That’s his job.”

“Well, I can help you. I have two perfectly working hands.” I lift my hands, spread my fingers, and wiggle them.

It’s a joke, but his valet appears horrified. To be fair, Étienne wore that expression a lot when he first met me, but he’s adapting to my humor.

Right now, he rolls his eyes and looks to his valet. “I can take it from here. I need to speak to Mrs. Lacroix alone.” He arches a brow and smirks.

Mrs. Lacroix.

Little shit. He knows I don’t like that title.

“Of course, sir,” his valet says.

I step out of the valet’s way and wait until he closes the door before I walk deeper into the room. Étienne’s bedroom is decorated in deep navy and gray. A king-size mahogany bed stands to the left of me. My hand curls around the smooth bedpost as I scan the room. There’s a lamp with a red marble glass shade. I’m confident that lamp would sell for close to two grand in my time. His glasses are next to the lamp.

Heavy, dark velvet drapes conceal the outside world. I bet it’s forbidden for the curtains to be pulled back to let sunlight pour into his dungeon. Next to the windows is a wooden gentleman’s valet stand.

There’s a lowboy dresser on the other side of the room. It’s polished so thoroughly, I could probably see my reflection on the surface. Very few items

on the dresser. A watch. A small glass bowl with cufflinks. A carriage clock. There's a magazine called the *All-Story*. I have no idea what magazine that is, but I'm assuming it's about stories. Like his office, everything has its place, and absolutely nothing is out of order.

"Did you come in here for a reason?"

"Yes." I move away from the bed and toward the windows. "I wanted to talk to you."

"About?"

"Talking isn't the right word. More like vent," I confess.

"About?"

I throw my hands up and laugh emotionlessly. "About? What do you think?"

His brows pucker as he concentrates on buttoning one of his sleeves. "Have you found anything that can send you home?"

"Oh, yeah."

Étienne's head snaps up. "Really?"

"Yeah," I remark dryly. "All I need to do is build a time machine, and I can be home within seconds!"

He exhales loudly and goes back to buttoning up his sleeve. Well, attempting to. All he's doing is pulling the thread of the button away from the cuff.

"If I'd found anything that'd take me back to my time, I'd be much happier right now." I sigh and walk over to him and wave his hand away. "Here, let me help. Your paws are too big."

"Did you call my hands paws?"

I grab his wrist. His skin feels like fire against mine. "Yes. I don't know if you've noticed, but they're massive, and watching you mutilate that poor button is cruel and unusual punishment."

“This is why I have a valet. To help me.”

I try to slide the button through the thin slit and fail the first time, so I tighten my grip. I’m so focused on this damn button going into the damn slit that I don’t even think twice when I place his hand on my upper breast. I freeze and stop myself from sucking in a sharp breath.

Étienne doesn’t move an inch. His hand remains pressed against my chest, his fingers slightly curled into a loose fist. He’s so tall that his shoulders become hunched somewhat. They’re so broad, they envelop me, shielding me from the room and blocking out the light. It makes my task harder, yet I don’t utter a word.

After a few seconds, the button slips through. I have to stop the sigh from escaping my lips.

“Other hand.”

Obediently, Étienne gives me his other wrist and boldly places his hand on my chest in the same place as his other hand was. I feel his sharp gaze on me, and it makes me slip up more than once. Can he feel how fast my heart is beating? I bet he can.

I bite my lower lip and concentrate, but it’s pretty damn hard; standing this close, I can smell him. Maybe I’ve been away from Will too long because Étienne smells divine. He isn’t wearing cologne. It’s the smell of his soap that’s putting me into a tizzy.

I’m pathetic.

After the fifth try, the button slides through.

“There. All done.” I all but throw Étienne’s hand back to him.

“Thank you.”

I nod and take a small step back, watching as Étienne continues getting ready. Discreetly, I place my palm against my chest as if that very act will soothe my frantic heart.

“Will it improve your mood if we go over everything we’ve searched through?”

I jolt at the sound of Étienne’s voice. “No. Maybe. I don’t know!”

Étienne leans against the dresser with his arms crossed.

“I mean, I feel like I’m gonna explode. I’m beyond frustrated because I’m searching for a way home, and nothing is happening.”

Étienne doesn’t offer words of support. Not that I expect him to. He’s not the comforting type. He remains quiet, staring in that unnerving way of his. A few seconds of silence and he pushes away from the dresser.

“Do you want to take a walk?” he proposes, not meeting my eyes.

“A walk?”

“Yes. A walk,” Étienne says deliberately slowly, as though he’s talking to an infant. “A walk might clear your head.”

It’s not the worst suggestion. It actually doesn’t sound half bad. Getting outside and taking a few deep, cleansing breaths might be precisely what I need.

I give him a faint smile. “A walk sounds nice.”

Instead of smiling back, Étienne frowns, straightens his shoulders, and clears his throat. “Fine. A walk it is.” He grabs his blazer from the valet stand. Even though it’s humid out, he puts it on. I try not to stare at how his abs become defined against his white shirt. As he walks toward the door, he adjusts the collar of his jacket. The material conforms to the wide berth of his shoulders.

Side by side, we walk down the stairs. Ben doesn’t raise a brow at seeing the two of us and opens the front door. Instantly, I wish I’d put my hair up.

“We should walk down the driveway,” I announce.

“I was thinking of a walk around Belgrave.”

I gesture to the long, twisting drive in front of us. “Look how enticing it

is. Listen closely.” I cup a hand around my ear. “It’s saying, ‘Walk me, Serene and Étienne. Walk me.’”

Étienne stops beside me and, with his hands on his hips, shakes his head. “You’re a strange creature.”

“I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me since I’ve arrived,” I reply cheekily before I set off down the driveway.

It’s a matter of seconds before Étienne catches up to me.

“How long is this driveway?”

“Almost two miles,” Étienne replies.

“I bet I could ask you how many acres your house stands on and you’d —”

“Before we sold it, a thousand acres,” he cut in.

“Why did you sell off the acres?”

“There was a year of bad crops. My father wasn’t interested in running a sugar plantation. He was busy enough with the shipping company and decided to sell. Which ended up being a wise decision.”

I stop walking and arch a brow. “What else can you tell me?”

“About Belgrave? Everything,” he says confidently. “This is all I know.”

“It’s a beautiful place, but that’s not what I’m curious about. I wanna know how your family earned all this.” I gesture wildly at our peaceful surroundings. “Was it by luck or hard work?”

“Both. My father’s parents immigrated in 1853 from Beauvais, France, with only sixteen francs to their name. My father was a year old. My grandfather, Alexandre, wasn’t a brilliant man, but he was hardworkin’ and persistent. Started workin’ at the docks and wanted to start his own shipping company, but then there was the Civil War. It shattered Charleston.”

I nod anxiously, rapt with attention. These words are better than any history lesson or textbook because it’s his life. His family. His story.

“In 1864, he started a shipping company that grew to be very prosperous.”

“Fascinating,” I whisper.

Étienne glances at me, his skepticism showing. He thinks I’m being sarcastic.

“I’m not joking,” I quickly say. “It truly is fascinating. I mean, the history books have got nothing on you.”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “Tell me about the city you grew up in.”

This is the first time Étienne has shown any interest in my life, rather than just the details of my time. It’s shocking, yet refreshing; I’m always the one asking questions. “I grew up in McLean, Virginia.”

He nods. “Is it a busy city?”

“I guess so. My family’s home is on the outskirts of town with lots of space, but it’s nothing close to Belgrave.”

“How do you mean?”

“For starters, there isn’t this.” I pause dramatically and close my eyes. When I open them, Étienne is staring at me as if I’ve lost my mind.

“There isn’t what?”

I shush him. “Listen.”

He pauses, his brows furrowed. “I don’t hear anything.”

Leaning in, I smile widely. “Exactly. Your era has this peace. In my time, you can hear the sounds of cars driving by, impatient people honking their horns. People are yelling or loudly laughing. We never truly take the time to stop and appreciate the moment.”

Gravel crunches beneath our feet as we continue down the driveway.

“Do you miss your brothers?” he asks.

I glance at my feet. “I do. Especially my brother Ian. Not to say I don’t miss Bradley, I do, but there’s a bigger age gap between us, and he’s so

serious and focused. Ian and I are closer in age. He's silly, and if I need help, he's always there."

Étienne remains silent. "And your fiancé—you miss him, too?"

"Of course," I say, outrage coating my words. I don't know why I'm so defensive. It's a simple question. Perhaps it's because when I first came here, I missed Will so severely, it was a physical ache. That pain is growing dim though, and it's scary. It doesn't help that my body is reacting to Étienne in ways it has no business reacting. I'm betraying Will. Plain and simple.

"Of course I miss him," I say gently.

Étienne looks nervous to ask another question, and I can't blame him. I just ripped his head off. It's probably best that he doesn't ask any more; we need to get back on track and talk about something a little less personal.

"I don't like that Asa dude," I blurt.

Étienne whips his head toward me. "Excuse me?"

"That man I met in your office? I don't trust him. Something seems off."

"What makes you say that?"

"For starters, he was an ass to me. And he had a cocky smile."

My answer makes Étienne burst into laughter.

"I'm serious."

"I know you are. And that's what makes it funny. Because if Asa is suspicious for his... how did you put it? Cocky smile? Then that means Livingston should be on your list of people not to trust."

"Stop making a joke out of all of this."

"Stop making ridiculous suggestions, and I won't have a reason to joke."

"I'm starting to believe that the entire reason this happened is because of you."

"Excuse me?"

"In my dream, who was in pain? You. And when I come here, I'm your

wife? That can't be ignored. I think you're the one who needs my help."

That sobers Étienne up quickly. "You can't be serious."

"Think about it."

"I did. And it's ridiculous. Did you ever think that you're the one who needs my help?"

"If I did, then you would've been the one to travel to my time," I counter. Just as I expect, Étienne bristles at my remark. He doesn't utter a word though, so I continue. "I think it's worth looking at the company you keep. Employees. Friends. People who might be angry at you."

"You can add Johnathan Hunt to the list of angry people."

"Fair enough." I stop and grab Étienne's arm. "You have to at least look at what I'm saying objectively; you know I have a point."

"Fair enough," he says reluctantly.

"And maybe the first person you should look at is Asa Calhoun."

"You have no reason to be suspicious of Asa. I'm not disagreeing that your encounter with him didn't go well, but he's not a cruel person. You simply took him by surprise."

I know I made a far reach by making that declaration, but once the words came out, I felt better. Étienne is convinced that his friend would never do anything to harm him, but all I can picture is the way he sulked and glared at me. True, he thought I was the other Serene. But it was more than that; he didn't want me in that office or giving my opinion because he didn't think it was needed. Or valid.

We become silent, lost in our thoughts. I sneak a glance at Étienne and see lines near the corners of his eyes. They're like faint parentheses, barely discernible far away, but apparent up close. Undoubtedly those lines appeared from the countless times he's narrowed his sharp gaze in someone's direction or squinted at a document because he didn't have his glasses on

hand.

“Asa is an accountant for your company, correct?”

Étienne gives me a nod.

“Will you at least think about looking into his activity within the company?”

He sighs loudly. He doesn't want to agree. In fact, I'm confident he thinks I'm way off base. But he throws his hands in the air in defeat. “Yes, I will think about it.”

That's good enough for me.

With the sun setting, the harsh line of his nose is less discernible. I can barely see the small bend. His hands are linked behind his back, but even in this peaceful environment, he's as tense as a board. It's as if he's waiting for someone to burst out of the trees and attack.

“Have you always been this...” I try to think of the right word. “Serious?”

A corner of Étienne's mouth twitches. He stares at me. “Serious?”

“You know... uptight and businesslike. Do you ever let go and have fun?”

“It's hard to let go and have fun when you're running a business,” he confesses.

Although Past Repeat doesn't come close to being the business Étienne has created, I understand what he's saying. Most companies have the odds stacked against them from the get-go. So you spend your days working like a dog only to have your head barely above water. The only thing keeping you going is your refusal to let all your hard work go to waste.

“I understand.”

“You do?” he asks skeptically.

“You don't believe me?”

“I do not. I was born with responsibility looming over my head. The responsibility that I would run the family company.”

“We have more in common than you think.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Although I was born from alcohol.” Étienne stares at me as though I’ve grown three heads, so I continue. “Parents went to Cancun for vacation. Had too much tequila and *bam!* Nine months later here I was.” I shrug. “The parallels between our lives are uncanny.”

He continues to stare at me with a small frown.

“Étienne,” I say softly and nudge his arm, “I’m kidding.”

His lips kick up into a smallest of smiles, and all I can think is that if he smiled more often, no one would think of him as ugly. No one would look at him in fear. He’d have the attention of every woman around him.

“But to answer your question, my business will probably never see the success that your company has, but I imagine that once you reach a certain level of success, it’s expected of you to keep that success going.”

Étienne looks stunned, and a glimmer of respect shines in his eyes. “You’re right. For that, I’m going to do something I rarely do.”

With his eyes on me, he raises both hands to his throat and unfastens the first two buttons.

I whistle low. “Oh, you are a rebel. What’s next? Not wearing a waistcoat and blazer to dinner every night?”

A smile plays on his lips. “Perhaps.”

I smile back. “I take back what I said. You do know how to lighten up.”

In some roundabout way, we’ve reached a truce. This walk has proven that we can be around each other and be civil. I’m sure there will be more moments where he takes a jab and I take one right back, but that’s the exhilarating and infuriating part of being around Étienne. He doesn’t know

how to back down.

“Follow me.” He grabs my hand.

Unlike the other times he’s seized me, his touch is now gentle and makes my heart race. Étienne seems oblivious, a man on a mission, and continues down the driveway. Our shadows project across the white gravel, making our limbs look long and exaggerated. The only thing keeping us connected is our hands. Quickly I look away from the image.

“Where are you taking us?”

“You’ll see,” he replies cryptically.

For the first time since I’ve been here, I feel a rush of excitement. The fear and apprehension I feel on a daily basis fade away as a slow smile creeps across my face.

Minutes tick by as we walk. Étienne’s legs are so long that I’m practically running to keep up with him.

“Slow down,” I say a bit breathlessly.

Étienne abruptly stops, making me run into his back. He veers to the left, stepping between two oaks. We walk through some bushes and onto a hidden path. The tall grass grazes my legs. Étienne makes an abrupt left turn and stops in front of a tall oak.

“Livingston and I used to spend time back here.”

I look around at all the trees surrounding us. “What did you do?”

He points high above him. “Up there. You see that severed rope?”

Sure enough, a frayed rope gently sways in the breeze. “Yeah.”

“It was much longer when we were kids, and we would have races to see who could climb it the fastest.”

I smirk at the thought of a young Étienne and Livingston creating mischief in the woods.

“Once I made it to the top and sat on the branch, waiting for Livingston to

follow me. I lost my balance, started to fall off, and when I grabbed the branch, my head slammed into the branch.” Étienne points at the jagged scar that starts at the top of his forehead and drags down toward his left brow. “That’s how I got my little scar.”

“Definitely little,” I say, deadpan. “You can hardly notice it.”

Étienne grins. “It hurt, but growing up, I would constantly use this scar to point out to Livingston that I was faster.”

Once again, I smile. I could picture myself doing the same thing to Ian if it happened to me. I touch the bark of the very tree where Étienne earned his scar. It’s corrugated and textured. Suddenly, I get an idea.

I turn to Étienne. “Do you have a pocket knife?”

Surprisingly, he sticks a hand in his left pocket and pulls out a knife. I peer closely at it. The main blade loudly snaps open. On the shiny surface are the words Crandall Cutlery Co. Bradford, PA.

“Do you recognize this?” Étienne asks.

“I’m an antique fanatic, but not that educated on knives,” I confess with a small smile. “Can I have it for a second?”

Étienne narrows his eyes. “Are you going to stab me with it?”

“If you asked me that question weeks ago, my answer would’ve been yes,” I reply. “But now? No. I have something else in mind.”

He hands me the knife with a wary expression. I turn the handle around and watch the light reflect off the blade.

“You’re making me nervous.”

“Relax, Lacroix. I may not have a lot of knowledge on knives, but I’ve held one once or twice.” I step closer to the tree, place the tip of the knife against the bark, and get to work. The blade’s imperfect with a slight curve, but it still gets the job done.

Étienne stands beside me with his hands in his pockets. He’s silent as he

watches me drive the tip of the blade into the bark over and over. My hand aches a bit and the upper portion of the knife digs into my skin, but I keep going until the last letter is finished.

With a sigh, I step back and inspect my handiwork. The letters are jagged and uneven, but certainly readable.

SERENE WAS HERE

If I'd more time to think it over, maybe I would've been more creative with my carving. But this is an impromptu opportunity. I jumped at the chance. What's happening to me right now is unimaginable. Time changes. People die and are born every second. But what stands the test of time is the world around us. I want to leave something to show that yes, I was here. That is, if I ever do leave this era and go back to the present day.

I watch Étienne from the corner of my eye. "Ridiculous?"

Étienne stares at my work for a second longer before he looks at me. He gives me that same heart-melting half-smile. "Not at all. I think I would do the same thing if I were you."

There my heart goes again, wildly thumping like a bird trying to escape its cage. My hands shake, so I hand Étienne the knife, not bothering to close the blade. His fingers brush mine, but instead of moving away, he lingers for a second. I don't move a muscle.

His eyes lock on mine. This should be the time when I break eye contact, but I don't.

The silence between us is somewhat dangerous. When we talk, it's similar to fencing. Our words become weapons, and when one of us attacks, the other feints left, then right. Neither of us knows how to disengage, so on and on it goes. We play the game so skillfully, I sometimes forget where I am,

who I am, and whose company I'm enjoying.

In the stillness, the impact slams into me full force. I feel as though I've been sucker punched in the gut, and I grapple to come up with any subject that is sure to outrage Étienne. Something to shatter this moment. I can think of nothing.

Étienne is the first to break contact. "We should probably go back. Dinner will begin soon."

"You're right," I rush out, grateful to leave this area.

We walk back through the tall grass, and by the time we leave the live oaks and step back onto the driveway, the lights are faintly glowing at Belgrave.

After a few minutes of silence, I turn toward Étienne. "I have a personal question to ask you."

"You mean the questions you've been asking me recently aren't personal?" he asks gently.

"This one is a personal question you may not like."

He sighs. "Ask away."

I observe him. "Why do you hate your wife so much?"

Étienne's eyes widen with understanding. "I was waiting for this question."

I remain silent, waiting for him to reply. The relationship between him and his wife has lingered in my head since I came here. I never felt comfortable—or thought it was the right time—to ask the question. But right now, I can only hope he'll give me an honest answer.

Étienne looks forward, his eyes fixed on Belgrave. I'm starting to believe he's going to ignore my question when he takes a deep breath. "It was decided when we were both kids that we would marry."

"So it was a betrothal?"

“Not quite. More of a marriage of convenience for our families, something they’d been planning since we were both children.”

“An arranged marriage?” I don’t hide my shock. “I thought they were typically done in the eighteenth century.”

“They’re still quite frequent, I assure you.”

“I’m assuming you and your wife weren’t thrilled?”

Étienne shrugs. “It made no difference to me. Serene... I mean, my wife... we didn’t get along growin’ up.”

“Why not?”

“For starters, there’s a significant age gap. That may work well for some couples. Between us, it couldn’t be more apparent. While I want to work, she wants to be at every social gathering. I want to invest money; she wants to spend. I prefer to be monogamous. She does not.”

“If you two didn’t get along in the first place, then why did you proceed with the marriage?”

Étienne gives me a queer look. “It was, for the most part, an irreversible decision. Our families were counting on it. Not to say that Serene didn’t fight it every step of the way. She hated the idea of marrying me.”

“Why?”

“This isn’t exactly a face that people dream of waking up to every morning.”

“That’s a bit heavy-handed, don’t you think?” I give him a once-over. “You’re not exactly the Hunchback of Notre Dame.”

“Is that a compliment or an insult?”

My cheeks feel red from his inspection. “Neither. It’s simply the truth.”

Étienne looks forward. “She insisted on marryin’ Livingston. ‘The handsome twin.’ Her words, not mine.”

“Did the Old Serene really say that she wanted ‘the handsome twin’ in

front of you?”

“No, but I overheard her.” He sees the look on my face and smiles. “It didn’t inconvenience me. Nothing she said did.”

That can’t exactly be the truth. Étienne may act gruff and emotionless, but he’s not. He hates this woman with a passion because her words hurt him to his soul. That’s why he can be so cruel. He wants to hurt you before you can hurt him.

But Étienne will never admit this, and I’m not going to press him any further on the matter.

“I have another question for you.”

Étienne rubs the back of his neck and looks at the ground. “As personal as the last?”

“Fraid so.”

“This means I’m allowed to ask you unlimited questions about technology in your time.”

“Fair enough,” I concede.

“Then go ahead, ask your question.”

“What happened to your parents?”

Other than his brows lifting a small fraction, there’s no indication that he heard me. He’s silent for a few seconds before he clears his throat. “You want to know how they died?”

I flinch slightly; I’m still adjusting to his acerbic tone. Everything Étienne says is so forthright. His siblings seem nonplussed by this, but not me.

“Yes,” I say quietly.

“You’re familiar with the oil boom, right?”

I nod.

“What about Spindletop?”

My brows scrunch together. “You’ve lost me.”

“Spindletop was an oil field in Beaumont, Texas, that struck oil in January 1901. The gusher blew for nine days before they could control it. Standard Oil was very interested in this oil field, but they couldn’t drill due to state antitrust laws. At the time, my father was heavily invested in Standard Oil.”

“How invested?”

“He had a close friend who had a small oil company that was bought out by Rockefeller. The friend gradually rose in the company and advised my father to invest. My father placed almost all the money he had then into Standard and became a stockholder.”

I whistle. “Wow.”

Étienne barely acknowledges my words and plunges on. “My father was determined to exhaust all efforts for Standard to dominate Spindletop. No matter what. He had meetings to attend in New York in March and planned to visit Beaumont directly after. My mother knew he was making a quick visit to New York. My father’s sister, Christine, lives there, and Mother wanted to see her, so they decided to make a trip out of it.” His lips flatten into a grim line. “They left February 15th. It would give them ample time to visit my aunt and arrive in Beaumont without hurrying. At the time, Livingston and I had recently graduated from Brown University. I was preparing to move back to Charleston to work with our shipping company. Nathalie was ten, so she stayed with Grandmaman.”

“And Julian?” I ask softly.

No one talks about the deceased Julian Lacroix, and my curiosity has been growing stronger.

“He was on the mend from influenza and still a bit weak. They thought the trip would lift his spirits.” He snorts bitterly before he continues. “They made it to New York safely. Nathalie still has the postcard Mother sent.

Father visited Texas with no issues. He went back to New York for Julian and mother. On their way back to Charleston, the train derailed.”

He says no more, but I can fill in the blanks. In a blink of an eye, he went from being a young man fresh out of college to the patriarch of his family and president of the family company. No wonder he’s so serious all the damn time. A weaker person would’ve crumbled under the pressure.

I take in his profile: Roman nose, the stubborn tilt of his jaw, firm and unsmiling lips.

“Stop giving me that look,” he says.

“What look? I’m not giving you a look.”

He watches me from the corner of his eyes, and a corner of his mouth quirks. That little half-smirk does something to my stomach that I can’t explain.

“You’re giving me that same expression that everyone gave my siblings and me after the accident.”

“And what expression is that?”

“It’s this pitiful expression where someone tilts their head and slowly nods. Their eyes are wide with sympathy. The corners of their lips curve down, making them look like sad mimes.”

Pretty detailed—and accurate—description. But I wasn’t giving Étienne the pitiful expression. Right? Because that would mean I felt something for Étienne besides barely contained indifference.

“Would you rather have me glare at you like before?”

“I would prefer that over your pity any day.”

“It’s not pity I felt.”

His piercing eyes meet mine. “Then what?”

“I feel... I feel...” I can’t think straight with him impatiently waiting for my reply. “Pity implies that I feel sorry for your misfortune, and on some

level, I suppose that's right, but what I feel is pain."

"Pain," Étienne repeats, skeptically.

"Yes, pain," I say curtly, because just as Étienne hates being vulnerable, so do I. "Pain that your whole family had to go through that. Nathalie and Livingston? I like them. They're good people. And you?" I peruse him carefully. "You're not all bad."

"Thank you. I think," he says, straight-faced.

I reach out to give his strong shoulder a reassuring squeeze, yet stop short at the last second. He probably wouldn't react well to my sympathy. My hands fall to my sides as we walk in total silence.

"You didn't deserve what happened," I say, breaking the silence.

He dips his head in acknowledgment, and that's the end of the conversation.

We reach Belgrave, and Nat rushes out the front door. "Where have you two been?"

Étienne steps forward and answers before I can. "We took a walk."

Nat stops and stares, her eyes volleying between us. "Oh, I see," she says, although it's clear she doesn't. "Was it... a pleasant walk?"

"God, Nat, we simply walked down the driveway. No one was harmed." He looks at me from the corner of his eye and smirks. "Although Serene did handle my pocket knife."

My stomach dips. That smile is going to be the death of me.

I quickly step into the conversation. "Other than that, it was a great walk."

The two of us walk into the house, leaving a confused Nat on the front porch to untangle our words.



“THERE YOU ARE!”

I lift my head from the book in front of me and find Nat standing in the doorway. “Have you been looking for me?”

“Yes.” Nat flounces into the sun-room and sits in the wicker chair across from me.

“Where did you think I was?”

She shrugs a bony shoulder and smooths her dress around her knees. “I don’t know. You’ve been preoccupied lately. I feel as though I never see you anymore.”

Two weeks have passed since my talk with Étienne in the woods. I grabbed a paper from Étienne’s office a week ago and kept a tally dating back to when I first arrived on April 12th all the way to now, Friday, May 3rd. I’m inching closer to the one-month marker. The unnerving part is not the fact that I’m no closer to finding a way to go home, it’s that I’m growing more

comfortable in this time. The fear and anxiety that clung to me when I first arrived are becoming hazy, and it has everything to do with one person.

Étienne.

Every night after dinner, we meet in his office and answer each other's questions about our own times. In fact, we talk about anything and everything. I now know that Livingston's name is their mom's maiden name and that their grandparents on their father's side spoke strictly French to them because they didn't want them to forget where they came from. I discovered that Étienne's middle name is Alexandre and when he was a child, he got so frustrated over people mispronouncing his name that he insisted on being called Alex. Although that only lasted for a few weeks. He had a love/hate relationship with school because he liked the challenge but hated being told what to do. (No surprise there.)

He told me he'd broken his nose twice. The first time he was ten, and when he was roughhousing with Livingston and Asa, his brother accidentally elbowed him in the nose. The second time was in college when he got into a fight with a fellow student.

In return, I told him that my brothers' nickname for me was Se. I confessed that my brothers Ian and Bradley explained to me that the best way to defend yourself against a guy is to knee him in the coin purse and that my brother Ian demonstrated by kicking Bradley in the nuts. He dropped to the ground quicker than a sack of potatoes.

That led us into a funny conversation where I explained slang and sayings from my time. He didn't get pale or all huffy. Quite the opposite. That night was the first time I saw Étienne laugh genuinely from his gut.

I confessed that sometimes I get overwhelmed with all the aspects of running a business. I told him that my favorite finds for my store are pictures because they are a portal to the past. (In my case, literally.)

We talk about it all except for two crucial aspects of our lives: my fiancé and the wife I replaced.

At the tail end of each of these conversations, we attempt to figure out ways for me to go back to my own time, but those discussions are short and sweet because we're honestly both in the dark when it comes to the actual reason why I'm here.

Last night, after I finished explaining all the things Microsoft Word can do, we got down to work. For the millionth time, we went over his closest friends and family while I did my best to think of every living and distant relative in my family. The only difference was that this time, we wrote each name down with the intent of cross-referencing them. We stared at those lists until I went cross-eyed, but we found no links.

He's coming around to the idea that perhaps it was him that brought me back through time, but I can tell he isn't all too thrilled with the idea. My gut is telling me to look closer at the people he works with. Specifically, Asa Calhoun.

I haven't mentioned him since our walk, although I still stand by what I said. Something is off about him. Something that's screaming at me that he could be a potential danger.

"What have you been doing?" Nat asks.

I look at the book in my hands and use it as my excuse. "Reading."

Nat peers at the cover. "*Directory of the City of Charleston.*" She's quiet for a moment, her brows forming a tight V. "What possessed you to read that?"

I scramble to come up with a reasonable explanation. "I saw it in Étienne's library, and my curiosity got the best of me." Not true. Étienne had a copy at his office and brought it home for me.

"You despise readin' unless it's one of your coveted magazines."

“You’re right. I’m not the biggest fan of reading,” I lie. “But I’m trying to broaden my horizons. Discover more about the town I’ve grown up in.”

“About the town you’ve grown up in, you say?”

I nod.

“What has gotten into you?” Nat asks in her jovial tone, but I hear the suspicion in her words.

“Nothing.” I give her what I hope is my most reassuring smile, hoping it will put her mind to rest.

It doesn’t.

She taps a nail against her lip, staring at me speculatively. “No, you’ve been very peculiar lately.”

“Oh?” My shoulders stiffen. I close the directory. “How so?”

“For starters, your demeanor.”

“My demeanor?” I repeat.

“Yes.” Nat crosses her legs and leans against the throw pillow to her left. “You’ve always been... oh, what’s the word?”

“A bitch?”

Nat looks momentarily shocked, but the expression quickly dissolves and is replaced with a smile. “No, silly goose. That’s not what I meant at all.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“You’ve severed all communication with your friends. You rarely go shopping. You haven’t spoken about having a soiree in weeks. It’s almost as though you’re a different person.”

Nat is a sweet, naive girl. But she isn’t stupid, and I need to throw her off the trail. She’s getting too close to the truth.

“We need to spend some time together,” I blurt.

Nat’s brows lift in surprise. Then she jumps up and claps. “I agree!”

I place the directory on the table in front of me and make a note to myself

that I'll look through it tonight. "What do you have in mind?"

A slow, devious smile spreads across her lips. "How adventurous are you feeling today?"

Within seconds, I'm sitting up straight in the chair. All I heard was the word adventurous, and I'm hooked. "Very."

Nat smirks. "Good. Now follow me."



"ARE YOU READY?"

I grip the handlebars tightly and look at my feet resting on the ground. This isn't my first time riding a bike. I practically lived on one as a kid. Growing up out in the country gave my brothers and me hours to explore the property. We created our own paths and used our imaginations as much as possible.

But that was with a bike not considered a relic in my time.

At a few auctions, I've seen this bike. It's a Raleigh All Steel Lady's bicycle. It's possible to find some that are well-preserved, but most times they're in bad shape. This one is in pristine condition. The tires are white, and the rims and cranks are all steel. Nat's bike has a wicker basket attached to the front.

I point at it. "What's the basket for?"

She glances at it and smiles proudly. "This spring, I plan on going out in the woods and collecting flowers."

"Ah. I see."

"I know that's not somethin' you enjoy. But who doesn't want fresh flowers in their room?"

I smile and bite my tongue. “So what are we going to do today?”

“Explore,” she says before she sets off down the drive.

Like everything else from this time, my mind whispers, *You’re touching a piece of history.*

It’s more than overwhelming. I force myself to place one foot on the pedal and push against the ground with the other. I find myself smiling as I pedal after Nat. Right when I think I’ve caught up with her, she lifts herself off her seat and speeds down the drive.

“Come on, Serene!” she shouts as she looks over her shoulder and grins at me.

Unable to back down from a challenge, I furiously pedal. The wind whips through my hair, destroying all of Hannah’s handiwork. It feels like freedom, and from the burst of laughter from Nat, I know she’s experiencing the same emotion. That moment stands out to me because it’s the first time I’ve had an actual glimpse into how most women feel in this era. From their clothing to daily choices, everything is restricted. When the opportunity for independence strikes, they happily take it. If I could show Nat a small glimpse into my world, how would she react to all the freedom at her disposal?

I pick up the pace until I’m directly behind Nat, then she abruptly stops. Her back tire sprays gravel onto the grass, but she doesn’t seem to notice. She looks over her shoulder at me and gestures for me to come closer.

“We have to be careful,” she says solemnly.

“Why?”

“Because technically, where I’m taking you is no longer Lacroix property.” She places a foot on one of the pedals and points toward the right. “It’s down here.”

Down here looks like absolutely nothing. But I don’t say anything and

quietly follow. At this point, I'm more curious than anything.

We weave in and out of the trees. Twigs snap beneath our tires. There's no gravel, just a small dirt track that bounces me around on my seat so hard I almost fall off a few times. The narrow ribbon of a trail extends beyond us, seeming to go on for miles.

Étienne has told me that Belgrave Plantation was originally run by his mother's family. When his parents were married, his father took over. Years later, he wisely sold off his share of the sugar plantation until all they owned were two hundred acres instead of the original thousand.

We break out of the wooded area into a field where the sun shines brightly on us. No one has bothered to cut the grass, so it's turned into thick weeds so tall they graze my handlebars. Ahead of me, Nat hums an unfamiliar tune, utterly unfazed by her surroundings.

Not me. Even though I'm growing more comfortable in this time, I still gawk at my surroundings. It's as if I've lived in a bunker for the past ten years and this is my first time stepping outside. The stark contrast between this time and my own is so powerful, I can't help but take everything in. I quickly get overwhelmed, but right here, with the insects chirping and the beautiful scenery, I feel as if I could lean against a live oak tree, organize all my thoughts, and take a deep breath.

Nat gestures to the open space around us. "This area used to be where the slave houses were. The buildings were torn down a few years ago."

"Ah-ha," I say. That explains the random cluster of trees spread through the land. In the middle of the clearing is a large building that's practically falling apart. I point at it. "What's that?"

"The old general store."

"A general store? Wow."

"That was before the Civil War," she says quietly.

I nod in understanding. “Before most plantations collapsed.”

She smiles grimly. “Precisely.”

“Who owns this property now?”

Nat shrugs. “I’m not sure. Daddy sold off this land years and years and years before I was born. That would be something Étienne would know. He knows everything about Belgrave. Both of my brothers do. Livingston may not show it, but they were both raised to know everything about the family business.”

“Yet it fell on Étienne’s shoulders.”

Nat muses over my words. “I don’t think it fell upon him. It was natural. It’s clear that he’s the responsible one between him and Livingston.”

“I would’ve never guessed,” I tease.

She smiles. Right then, I have the strongest urge to talk about the parallel between Nat’s siblings and mine. But I can’t. It still makes no sense why my brothers aren’t here. They should be, but I can’t help but wonder—if they were, would they be same men I know and love? Or perhaps they would be caricatures. Maybe it’s better they aren’t here.

“We’re here!” she announces.

I’ve been so wrapped up in our conversation that I stopped paying attention to our surroundings and failed to notice the creek to my right. Marsh grass lines the murky waters and disappears beneath a solidly built deck. From here, I can see that on the opposite side of the creek is a rope dangling from a tree, showing that this once was a location the Lacroix kids frequently visited.

“This is great!” I say as I get off my bike.

Nat practically glows from my praise. She all but skips toward the deck. “I know Étienne has never taken you here, but you seemed so spiritless at home, and I thought it wouldn’t hurt to ask you to come with me.

“I love it. This is exactly what I needed.”

She stops on the deck and turns around. “There’s only one thing.”

“What?” I ask as I take off my shoes.

“I didn’t bring my suit.” Nat stomps her foot. “I was so excited about coming here, I forgot it!”

I shrug and take off my stockings one at a time. “Who cares? You have undergarments on, don’t you?”

Nat turns beet red before she nods. She may be progressive for her time, but there are still lines she’s afraid to cross.

“Great.” I toss my stockings over one shoulder and move toward the dock. “Then you can swim.”

Nat’s mouth hangs open like a codfish’s. She looks around as though we’re surrounded by people and whispers, “That’s scandalous.”

“It’s no big deal.”

And it’s true. The layers of clothes beneath our dresses are more than I’d wear on a cold winter day. How would Nat react if she saw the bathing suits women wear in my time? Probably have a stroke.

“I’m sweating like a whore in church, and I know you are too. Now, we did not come all the way here only to go back home all because of some bathing suit. We deserve to be in that water, Nat,” I say emphatically.

A wistful expression crosses her face. Sweat around her hairline drips down her face. She glances between the water and me, and I know that my passionate—and borderline dramatic—speech is getting to her.

“Are you in or out?” I ask.

She pulls her gaze away from the water, a look of determination in her eyes. For a fleeting moment, she looks identical to Étienne. “I’m in.”

Without waiting for my reply, she turns her back and starts to undress. To make her feel more comfortable, I do the same. I sigh with relief when the air

touches my skin, and I turn toward Nat. Even though she's wearing a slip over her corset and underwear, she crosses her arms self-consciously.

"Come on," I cajole. "In this heat, you have to admit having all these layers off is not so bad."

"It's amazing."

She smiles widely then surprises me by turning toward the sparkling water and running full speed down the dock. She tucks her legs close to her chest, tightly wraps her arms around her knees, and cannonballs into the water.

Some drops land on my warm skin, making me jump.

Seconds later, Nat's head emerges from the water. She pushes her dark hair away from her face and cups both hands around her mouth.

"Jump in, Serene!"

I don't have to be told twice. Copying Nat's actions, I jump off the dock. I open my eyes while under the water, but it's so murky I can barely see my hand in front of me. That doesn't matter to me; the water feels amazing.

After a while of swimming and lying back so the sun can touch our faces, I glance at Nat. Since I met her, this is the first time I've seen her quiet. It's hard to say how much time has passed. Minutes, hours, days? The outer world seems closed off from us, almost as if there's a dome around the water. Even the animals in the woods are silent.

"Do you ever want something more out of life?" I lazily ask.

Nat lifts her head and glances at me, clearly perplexed. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you want a life outside of Belgrave?"

"Oh..." Nat smiles knowingly before she tilts her head back, submerging her hair in the water. "I know what you're doin'."

"What is it you think I'm doing?"

“Trying to find out if I’m still intent on marrying Asa.”

Does Nat want to marry Asa Calhoun? That arrogant asshole who works with Étienne? Why, why, why?

She watches me closely.

I nod, pretending to know what she’s talking about. “Of course I remember our conversation. Can’t forget it. But I’m still not exactly sure what you see in him?”

She frowns. “I’ve loved Asa since I was sixteen.”

“Okay,” I say slowly. “That’s a start. But what do you love about him?”

To me, he seems like a creep who would toss women out like yesterday’s newspaper. But hasn’t every woman fallen for a man she shouldn’t? Regardless of what someone says, you still try to give that man a chance even though you’re more than likely to get hurt. It’s like we have to scrape the bottom of the barrel to understand when there’s a good man in our midst.

“Shouldn’t you get to know more men before you settle for Asa?” I ask carefully.

“I’ve been on a date recently.”

“And?” I prod.

“He was a complete flat tire!”

I stare at her blankly. I know what she said is some saying, but it’s flying straight over my head.

She rolls her eyes. “I swear, Serene. Lately, you’ve had your head in the clouds. He is dull. The date was utterly disappointin’.”

“But that’s one guy,” I point out.

“I’d say more like one guy too many.” Nat goes back to looking at the sky; a dreamy expression takes over her face. “No. I love Asa.” She glances at me. “I know you don’t love my brother, but have you ever felt... somethin’ with him?”

My heart races. “What do you mean?”

“You know... get that feelin’ around him? Butterflies in your stomach when he walks into the room? The desperate urge to be wherever he is? Constantly thinkin’ about him?” She lifts a brow. “Well?”

Chances are if she’d asked me this question four weeks ago, my answer would’ve been a resounding hell no. But now... now I’m not so sure. Very slowly, I’ve begun to see a different side of Étienne. I’ve started to think of Étienne as a friend. And that friendship is evolving into something I can’t quite explain.

“I didn’t,” I admit.

Nat’s face falls.

“But,” I say, “wouldn’t you agree that a lot can change over a year?”

She raises both brows and smiles. “Absolutely.”

“We may not have gotten along well in the past, but who knows? I might end up enjoying his company after all,” I say casually. In reality, I enjoy his company a lot.

“Perhaps time will allow Asa to start noticin’ me.”

My heart breaks a bit for Nat. She’s so sweet and optimistic and so sheltered by her brothers that it hasn’t crossed her mind that Asa might not return her feelings. I know I should probably tell her that, but I don’t have the heart to burst her bubble.

“You don’t think he notices you?”

She snorts. “No. He thinks of me as Étienne and Livingston’s younger sister.” Nat leans forward. “Do you know I overheard my brothers talkin’ about me weeks ago and Étienne called me fragile?” She slaps a palm against the water, sending ripples all around us. “The audacity of him.”

I’ve been called a lot of things in my life, but fragile is not one of them. But I can understand why Étienne said that. Especially after our nightly

conversations. If I lost a sibling and my parents in a tragic accident, I would cling to any surviving trace of them with everything that I had.

“He’s protective of you,” I reply quietly.

Nat blinks rapidly at me, shocked that I defended her brother. “I know.”

“That might be the reason Asa hasn’t returned your feelings.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s best friends with your big brothers, right?”

She nods.

“And he’s known you since you were a little girl, right?”

Another nod.

“So maybe he views you as off-limits.”

Nat’s face lights up with understanding. “Brilliant! I never thought about that!”

I smile encouragingly.

“How do I make him see that I’m more than their younger sister?”

“I don’t think you can make him. Just... give it time.”

“Time...” Nat clucks her tongue for a few seconds, considering my suggestion before she looks at me with determination. “Then that’s what I’ll give him. Time.”

“What will you do if time isn’t enough?” She gives me a blank look. “What if he ends up not returning your feelings? What will you do then?”

Nat seems taken aback by my questions. But I asked them in the gentlest way possible, and they needed to be asked. The seconds tick by and it dawns on me that Nat truly doesn’t understand her potential and what’s waiting for her. She’s just grabbed the first thing the world dangled in front of her—being mother and wife.

“What do you want out of life?” I ask.

“I want to get married and have children. With Asa,” she says calmly, but

with determination.

“All right, but if you could do anything, what would it be? Not that raising a family isn’t good enough,” I rush. “I don’t want you to get the idea that I think that is a bad ambition, because it’s not. But it’s not your only option.”

In typical Nathalie fashion, she gives me a bright smile. “I understand.” She looks at the water. “I can think of nothing.”

“Nothing?”

She nods.

“There has to be something,” I urge gently.

“Well, there is something I’ve been thinking about.” She hesitates before she looks at me. “I’ve been wantin’ to purchase a camera.”

“You’re interested in photography?”

“Yes!” Nat gives me a conspiring smile. “There’s this camera I saw in a Sears catalog. It’s a vest pocket Kodak.” She lifts her hands from the water and holds them about four inches apart. “It’s a small folding camera that’s perfect for amateur photographers.”

“Have you always been interested in photography?”

She nods anxiously and stares behind me with a faraway look in her eye. “I remember my mother had a camera that had all these mechanics: pulling strings, pressing buttons, and keys. She took photos of my brothers and me any chance she could. The pictures certainly weren’t professional. That’s why I like them though. They showed my brothers and me in our element.”

“That’s amazing!” I exclaim. “You should go buy the camera.”

“It’s twenty-five dollars though.”

Twenty-five bucks doesn’t seem like much to me, but it is for this era. With inflation, I’m willing to bet that the cost of the camera would be a couple of hundred dollars in my time.

“Ask Étienne. I’m sure he’ll get the camera, and if he doesn’t, we can scrounge the money up.”

“Thank you.” She looks at me from the corner of her eye. “I still want to marry... but I want to marry for love.”

I can read between the lines. She doesn’t want a marriage like Étienne’s. I can’t fault her for wanting something better for herself.

“Who says you have to choose one option? Marry and have kids and take loads of pictures of them. Do whatever makes you happy,” I urge.

I need to reel it in a bit. Everything I’m saying feels like it’s been ripped off from a Hallmark card or a bumper sticker.

Thankfully, the conversation is dropped when Natalie swims around, doing little figure eights around me. I follow suit and enjoy the feel of the cold water lapping at my skin. Sometimes I do laps, and the warm embrace of the sun greets me when I come up for air. Time ticks by as we do our own thing.

After a while, Nat drifts back over. Even with the sun blaring down on us, I can see a faint pink tinge on her cheeks. I can’t tell if it’s the beginning of a sunburn or if she’s nervous.

“I know this may be futile to ask, considerin’ your past with my brother.”

Yep. Definitely nervous.

“But do you think there’s a possibility that you two can mend your relationship?” Nat asks before she leans closer. “Because I’ve noticed him watchin’ you. His eyes follow you wherever you go.”

In spite of the sun beating down on me, goose bumps break out on my skin.

“Maybe the two of you are meant to be,” she says hopefully.

“Maybe,” I reply faintly.

Every single time I nod and play along with this improbable charade, I

feel less like a fraud and more like a deceitful bitch. I never expected to like Nat so much, and I didn't anticipate her words about Étienne and me to fill me with happiness.

I exhale loudly and swim closer to her. "Nat, I think there's something I should tell you."

"You can tell me anythin'."

She stares at me with her sincerity in her eyes, and I begin to think that maybe, just maybe, she'll believe me. I take a deep breath. "I'm—"

"This isn't Lacroix property anymore."

Snapping my head toward the dock, I see Étienne standing there with his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and towels in his arms. My smile fades away.

Nat beams at him and swims closer to the deck. "Where did you come from?"

"The house. I asked the staff where the two of you were. Only Hannah knew." His eyes remained fixed on me.

"And you brought towels. That's considerate," I say.

"Hannah suggested I bring them. I told her that surely my sister and... wife wouldn't forget towels, but alas, I can see that she was right."

"Going swimming was a spontaneous decision," I say before I can think twice.

Étienne gives me a half-smirk that makes my heart drop to my stomach. "Clearly."

"*A few civil conversations and you're turning to mush? Pull yourself together, Parow,*" my mind hisses.

"How long have we been gone?" Nat asks.

"Close to two hours. I was gettin' concerned."

I lift my knees and gently float backward. "We're doing just fine."

Étienne's eyes heatedly trace the action. "I can see that."

The comfortable silence Nat and I built these past two hours flees like a thief in the night, but the three of us say nothing. Étienne is staring at me. And Nat? I have no idea what she's doing because I'm staring back at Étienne.

Nat opens her mouth and French flows out. "*Que se passe-t-il entre toi et Serene?*"

The sound is so graceful, I don't care that I have no idea what she's saying or that she mentioned my name.

Étienne replies. "*Rien!*"

"*Je ne suis pas aveugle. Je peux voir le changement. Dis-moi, Étienne.*"

"*Entre à l'intérieur, Nathalie.*"

"*Mais—*"

"*Entre,*" Étienne says, his voice brusque.

Their conversation comes to grinding halt. Nat narrows her eyes at Étienne as if she wants to say more, but she sighs and moves toward the ladder. "I think I should be gettin' on home."

"No. Wait." Desperately, I grab her arm. "Stay," I plead at the same time Étienne says, "Go."

Nat glances at us with an amused smile before she gently pulls away from me and swims toward the ladder. She takes one of the towels that Étienne brought and quickly wraps herself up in it before she picks up her dress. She looks over her shoulder.

"Traitor!" my eyes scream.

But Nat smiles and walks to her bike, leaving a trail of wet footprints.

"You're not goin' back to the house like that!" Étienne shouts.

"I'm aware of that. I'll change down the pathway!" Nat shouts back as she hops on her bike.

I feel Étienne's eyes on me as I watch Nat pedal away. Soon she becomes

a speck in the distance.

Étienne clears his throat, so I drag my gaze to his. He watches me with a small frown. “Why were you clingin’ to my sister? Are you afraid of me?”

“Afraid of you?” I sniff. “Hardly.”

That isn’t technically true. While I know Étienne won’t hurt me, I’m afraid of what can happen between us when we’re alone. Dangerous feelings are appearing. Feelings that have no business being there. When they arrived, they were impossible to fight off.

I can’t explain that to him though.

“I need to talk to you,” Étienne says.

“Whatever you have to say, you can say in the water.”

He crosses his arms over his broad chest and laughs. “I’m not swimming.”

“Do you know how to swim?” I challenge.

That sobers him up pretty quickly. “Yes.”

I nod toward the water in front of me. “Then get in.”

Étienne opens his mouth but promptly shuts it. I threw a gauntlet before his feet, and I know he’s dying to pick it up. No one challenges him.

He glances between my dress on the dock and me. “What are you wearing?”

“Bra and underwear,” I answer honestly, yet my cheeks still turn red. Which is ridiculous. I’ve worn bikinis in public and never thought twice about it, but the way Étienne’s staring at me, it’s as if he can see through the murky water, making me feel naked.

He swallows and looks away for a second. “Do you always wear that to swim?”

“No. Typically, I wear a bikini. But it’s pretty much the same thing.”

Étienne doesn’t reply, just stays stock-still on the dock.

“Are you going to get in or are we going to continue talking about women’s swimwear?” I tease.

“No, I’m not getting in the water. As you can see, I’m dressed and I have a meeting in an hour.”

“So undress, and you won’t have to worry about getting your clothes wet.”

He arches a brow. “That’s indecent.”

“It’s freeing. Wearing clothes in the water would be awkward. They’d weigh you down,” I point out.

“Your suggestion is to swim unclothed?” he asks with tightness in his jaw.

“No, I’m suggesting you undress to your underwear. What you’re talking about is skinny-dipping.”

He arches a brow and stares at me skeptically.

“Skinny-dipping?” Still nothing. “You know... where you swim... nude?” I pause. “Ever done that before?”

He glances at the dock. There’s a small pause before he replies. “No, I haven’t.” His eyes, hot and resolute, flick to mine. “Have you?”

What are you doing? What are you doing? WHAT. ARE. YOU. DOING? my mind bellows at me.

I don’t know anymore. But what I do know is that it’s impossible for me not to poke at Étienne’s armor. The past few weeks, I’ve gotten to know him and I’ve realized just how much pressure is resting on his shoulders. He never really takes a break and has fun.

Deep, deep, deep down inside him, I know he’s capable of unwinding. It’s just that no one has been patient enough to stay around long enough to see it happen. I want to be the person to stay.

“Yes,” I reply, my voice coming out in a croak. “I have.”

“Why am I not surprised?” he murmurs.

“Get in, Étienne.”

Another small pause, then, “Fine.”

I smile triumphantly. My legs kick wildly as I wait. He kicks off his shoes. His socks are next. He rolls them up and puts them next to his shoes.

At the rate he’s going, we’ll be here all night.

“Oh, come on! Take it off, Lacroix,” I tease.

When Étienne gives me a half-smirk, my heart goes up a notch.

“Turn around,” he orders.

“Again with the shyness.”

“Fine. Don’t turn around. I was simply sayin’ that for your benefit.”

“My benefit?” Now it’s my turn to arch a brow. “You have a hideous body under your clothes?”

His eyes are challenging as he unbuttons his shirt. Just a small glimpse of his chest and my laughter fades away. He takes off his shirt one arm at a time, and my smile is wiped clean from my face.

Because beneath his clothes, he’s not hideous.

Definitely not.

It’s exhilarating, seeing him like this, because I can finally put to bed all those niggling thoughts I’ve had about his body. The sad part is none of those thoughts come close to what’s standing in front of me.

From here, I can distinctly see his defined pecs and the ridges of muscles on his abdomen. A trail of dark hair starts at his belly button and disappears beneath his pants. But it’s the abdominal V near his hips that catches my attention. I swear it’s like an arrow, pointing toward what’s down south, daring me not to stare.

His pants come off next, but before I can get a good look at him practically naked, he jumps into the water.

My face scrunches up as water splashes all over me. Seconds later, Étienne reappears a healthy distance from me. With both hands, he pushes his hair from his face. Droplets of water cling to his dark lashes. I see a single drop on the tip of his crooked nose. I want to brush it away.

“What were you talking about with Nat before I interrupted?” With ease, Étienne swims toward me, his arms gliding through the water. He resembles a predator moving in on his prey.

I have to stop myself from pushing backward. “Nothing.”

“Nothin’? You two seemed to be in a deep conversation.”

Étienne regards me for a few seconds before he nods and moves closer. Beneath the water, his fingers graze the side of my stomach. I can’t tell if it’s on purpose or by accident, so I say nothing. Nevertheless, I suck in a sharp breath and stay perfectly still.

“What’s the real reason you came out here looking for me? It can’t be to drop off towels.”

“It wasn’t. I came here to tell you that I took your advice.”

My head whips up in shock. “You did?”

“I did,” he confirms. “I poured through the ledgers at work.”

“And?” I prod impatiently.

“And it’s as I thought. Nothin’ suspicious is going on.”

I’ve been so sure, so confident that Étienne would find an error that it never occurred to me he wouldn’t. My shoulders slump in defeat.

“Would you like to search through the books yourself?”

I face Étienne. “Yes, I would.”

He sighs. “Be my guest; you won’t find a single error. There’s a reason I hired Asa and Edward. They’re not in the business of makin’ mistakes.”

“Why are you so sure of them? You truly believe they’d never betray you?”

“Yes!” Étienne snaps.

His outburst makes me arch a brow.

He takes a deep breath and rolls his shoulders. “I’ve known them my whole life. Don’t you think if they had malicious intent I would’ve recognized it by now?”

He has a valid point, but it does nothing to reassure me. There’s something about Asa that tells me I need to dig harder.

“What about Johnathan?” I ask.

“I don’t think he would do anythin’ in retaliation. He is a bastard, but he’s too dense to be cunnin’.”

“Okay. You think Johnathan is a nitwit. But my gut is telling me there’s something off with Asa.”

Étienne drags his hands through his wet hair. “What will it take for you to believe he’s harmless?”

“Nothing; I don’t trust him!”

“I know. You’ve made that abundantly clear. But perhaps you’re focusin’ all your energy on him because we’re gettin’ nowhere figuring out a way for you to go back home?”

He has a point. Other than Asa being a complete dick during one encounter, I have nothing to be genuinely suspicious of. Just gut instinct.

“You never answered my question earlier. What were you and Nat talking about before I arrived?” Étienne prods.

“You can’t ask that question and not expect for me to ask the same one in return. What were you and Nat talking about in French?”

“You,” he replies.

Étienne’s forthright answer throws me off; I hadn’t expected him to tell me. “What about me?”

“She asked if there was anything between you and me.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Not a thing. It isn’t her business.”

I’m glad he’s keeping our new friendship private. I know it sounds strange, but I’m protective of what I have with him. No matter how insignificant it may seem to someone else, it took a lot for Étienne and me to get where we are today. However, a part of me wishes he would confirm that there is something between us. It would set me apart from the Old Serene.

“Are you gonna tell me what the two of you were discussing?”

I blink him back into focus. “No,” I answer honestly. “Are you nervous that I’m going to confide in her about my... situation?”

“Yes,” Étienne confesses.

“Well, since you’re being honest, so will I. I want to. I want to tell her I’m not the Serene she thinks I am, but I’m lucky to have you believe me. It’d be greedy to expect two people to put their trust in me.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I’m not going to. But I’d be the biggest liar if I said it doesn’t cross my mind every damn day.”

“You can’t,” he repeats urgently. “Not only would it confuse her, but it would also hurt her.”

“How so?” I lean in. “Your sister is a kind and caring person. If anyone is going to believe me, it would be her.”

“Those are the precise reasons you shouldn’t tell her a single thing. She’s too kind.”

“I get it. But it feels wrong.”

“Lyin’ to her?”

I nod. “Pretending to be the Old Serene only camouflages her bad behavior.”

“I know you’re not the Old Serene.”

“And I’m grateful for that. But I like Nathalie. She deserves to know the truth.”

Étienne is quiet for a second. “Say you do tell her, and you two become close. What happens when you leave? Because we both know you’re tryin’ to find a way home. You’re on borrowed time, and I don’t want my sister to be hurt in the end.”

I don’t say a word because he’s right. The thought of leaving them all behind stings. “I would never purposely hurt her.”

“I know that.” Étienne moves closer. His legs brush against mine, and his hands brush against my stomach and hips more than once. He watches me, gauging my reaction.

I don’t pull away from him, but I don’t touch him either. “What happens if I leave and the Old Serene doesn’t come back?”

“I don’t know.” Étienne’s gaze never leaves my face. “If it was up to me, I’d never find out.”

I can’t figure out if that’s Étienne’s roundabout way of saying he wants me to stay here or if he means that he never wants to see his wife again. For reasons I’ll never be able to explain, my heart wants to believe the former.

“You don’t want to. Right?”

“Stay?” I ask faintly.

He nods, staring at me carefully. It’s obvious when I’m lying. Étienne is beginning to know me so well that he’ll instantly be able to see if I’m fibbing.

I open my mouth, ready to tell him the truth, when I feel his hands on my waist. Suddenly, I forget how to speak English. “I-I don’t know.”

It’s an unexpected, bold move. Light flirting and a few lingering looks here and there is one thing. This is a whole other. It’s an intimate gesture that I should shut down immediately. But the only thing that shuts down is my

brain.

My hands hover in the water, inches away from his chest. I want to touch him more than anything, but I know it's wrong. Étienne's grip on my hips tightens almost reflexively. A small frown appears on his face.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I whisper.

He swallows, and I watch his Adam's apple bob. "Because suddenly I'm not so sure I want you to leave my world."

I'm more than playing with fire, and I know it.

It's okay though, my mind whispers. Only the water will feel your heartbeat and choppy breathing. Only the wind whistling through the trees will see you reach for him.

They'll keep this a secret.

Gently, his fingers drift down my spine. At the same time, my hands settle against his stomach. His abs tighten beneath my touch as I trail my fingers up his body. My hands drift over his pecs, making him jump slightly before my hands move to his arms. My thumbs brush over his biceps.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. But do I stop? Hell no. My hands have a mind of their own, taking their sweet time touching Étienne's body.

His chest is a solid wall against my own. I feel the hard ridge of his dick against my lower stomach. Without a second thought, my legs part to let him closer and wrap around his waist. The two of us lean in until our foreheads are touching. Our lips are a hair's breadth apart.

Then I hear a voice in the far distance.

The moment breaks, and Étienne and I pull away from each other like two kids with their hands caught in the cookie jar. He stares at me, lips parted, but doesn't say a word. His eyes dip toward my lips for a millisecond, then he moves toward me. I'm almost confident he's going to kiss me. And if he does, I know I won't stop him.

But then, he freezes. “We should go back.”

Étienne doesn't give me time to reply. Swiftly, he turns toward the deck and swims away. His hands grab the ladder, and he hefts himself out of the water. I openly gawk as water drips from his deltoids and the back of his neck. The droplets drift down his spine. His muscles jump beneath his skin as he dries off and gets dressed.

“You're starin'” he calls idly.

I blink rapidly. My hands slice through the water as I move toward the ladder. “How can you tell?”

He slides his arms through his shirt sleeves and pulls up his pants before he faces me. “I could feel your eyes on me.”

Étienne holds out a hand for me. His body blocks the sun, and pieces of his hair become golden. He hasn't been out in the sun as long as Nat and me, but I already see small freckles darkening on his nose.

He smiles at me. And it's that grin that seizes my heart and steals my breath.

How in the world did I ever think he was ugly? It seems so long ago when I thought that, but the sad fact is, it wasn't. I've never considered myself a vain person, but now I realize judging him before I got to know the real Étienne was such a bitch move.

I feel unsteady as I reach for his hand; I'm in too deep with Étienne. Somewhere along the way, I fell for him. I've just been so busy trying to find a way back to my era to notice the truth, even though it's been standing directly in my face all this time.



“TOMORROW YOU HAVE a meeting with a potential investor from Triplex Safety Glass and then...”

As Asa drones on, I lean back in my chair and nod every few seconds. In reality, I’m wondering what Serene is doing at this very moment.

Did Nat coax her into going to town? Or maybe she’s searching Belgrave, once again, for a way back home? She has searched the house so many times, I wouldn’t be surprised if she knows my childhood home better than I do.

I never tell her that her hunt is pointless. Numerous times she’s expressed that her gut is telling her she’s missing something important. However, my gut is telling me that that something won’t be found in Belgrave.

Deep down, I think she knows that. It’s her determination that drives her to continue her explorations. I admire her boldness. It’s a trait I relate to. If I were in her position, I would also refuse to give up until I found a way back to my time.

Over the past few weeks, Serene's made her presence known. Take this morning after breakfast. I found her trying to coax our driver, Warren, to let her drive the car because, and I quote, "I can drive myself."

Or the day before, where immediately after dinner, she piled her utensils on her plate and grabbed her drink and, to everyone's horror, went to the kitchen to wash her dishes because, "She had two perfectly capable hands."

A few days ago, I heard her none too quietly discussing with Nat why she hated corsets and how there could be more to Nat's life than shopping, needlework, and marrying at a young age. I heard her ask Nat, "What do you want to do with your life?"

Last night she got into a heated debate with Livingston about the Kentucky Derby. He left Belgrave muttering, "When did she suddenly become interested in horses?"

Nat and Livingston look at her with confusion. The staff watches her with fascination before their eyes slide to me. They're waiting and wondering when I'm going to step in and bring order back into our lives.

Maybe I don't want order.

Maybe I see what everyone else can't—she has breathed new life into our family. For so long I've asked for a revival, yet I've received a revolution in the form of Serene. The irony is not lost on me.

Nat appears happier than usual, and Livingston has been showing up at Belgrave more often because he's never one to shy away from a good debate.

The begrudging respect I've gained for Serene has extended into an attraction I never anticipated. She's gorgeous, there's no getting around that. But I'm drawn to her intelligence and smart mouth. She's unpredictable in every way. I can never gauge where our nightly conversations will take us. Some of the things she talks about are borderline preposterous, such as the device called an iPad that is supposedly a touch screen. My favorite claim of

hers is the television. Watching movies in the privacy of my own home? Fascinating and a little too good to be true. But she speaks of her time with such conviction that I can't help but believe her.

The way I see it, Serene's arrival highlights how dark and empty our lives were after our parents and brother died. I can't help but think that if she had never arrived, we all would have continued with our lives without knowing how bleak they indeed were.

Thinking about the Old Serene has my hands curling around the armrests. If Serene does manage to make it back to her own time, what happens to the other Serene? Will she come back? Will everything revert to how it once was?

I imagine the Old Serene saw the world through a kaleidoscope of images of her. No one loved Old Serene the way she loved herself. She surrounded herself with people who fed her ego and narcissism, and when she tired of them, she replaced them as though they were a piece of clothing.

The Serene waiting for me at Belgrave cares about the well-being of others. When someone speaks, she listens. The signs were there from the beginning that she was different from the Old Serene, but the idea of time traveling was so preposterous that I thought Old Serene was simply bored and playing a cruel joke on me. It took the tragedy of the *Titanic* sinking for me to believe her.

“Étienne? Étienne!”

Rapidly, I blink the room into focus, only to find Asa and Edward watching me. Clearing my throat, I abruptly sit up in my chair and rest my elbows on my desk. “Yes?”

“Did you hear what I said?” Asa asks.

“Of course.”

“All right,” he says skeptically. “Then I suppose I'll continue. Also, I

received word that Johnathan Whalen has decided to part ways with E.A.L.” He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. “Because of an altercation between him and... Serene?”

I smile darkly. “Is that what he told you? An altercation?”

“Yes.”

That he’s not telling the complete truth shouldn’t come as a surprise. His pride knows no bounds and to tell the truth—that he assaulted Serene and she fought back and turned him into an incapacitated fool in a matter of seconds—would be a massive hit to his ego.

Asa stares at me expectantly. He wants me to come up with a solution that will smooth this all over. Even if I had one, I don’t think I would use it on Whalen.

“I don’t care,” I finally say.

“What?” Edward and Asa say in unison.

“I don’t care. He’s an ass.”

“No one is debating whether the man is an ass, but doing business with him and his father is extremely lucrative.”

“What do you suppose I do?”

Asa hesitates. “Perhaps you can talk to Serene.”

“There’s no need to talk to her. I saw the ‘altercation’ with my own two eyes. I know Johnathan is in the wrong.”

“Are you sure?”

“What?”

“Are you sure?” Asa repeats. “Perhaps you think you saw one thing when you... I mean...”

“Out with it,” I say quietly.

“How can you trust your wife and truly believe what she has to say? If you consider her track record—”

“Enough.” I abruptly stand.

I’ve grown up with Asa. In a lot of ways, he’s been a brother to me. We’ve had numerous disagreements, however, I don’t think I’ve ever been this angry with him. I want to reach across my desk and wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze, and squeeze, and squeeze.

My anger is spontaneous and takes me by surprise. It’s a beast in my belly, growing stronger and more powerful by the second. My hands curl into tight fists as I glare at Asa. Seconds later, I push away from the desk and grab my jacket. “I’m leavin.”

Asa stands. “Where are you goin’?”

“Home.”

“We’re not finished here.”

“I’ll work from my home office.”

Edward stares at us nervously, so I clap him on the shoulder. “If you need anythin’, let Livingston know.”

“This is ridiculous. You can’t possibly be—”

I slam the door, abruptly cutting off the rest of Asa’s words. With a sigh, I walk out the front door. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve left work early. Most of those times have been for an emergency, and I always took work home with me. For the first time, I’m placing my wants before anything else, and what I want is to see Serene.

It feels damn good.



WHEN I ARRIVE home, Ben isn’t at the front door, waiting to take my jacket. Nat isn’t in the sunroom, and Serene isn’t driving the staff insane by

trying to do everything herself.

It's quiet and oddly unsettling.

"Hello?" My voice echoes around the foyer. No one replies. "Hello!" I shout. Still nothing.

My mind races as I picture something happening to Nat or Serene. My heart drops to my stomach at the very thought. I hurry over to the stairs, intent on taking them two at a time, when I hear someone shout and a chorus of cheering and yelling coming from the first floor.

I stop dead in my tracks. The noise comes again, and this time I can tell the sounds are coming from the back of the house. I walk down the hall, past the dining room, and move toward the kitchen. The sounds become louder.

I stop when I reach the kitchen doorway.

"Don't do it, Ben!" a voice similar to my valet's shouts. "It isn't worth it."

Puffs of smoke lazily trail out of the room, making my nose itch.

"She's lyin,'" says another voice, most certainly Ben.

My brows lift; I've never heard him speak without being dignified and respectful. The voice I'm hearing now is aloof and distant, as though he has no care in the world.

What in the hell is going on in there?

The room becomes silent. I peek my head into the room, and what I see has my mouth parting in surprise.

The kitchen table has been cleared off and placed in the middle of the room. Ben sits on one side, taking idle puffs from a cigar as he plays what looks like a hand of poker. And who do I see facing him?

Serene.

I shouldn't be surprised, but I am.

And behind her? My brother and sister, of course. Both of them hover

over her, staring at her cards intently.

Serene's face is solemn and unreadable. I can't see Ben's face, but judging by his tense shoulders, he's taking this as seriously as Serene is.

How long have they been playing? And who set up this game? I don't have to think long about the answer to my last question. It has to be Serene.

After a few seconds, Serene glances between her remaining cards and her poker chips before she tosses a blue chip into the middle of the table.

Ben pauses before he calls her bet and puts a blue chip of his own into the growing pile. The rainbow of chips is on the table, but they're using mostly blue. They may be taking this game seriously, but the stakes aren't high.

I strain to get a good look at the five cards placed in the middle of the table, close to the poker chips. I can't see them all, but I see an ace and a queen in the mix, close to the burn cards.

Serene's gaze jumps between Ben and his cards before she flips over her hand.

Queen and jack.

Nathalie and Livingston smile at each other.

The room, however, is tense as everyone waits for Ben to reveal his two cards. When he does, a few men behind him throw up their hands and murmur all at once.

"I didn't expect that."

"Ben never loses!"

"You think she cheated?"

Servants congregate around Ben, and it allows me to see his hand. Two kings. The five cards on the table are the ace of diamonds, queen, ten of spades, an ace of spades, and a king.

He has a three of a kind, which is good, but not enough to win; Serene has a queen and a jack, giving her a royal flush.

Serene offers Ben an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Ben. Maybe next time.” She extends her arms over the table and curls them around the poker chips. Stacks fall as she drags them toward her. “Anyone else want to play? I’m on fi-ah!”

A resounding “no” reverberates throughout the room. A few servants even back up from the table. However, everyone in the room smiles. They’re enjoying themselves so much, no one notices my presence.

“That was wonderful, Serene,” Nat says.

Serene looks over her shoulder and smiles at Nat. She glances at Livingston. “You want to play?”

He holds his hands up in front of him. “No. I prefer to keep my money.”

She shrugs and organizes chips into color-coded stacks.

Ben stands from the table. “I’m impressed. That was good.”

“It was a good game because I was playing with a great poker player.” She holds out a hand. Ben hesitates before he shakes it.

I choose that moment to enter the room. “What is goin’ on here?”

Everyone freezes. The room goes quiet. All eyes turn in my direction. Except for Serene’s. She continues organizing the chips.

“Am I interruptin’ something important?” I ask.

Feet shuffle as the servants look at me, then at Serene. Back to me and her again. They keep looking to her as though she’s the one in charge.

“No. You’re not interrupting anything,” Serene replies innocently.

With my arms crossed, I fix everyone in the room with a glower that has always made everyone run for the hills. It’s a never-failing tactic. Except for now.

Seconds tick by, and when no one moves, I roar, “Get back to work!”

Chairs tip over and bodies move past me as everyone suddenly becomes eager to escape the room. As people rush down the hall, I hear a few

whispers. “Did you see his face?”

“Poor Serene!”

Poor Serene?

Poor Serene?

Since when did she become on a first-name basis with the staff? Even though that’s a good thing, I feel oddly betrayed by them warming up to her.

“Étienne, this is a pleasant surprise.”

I ignore Livingston’s words. “Did you plan this secret poker game?”

“No, I didn’t.” Livingston’s gaze flicks to Serene. “Your wife did.”

I look at her. “Is that true?”

Her gaze collides with mine. “Yes. Is there anything wrong with that?”

In the grand scheme of things, there isn’t. I don’t say that though.

“Of course not,” I snap.

I don’t know what’s gotten into me. The idea of everyone seeing the Serene that only I’ve been able to see, and sharing her with them, makes me possessive and irritable. This is a weird, unexpected emotion. One that I don’t know how to handle. So I do what’s always worked best—yell.

Livingston rubs the back of his neck and glances at Nat. “I think this is our cue to leave. Wouldn’t you agree, Nat?”

“I do.” Before my sister leaves the room, she leans down and whispers into Serene’s ear.

I throw my hands in the air. “This is ridiculous. You’re actin’ as though Serene’s in danger!”

Nat gives me a dubious look before she hurries out of the room with Livingston. I wait until they’re in the foyer before I face Serene. She’s standing now, taking her time gathering the cards. One by one.

“Can you enlighten me as to when my sister began to see me as the villain?”

She gives me a smirk. “She’s protective.”

“I’m her brother. Besides, she knows I’d never do anything.” I stop right there. What I want to say is that Serene is the one everyone needs to be careful with. Her charm is effortless. No one is immune. Not even myself.

“Étienne, you act tough, but I know you’re all bark and no bite.”

Her words bring a series of unbidden images. All of them have her in my bed. Naked. I gently bite her shoulder. The slope of her neck. Her lower lip. Then I—

“Étienne?”

The images fade as quickly as they arrived. Serene’s staring at me innocently.

“I’m sorry. What were you sayin’?”

“I was saying that you can’t only be upset over what Nat said. There’s something else.” She arches a brow. “Are you mad at the staff?”

I snort. “Absolutely not.”

Liar. You’re jealous, you pathetic bastard. Disregarding the truth, I walk over to the table and place the chips in the wooden case. We work in silence, clearing off the table and pushing the table back to its original position.

Once we’re done, Serene sighs and looks at me. “You’re home in the afternoon. This is new.”

Home. She says the word as if Belgrave indeed is her home. I don’t comment on it because I like the idea of her settling here and never leaving.

“I finished work early, and I figured why not leave my office to see what you were doing. Little did I know I would be disturbing your weekly poker tournament,” I say, because it’s far more reasonable than the truth—which is that being near Serene relaxes me. Even when we spar with words, I’m comfortable and... happy.

“Weekly?” She snorts. “Hardly.”

I pounce on her words. “This is something you frequently do then?”

“No. Just while you’re at work.”

“Why am I not surprised?” I grumble.

She crosses her arms. “If it bothers you, I promise I’ll do a better job of hiding the next game from you,” she teases.

“No. It doesn’t bother me,” I lie. “The staff seemed to be enjoying themselves. Especially Ben. I had no idea he played poker.”

“You know that your staff are people outside of their jobs, right?” Serene says with a twinkle in her eye. The corner of her mouth curves up.

And just like that, the tension that was curling around us dissolves.

How does she do it? How can she control me with a smile?

Perhaps my thoughts are written on my face because Serene’s smirk dims. She averts her gaze and snatches the cards and wooden case. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to take this stuff back to your office where I found them.” She walks toward the door.

Abruptly, I face her and say, “Wait.”

She stops and whirls around, staring at me patiently.

“There is a reason I came home; we need to talk about something.”

Serene’s shoulders visibly stiffen. She averts her gaze, and I know she’s thinking about the day at the creek. It was nearly three weeks ago, but the moment is still fresh in my mind. I know she’s engaged to someone else and a part of me should be remorseful for almost kissing her. But I’m not, and I won’t apologize for something I don’t regret.

“There’s a dinner party on Saturday night. I want you to come with me.”

“I swear you people celebrate the opening of an envelope,” she mutters.

“That’s something else we need to address.”

“Oh? And what’s that?”

“I’ve noticed that you mutter. Frequently,” I explain. “You can’t do that

in front of the other guests.”

“I know this might come as a shock to you, but I wasn’t raised by wolves. I do have some manners.”

“Really? I haven’t seen them. You curse, you yell, and you’re far too stubborn for your own damn good.”

“You’re saying all of this like it’s a bad thing.” She gives me a wicked grin that makes my gut clench. I lose my train of thought as my eyes veer to her perfect smile. “Who’s hosting the party?”

I hesitate before I reply. “Asa.”

Serene groans and rolls her eyes.

“Do not harass him. We are gonna go. We are gonna enjoy ourselves.”

She stares at me innocently, but I see right through her. “Of course.”

“I mean it, Serene.”

“So do I, Étienne.”

She once told me that it’s impossible to tell what I’m thinking. The same could be said about her. I’m harsh with my words and don’t show my emotions, but Serene hides behind sarcastic quips and dry humor.

“I have a question for you.”

“Shoot,” she replies.

“Do you know the one-step?”

She frowns. “No.”

“Then we’re in big trouble.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a popular dance here. I guarantee you, you will be asked to dance more than once. The one-step is all the rage right now.”

She groans and closes her eyes. “I don’t understand why I have to know it. If anyone asks me to dance, I’ll say no.”

“You’re all right with forgoing dancing to talk to the rest of the guests all

night?”

Serene hesitates, and I know she’s starting to realize I’m right. Standing on the sidelines and refusing to dance will garner far more attention than her blending in with couples dancing.

“Fine. I’ll learn the three-step.”

“One-step,” I correct.

Serene waves. “Tomayto, tomahto.”

“Excellent. I’ll meet you in the ballroom tomorrow at noon sharp.”

“We can’t start now?”

“No. Rest up; we have a lot of work ahead of us.”



fourteen

THERE ARE TWO essential rules when playing the part of someone else: do your homework on the person you're depicting and never drop out of character.

I've broken the second rule frequently, but I'm determined to not have any hiccups at this party. If I'm going to an event at Asa's home, I want to know the right things to say, when to kick my head back and laugh at an inside joke. Étienne and I have been going over the names of friends and colleagues that I should know. There are dozens of names. I can only name a few off the top of my head.

According to Étienne, his wife is the life of the party, mingling with everyone. She never sits or lingers near the wall to watch the couples dance. Old Serene is the person everyone views with a bit of envy and fascination.

Considering the brunch at Old Serene's parents' house was a complete flop, neither one of us is hopeful. Especially Étienne.

“No, no, no! You’re doing it wrong!” he shouts as he paces in front of me. “Do you have two left feet?”

I breathe deeply through my nose and try to keep calm. “No.”

“Then why do you still not have these steps down pat?”

“Maybe it’s because my teacher isn’t good at the moves himself!” I snap. So much for remaining calm.

Étienne drags his hands through his hair and shakes his head. “I’m all you have. Now let’s go back to the Hesitation Waltz.”

I can’t stop the groan that slips from my mouth. If there were a chaise lounge right behind me, I would fall onto it dramatically. “I can’t do that dance again. I’m terrible at it.”

Yesterday, Étienne mentioned the one-step, but he decided to switch to the Hesitation Waltz because he thought it would be easier. Oh, how wrong he was. I’ve always thought that I’m a relatively good dancer, and whenever I watched movies that showed any waltz, I found it so beautiful. The couples looked as if they were practically gliding across the floor. But to attempt the dance? It’s awful.

There are all these counts, and on each one, I’m supposed to do something different: slide, leap, and step. It has to be executed at the precise moment. Otherwise, you stumble and so do your partner’s. I don’t glide beautifully across the room. More like stumble. I suppose it wouldn’t be so bad if I at least knew how to waltz, considering it’s a variation of that, but I don’t.

What keeps confusing me is that instead of moving around the floor to the music, you pause at specific beats. Right when I think I have all the counts down, I get too confident and Étienne pauses, making me fumble.

I step forward even though my feet are begging me not to. They’ve been stepped on so many times, I wouldn’t be surprised if they’re black and blue.

But what other choice do I have? Beggars can't be choosers.

“Ready?” Étienne says. He's no more pleased by being here than I am.

Somberly, we face each other. A few seconds pass as we stare at one another with grave expressions. I try to fight the grin tugging at the corners of my lips.

Étienne frowns. “What's so funny?”

“The two of us, staring at each other like we're going off to war.”

The corners of Étienne's mouth twitch too, but he doesn't smile. “Yes, well, I have never danced so much in my life.”

“I can say the same.”

“And I now realize why I loathe dancin' so much. I'm terrible at it.”

“Likewise.”

We share a smile of understanding. It's a small, sincere moment, so rare and unheard of that if it were possible to bottle a moment up, I'd try to capture this one.

Étienne glances out the windows to his left. I know he's yearning to be anywhere but here. I can't say I blame him. After our little moment of swimming, things have been off between us. I've been going out of my way to pretend it never happened. That we didn't almost kiss.

I've told myself over and over that it was a mistake.

The moment got to me.

I miss physical affection.

I've been away from Will for too long.

And when I repeat those phrases in my head, soon enough they take shape and substance until I almost believe it's the truth. Deep down though, it doesn't matter how many excuses I make. All that matters is that when my lips were inches from Étienne's, I wanted nothing more in the world than to kiss him. And my fiancé? I forgot about him.

That realization is terrifying.

He clears his throat. “It is imperative that you learn this. The Serene in this time would never not dance.”

Étienne’s honesty is written across his face. I know he’s not against me, but for me. But I don’t want to be his Serene. I’ve been impersonating her for over a month now, and she’s not a person I’d ever want to be. That should be rule number three when playing the part of someone else—you must connect with the individual on a singular level.

“What are you two doing?”

I freeze and stare at Étienne. He arches a single brow at me, silently warning me to stay in character. I turn around and see Nat. She steps into the room, looking at Étienne and me with a baffled smile.

“I was walking to my room when I heard Étienne playing his music.”

Nat tilts her head. “His music?” She looks at her brother. “What is your music?”

“Uhh...” Étienne and I say in unison.

I look at him in a panic.

He confidently squares his shoulders and faces his sister. “Billy Murray.”

“Billy Murray,” Nat repeats.

We nod.

Nat’s eyes veer to me. “You’re the one who adores Billy Murray.”

That must’ve been the man singing the song. I may have a passion for antiques and history, but that passion doesn’t extend to music.

Étienne gently nudges me in the ribs, so I play along. “Right. That’s right. I do.”

“What was Étienne doing with your records?”

Dear God. I feel as if I’m on the witness stand. I’m a horrible liar and have many tells, like sweating profusely and my face turning red. It isn’t a

pretty sight. I turn to Étienne because he seems to be a better fabricator than me. “Étienne, you wanna to take this one?”

He gives me a murderous look before he smiles at his sister. “I took her records because I wanted to lure... my wife here so we could share a dance together.”

“Awww!” I coo as I snuggle up to Étienne. I stare up at him adoringly. He does not do the same. I glance at Nat. “Is your brother not the sweetest?”

Once again, she looks at us. This time with her eyes narrowed. Seconds tick by before she smiles. “He certainly is.”

I’m smiling so broadly my cheeks ache. An awkward tension descends over the ballroom as Étienne and I wait for Nat to leave, but she’s oblivious and walks over to the gramophone.

I wait until her back’s facing us before I step back from Étienne. I stare at the record player and not at Étienne, even though I can feel the weight of his stare. My body tingles in every spot that was pressed against him.

Ignore it, my mind whispers. Focus on anything else but him.

When Étienne and I stepped into the room, my eyes immediately veered to the gramophone. The wooden box is in pristine condition. The lid is open, revealing how deep the inside is. It’s crafted that way to amplify the music. In the middle is where you place the record. The record turns so slowly, that when you glance at it, it barely appears to move.

Before we started this little dance practice, he played the album, but the gramophone only has a playing time of up to four minutes, and it would obviously take me longer to learn this dance. After the twentieth time of going back to the record, we gave up and danced to nothing. To use the machine, you didn’t just place the needle onto the record. No, there was a hand crank on the right side that you had to wind up close to thirty times. In a way, it reminded me of a jack-in-the-box. Without the toy jumping out in the

end, of course.

“I hope I’m not interrupting the two of you,” Nat says, pulling me back to the present. She stares at Étienne and me.

Reluctantly, I step toward Étienne and resume the same position I was trying so hard to forget minutes ago. “You’re not necessarily interrupting, but it’s been wonderful spending quality time with Étienne.”

Étienne says nothing. I not-so-gently pinch his side.

“Yes, yes,” he rushes out. “It’s been... wonderful.”

A blind cat could see that something isn’t right with Étienne and me. However, Nat doesn’t say a word.

“I think I’ll leave so the two of you can continue havin’ a wonderful time.”

Nat walks out of the ballroom and closes the double doors.

Étienne and I immediately break apart. I drift over to the gramophone and stare at it carefully.

“What are you doing?”

I twist around and see Étienne staring at me curiously.

“Looking at this record player,” I confess.

Étienne walks up to me. “You have these in your time?”

“Not anymore. I think I saw this kind of record player in my grandma’s attic.”

It’s strange to think that my great-great-grandparents are living in this time. Virile and young. So strange. And bizarre.

“So how do you listen to music?”

“Either on my phone or laptop. Sometimes on the iPad I was telling you about.” I shrug. “Anywhere, really.”

Étienne shakes his head in disbelief. “Anywhere...”

Sometimes I forget we come from different times. The difference is so

substantial it's insane and impossible. But here I am living this impossibility.

"A lot has changed since your time," I say.

"You've been here for weeks now. This isn't my time anymore. It's yours, too."

I nod because, in a way, he's right. I feel myself slipping into this comfortable role as Étienne's wife. The clothing, my talks with Étienne and moments with Nat. I've scarcely thought about Will, my family, and all that I left behind, and it's terrifying how I feel hardly any guilt.

"For now it is," I reply softly.

Étienne's smile dims slightly, and I want to take my words back. I don't mean them. I don't.

Quickly I speak up. "Be honest. How many times have you gone to a party and danced?"

"A handful."

I whistle. "I was expecting you to say never."

"Why's that?"

I walk around the room, observing everything. Étienne turns in a circle, his eyes never leaving me.

"You're uptight."

"I am not uptight."

"Try saying that without your brows slanting down and I might believe you," I say with a smile. My smile fades as I think of something. "Did you dance with her on your wedding?"

"No. I believe I drank that night away."

"Sounds depressing."

"Not nearly as depressin' as watching your wife flirt with every male in attendance."

"When you dance, what is your dance of choice?"

I continue to walk around the room, capturing every piece of beauty this spacious room has to offer. In all my life, I don't think I've ever seen anything more breathtaking. The servants keep Belgrave spotless from top to bottom, but with the sunlight pouring in through the windows I can make out the dust motes in the air. They move so delicately, I swear they're mocking me over my awkward movements and showing me the dance partner I should be. The whole time I peruse the room, I feel Étienne's eyes on my body.

Instead of answering, he turns the question around on me. "How do you dance?"

I turn and face him. His question makes me smile faintly. "A lot different from the Hesitation Waltz you're trying to teach me, I'll tell you that much."

"Really?"

I nod.

"How so?"

"I don't even know where to begin."

"Then show me."

I freeze in place. His voice is good-natured. Still, I hesitate. And then his eyes glint with a challenge that makes my body stiffen.

"No. That's okay," I say.

He slowly approaches. "Why not?"

"Because," I reply lamely.

"Because... you're embarrassed?"

I know what Étienne's doing—he's trying to get a rise out of me. If I knew what was best, I would back down. Instead, I step closer, arching a single brow. "Why do you care how I dance?"

His challenging gaze never wavers. "What you don't understand about my world, I show you. The least you can do is return the favor."

"I'm sure there are enough women who have returned the favor to last

you a lifetime.”

He turns and walks across the room. “Oh, of course.”

I ignore the jealousy that shoots through me and snort. “Thought so.”

“Are you always this arrogant?” he asks as he grabs one of the armless chairs lined against the wall.

I don’t answer him and warily watch as he brings the chair over and places it directly in front of me. Right in the middle of the room. The legs land on the floor with a resounding thud. He makes himself comfortable in the chair, his legs crossed at the ankle and hands linked behind his neck. His wicked grin sends off warning bells in my head.

His lips say one thing, but his eyes say something else entirely.

You’re too shy. You’ll chicken out, they all but scream.

He’s counting on me saying no. If he thought I’d agree, he would’ve never issued the challenge. His estimation of me isn’t too far off. My heart’s pounding at the thought of dancing in front of him. For many reasons.

“You look scared, Serene.”

“What? No. I think what you’re asking me to do is ridiculous.”

“Why?”

“I’ve already told you. People in my time dance differently than people in your time. On top of that, our music is... very distinct.”

“Dance without music,” he suggests.

“No”

“Why?” Étienne smirks. “I never thought you would back down from a challenge,” he says, his voice going up an octave.

“If that’s your best attempt at imitating my voice, you need to practice harder.” I cross my arms and cock my head to the side. “You’re just trying to get back at me for the day at the creek.”

“That’s childish,” he replies in mock reproach.

I take a deep breath and count to ten, but that doesn't work. The truth is, I've never been good at backing down. At anything. My pride always has always been bigger than logic. And right now, all I can think about is taking that smug expression off his face. I want to turn Étienne's controlled world upside down.

Étienne lifts a single brow in a gesture that says, *Well?*

"Okay," I grit out.

His eyes widen imperceptibly. The idea that I may have usurped Étienne takes some of the sting out of giving in.

"Great," he says, his voice gruff. "Show me how you dance."

Seconds tick by and I don't move a muscle. I feel ridiculous. Who can dance in complete silence while someone watches them? I feel as though Étienne's going to judge every move I make.

Why did you agree to this? my mind screams. *Tell him you've changed your mind and take the loss.*

Étienne smirks, appearing pretty satisfied with himself. He must know that I want nothing more than to bolt out of this room.

If he was shocked when I agreed to this, what would his reaction be if I go through with it? I want to rise to Étienne's challenge with one of my own. I know I shouldn't, but I can't help myself. The idea is like dangling forbidden fruit in front of me. Of course I'm going to try to take a bite.

My hands curl into fists. I take a deep breath and relax my hands to my sides.

Might as well get this over with.

Since there's no music, I lightly hum a song that's wildly popular in my time. Deliberately, I choose one that's fun, that makes my heart race in excitement. I hear the rhythm and lyrics in my head and focus on them. I stare at the doors clear across the room, the white walls and the curtains

pulled back from the windows. I look at everything but Étienne.

If I look at him, I'll lose my courage; I feel silly. However, the longer I hum the tune, the more at ease I become.

When the song ends and I hum a new one, my eyes meet Étienne's. At first, he watches me with open curiosity, a small smirk playing on his lips. But when I move my hips, his eyes zoom in on the action and stay put for a few seconds before they lazily drift up my body. My skin tingles.

And then, somewhere along the way, his smirk fades. And somehow, I'm inching toward him.

The casual body language he possessed only a minute ago is gone. He's sitting up straight. His jaw is clenched, and his brows form a tight V.

I can't say the same for myself. My body feels pliant as if it's soaking in all the attention Étienne directs my way. As I move closer, he stretches his long legs.

"Are you good, Étienne?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

What are you doing? What are you doing? What are you doing? my mind hisses.

I don't know, yet I can't seem to stop myself. Never in my life have I been considered a tease. Not even with Will.

His name should be a bucket of cold water dumped over my head. But my body keeps moving, and my eyes are fixed on Étienne, watching as his hands flex and curl into fists, as if he's stopping himself from grabbing me.

My confidence flourishes. I glide my hands up and down my curves. Étienne's Adam's apple bobs when he swallows. It's only when I'm standing between his legs that I stop dancing.

Étienne tilts his head back, our eyes never breaking contact. "I like this

dance,” he says gruffly.

“Yeah?” I grip the back of the chair. My legs brush against his thighs. I’m mere inches away from straddling him. It’s then that I realize that somewhere along the way, this became less of a challenge and more of a seduction. Daring. Erotic. This is a glorified lap dance if there ever was one.

Get up, my mind whispers. Get up right now! You have a fiancé at home!

I can’t move though. How I feel is confusing, because on paper, Étienne’s mine. On paper, I share his last name. On paper, I’m his wife.

In my heart, none of that is true.

“Serene,” Étienne says gruffly, his hands balled up into fists at his sides.

“Hasn’t a woman ever danced for you?”

He swallows loudly. “No. Nothing quite like this.” His voice is a deep rasp.

I draw back an inch and brush a finger down his throat, across his rapid pulse. He sucks in a sharp breath but doesn’t pull away. One of us needs to though.

“You stopped dancing,” he says.

“The song is over,” I reply quietly.

“Hum it again.”

I smile at his eagerness. But that smile quickly fades; the self-possessed man who always seems in control of every aspect of his life is losing his power. His eyes are a bit glazed over. His hands, still curled into fists at his sides, unclench. They lift and are inches away from my waist before he snatches them back.

Soon I hear only our labored breathing quietly mingling. The dance is over. I’ve won this challenge. But I’ve lost all function in my legs, and instead of trying to gather my strength to move away, I deliberately lower onto his lap.

He hisses in a sharp breath. Almost reflectively, he grips my hips, holding me immobile. “Don’t move.”

I’m frozen.

Can’t breathe.

Can’t think.

I can’t feel a single thing except for Étienne. The heat of his body.

We stare at each other in shock. I make no move to get off Étienne’s lap, and he doesn’t take his hands off of me. With my corset on, his big hands practically encircle my waist.

“Serene...” He swallows, and I watch in fascination as my hands curl around his shoulders and toward his neck. “What are we doing?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, and it’s the truth. “I don’t know, but I don’t want it to stop.”

This close to him and my brain is short-circuiting.

A little taste won’t hurt, right?

Of course.

I think Étienne is thinking the same thing because he moves closer until the tip of his nose brushes against mine, and our lips are a hairs-breadth apart. Dancing for him straddled the line between right and wrong. But this? This pushes the line so far away, I’d need a pair of binoculars to see it.

His fingertips outline my body. Thumbs brush against the sides of my breasts before he curls his hands around the back of my head. “If I wanted, I could make you mine. Here and now.”

I smile because I know that he’s saying that more for himself than me.

“No, you couldn’t,” I whisper.

I’ve never been good at taking demands from people. Some may think that’s my worst quality—the very thing to get me in trouble. But I believe it’s the best part of me.

In life and love, I want half the control. Half the power. And I'll fight for it until I have no energy left.

For Étienne, giving away any power, no matter how small, is damn near impossible.

I wait. I keep my lips inches away from his. His grip on my head tightens. At the last second, I turn my head. Étienne's lips graze my jaw.

"No. Say you want this just as much as me," I say.

"Serene. Please," he growls.

I give in, lowering my head to kiss him.

The perfect kiss will be in the eye of the beholder. Everyone will have different preferences: soft and sweet, deep and passionate. The options are endless.

However, in our case, it's impossible to tell what our perfect kiss should be because both of us freeze. I feel as if I've been punched in the gut. I want to pull away, but my fingers are gripping the back of Étienne's neck so tightly, it'd take a few minutes to pry them off one by one.

Then I tilt my head. I sink deeper into his lap as my legs brush against the sides of his stomach. The movement settles his dick between my legs.

And just like that, the kiss goes from tentative to scorching hot.

Étienne breathes deeply through his nose as his tongue slips past my lips and moves against mine. His hands drift down my back, fingers grazing my tailbone. Then, boldly, he cups my ass, holding me in place. I suck in a sharp breath but don't pull away.

Time stops altogether. We're no longer two people from different worlds with so much stacked against us. Everything about this feels right.

The longer my lips are on his, the more frantic I become.

My fingers move to his chest, fumbling to open his waistcoat. I try to slow down and gain some control, but this kiss has a power all of its own. I

couldn't slow down even if I wanted to.

Finally, the last button releases and I start on his shirt. Étienne moans in my mouth. His hands break away from my body only to come back seconds later. This time they're beneath my dress, against my bare skin, creeping up my outer thighs.

I break away long enough to glimpse at him. Étienne captures my lips, and my hands greedily touch his bare stomach. Tracing his taut muscles only leaves me unsatisfied. I need more.

More, more, more.

I feel like a starving animal who's come across food for the first time in days. I need to stop and practice self-control, but I don't know how.

Étienne presses me closer to him. Enthusiastically, I grind against him. Étienne lets free a primal groan that only makes my heart beat faster.

Brazenly, my hands move south. I pause only for a second to figure out how much time it'd take to unbutton Étienne's pants. Way too long. I drag a finger down his dick before I cup him through his pants. Instantly, Étienne's hand clamps down on mine, stopping me from going any further.

He stares at me with a glazed-over expression. "Serene, I—"

I hear laughter coming from the hallway, and my body stiffens at the same time Étienne's does. Instantly, we break apart, both of us panting. My legs are shaking as I step away from Étienne. He jumps out of the chair as though it's on fire. With his hands on his hips, he takes deep breaths and stares blankly at the wall.

What just happened? This was far from my first kiss, but judging from how my body is reacting, you'd think it is. Desperation flows through me, and I have to stop myself from rushing back to Étienne.

"I need to go," Étienne says abruptly.

"Go?" I repeat.

He nods and buttons up his waistcoat. “Yes. We’re finished for today. You did well.”

“Étienne—”

“You will do fine tomorrow,” he interrupts with authority. He attempts to take the edge out of the words by smiling, but it doesn’t meet his eyes.

Like a statue, I stand there, watching him with confusion.

He flings a hand toward the door. “If you want to leave now, you can.”

Translation: go away.

He wants me to leave? That’s fine. I won’t beg him to talk about what happened—mainly because I need to think it through myself.

“Okay,” I say before I turn on my heel and walk away.

The echo of my footsteps ricochets off the walls.

Then Étienne says, “Don’t ever dance like that again.”

I bite my tongue because I want so badly to tell him to shut the hell up and not tell me what to do. But Étienne wants that. He wants a fight; he lost control, and so did I. And the truth is, neither of us would’ve stopped if it weren’t for the servants in the hall.

I ignore his words and continue toward the doors.

“Unless it’s with me.”

I twist around so fast, I’m surprised I don’t get whiplash. Étienne’s standing in front of one of the many windows with his hands tucked in his pockets and his back to me. For a second, I question whether I heard those last four words. But I know I did.

“What did you say?” I ask.

Étienne glances at me from the corner of his eye. “Nothin.’ I said absolutely nothin’.”



DINNER ENDED OVER an hour ago.

Serene sat across from me, which allowed me to watch her without gathering attention. If she was uncomfortable or nervous, she didn't show it. She had conversations with the guests around her; you'd think she'd been friends with them since childhood.

When dinner was over, the ladies retired to the parlor. I stopped at the doorway, wondering whether I should join her. But Nat linked her arm through Serene's and led her deeper into the room.

I told myself I didn't need to worry. The etiquette after a dinner party is a bit uninhibited, but that doesn't mean Serene will let her guard down. The ladies surrounding her are bloodthirsty with their need to gossip. One false misstep can provide a week's worth of hushed conversation and arched brows. I know Serene is capable of blending in, but she has a stubborn streak and a bit of a temper. She blurts out what she thinks and is incredibly

spontaneous. Right when I think I have her figured out, she does a one-eighty.

Only moments after we arrived at Asa's, she made her way to him. In front of everyone, she sweetly greeted him then apologized for the argument they had in my office. People gathered around them listening avidly, and Asa's face turned bright red as he accepted her apology. His manners dictated that he immediately receive it and give one of his own. When he did, a slow smile spread across her lips. She told him that she wanted to turn a new leaf over with him and walked away.

Did Serene seem sincere? Yes.

Did I wholeheartedly believe her? I don't know.

One person she didn't apologize to was Johnathan. He's here tonight. I've watched him closely. Not that it matters; he's kept a wide berth from Serene. During dinner, he shot daggers her way, and she not so subtly scratched her nose with her middle finger.

Furniture has been pushed against the walls in the parlor to make room for dancing. I wait for one of the men openly staring at Serene to ask her to dance, but she shocks us all when she walks into the middle of the room. Couples around her curiously stare. A guest volunteers to play the piano, and once she starts, Serene doesn't do the one-step. She merely moves to the music and encourages Nat to do the same. While everyone else dances the very dance we spent hours practicing.

At one point, Serene holds Nat's hands in the air so my sister can do a small spin. The two of them laugh while everyone gives them disapproving stares. Some look at me, probably confused as to why I'm not intervening. A few appear nonplussed. But most likely, everyone thinks this is the typical Serene they see at every party. They don't know what I know.

All eyes watch her, but not because of the way she dances. The other

ladies move with restriction; Serene moves with grace. There is something... free about every step she takes. I'm certainly not the only man in the room who has noticed. Even the ones dancing are looking at her from the corners of their eyes.

It doesn't help that her dress is borderline scandalous. On the way here, she swore she found this dress in Old Serene's closet, all the way in the back. The gown is dark blue, though the sleeves are a light blue muslin. It has fluid lines and draping across the front, and a slit that goes up to her knee, barely hidden by the same material for the sleeves. The dress is so form-fitting I—and everyone in the room—can tell she isn't wearing a corset.

When Nat was out of earshot, Serene openly gushed about how the gown is something she would wear in her own time, that it's so beautiful, and it makes her feel more like herself. She's right—the dress is beautiful, and because of that, no one can take their eyes off of her. My hand tightens imperceptibly on my drink as anger grows inside me. Before long, it turns to fury. I have the urge to break them all in half. Even my brother. He's staring at her with laughter in his eyes. If he'd experienced what I did in the ballroom with Serene yesterday, he wouldn't be smiling.

I've been telling myself that if we kissed just once, then my fascination with her would fade away. Oh, how wrong I was.

My thoughts are dominated by her and how I can get her alone again. I smirk darkly at the fools around me because I get to do what they're all craving to do—go home with her.

“Bless your heart, Étienne.”

I turn to my left and see Phoebe McNeal.

When it comes to women, no one loves them more than Livingston. I, on the other hand, find the whole rigmarole of flirting to be exhausting and a waste of time; I know the end scenario I want—with them in my bed. That's

what made Phoebe refreshing.

She's a beautiful woman with curves in all the right places. Over a year ago, we started a relationship. I use that term loosely, considering our relationship centered around sex. Over time, she became more insistent for a relationship that existed beyond my bed. She didn't go ballistic when I called off things, and because of that, we could be cordial in public. Tonight though, I hadn't anticipated seeing her. A brief surge of annoyance rolls through me.

"I'm sorry?" I say.

She steps closer, keeping her eyes on the couples on the floor, and speaks in a hushed whisper. "The spectacle your wife is makin' right now. I don't know how you've been so patient throughout the years. And that dress..." I don't take the bait, and she sighs. "It's risqué."

"Leave her be. She's enjoyin' herself."

Phoebe seems momentarily off guard by my harsh reply. She raises both brows and watches the couples dancing. "Very well. I apologize for oversteppin'."

I glance at Phoebe in time to see her lips curl up in disdain over the last word.

Within a blink of an eye, any trace of disgust is gone as she smiles and watches me from beneath her lashes. "I presume things are favorable between you and Serene?"

Such an innocent question, though I know Phoebe well enough to realize she's anything but honest or sincere. I hesitate because a substantial part of me wants nothing more than to end this conversation, march toward Serene, and ask her to dance with me. On a smaller scale, I'm tempted to answer. Not because Phoebe, or anyone else at this party for that matter, deserves to know the truth; this group is as loyal as a pack of rabid, starving dogs. No, the only reason I want to tell her the truth is because I myself can't believe the turn of

events.

I cast a surreptitious glance at Serene. “Things between Serene and I are... very pleasant.”

Phoebe arches a thin brow. Her brilliant smile doesn’t waver. “That’s wonderful to hear.”

I nod and direct my attention toward the dancing couples, trying to ignore that Phoebe is still standing beside me.

After a few seconds, she sighs. “It was lovely talkin’ to you, but I see some familiar faces I haven’t said hello to.”

“Good night, Phoebe,” I say without bothering to pull my gaze from Serene.

The song comes to a close, and Serene takes a deep breath and smiles. She and Nat talk for a few seconds before my sister drifts toward a group of her friends. Serene stands there alone, momentarily lost as she turns in a circle, trying to find a familiar face.

My grip tightens on my drink. *Look my way. Look my way.*

She’s seconds from seeing me when one of Livingston’s good friends, Trevor McBride, taps her shoulder. She whirls around, and I’d do anything to get a glimpse of her face right now. Trevor’s lips move. It doesn’t take a genius to realize he’s asking her to dance. I crane my neck forward as if those extra inches will gain me access to their conversation.

When we left Belgrave, she hadn’t a single hair out of place. Now her pins have loosened, causing a few wayward strands to escape and tease her neck and jawline. Beneath the light, the strands take on a golden hue.

In a sea of coiffed hair and uptight personalities, she’s a feral child. Free and unstrained. She’s the most fascinating thing I’ve ever seen.

She’s failing miserably at the one-step, but she does so with a gracefulness that has everyone wondering if they’re the ones who have the

steps wrong.

“Is there a reason you’re sulkin’ in the corner?” comes a voice to my left.

“Go away, Livingston,” I reply, never taking my eyes off of Serene.

At that moment, the piano stops. Serene claps, along with everyone else, and steps back from Trevor. Her cheeks are rosy, and her eyes are dancing. Something close to fury burns in my belly and spreads through my body when I see Trevor still hasn’t left her side. Her head kicks back as she laughs at something he says. It’s such a genuine and effervescent sound. Nearly every man in the room turns in her direction and watches Trevor with envy that he’s the one pulling that appealing sound out of her.

What did he say to her? Better yet, when did he grow a sense of humor? The man is as stiff as a board.

The interesting part is she isn’t flirting or giving him coy smirks like the Old Serene. The one standing in front of me is friendly and has nothing to hide.

“This is utterly fascinating,” Livingston remarks.

I give him my full attention. “What is?”

He pulls out his pocket watch. “It’s a quarter till ten, and you’re still here.”

Typically, I stay no longer than an hour at events. That gives me ample amount of time to speak with the people I know and make sure that my presence is noticed. But watching Serene gives me a rush of energy that’s impossible to describe. The only thing I know is that leaving is the last thing on my mind.

I snort. “Shouldn’t you be out there enjoyin’ yourself instead of counting the minutes I stay here?”

Livingston rocks back on his heels and laughs. “Touché. But you need to understand that lately, your behavior has been very singular.”

I grind my teeth and ignore his subtle attempts to get a rise out of me. “I could say the same for you. You’re standing on the outer edges of a ballroom, talking to your brother of all people, instead of making advances on the countless of available women here tonight.”

Livingston takes a long drink and grins. “Ah, the night is young, Étienne. The night is young.”

Our conversation is put on hold as Serene approaches us with Trevor at her side. He stares at her like a puppy dog anxious to make his master happy.

Livingston gives me a sidelong glance before he smiles at Serene. “There you are! I’ve searched this house top to bottom lookin’ for you.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Then I followed the whispers about the enchanting Serene, and they led me here. You are making quite an impression tonight.” My brother glances at me. “Wouldn’t you agree, Étienne?”

Bastard. He’s baiting me, and he knows it. I take a long swallow of my drink and don’t say a word.

He shoves his drink into my chest. “Hold this, will you? The next dance is mine.”

Serene gives me a hesitant smile before she follows Livingston.

I made a promise to Serene that I would help her find a way back to her time. A part of me is determined to keep that promise. But the other, bigger part resists it. Perhaps it wouldn’t be such a terrible idea if she stayed in my time. Forever.

Want her from afar, because she’ll never honestly be yours. She has a fiancé waiting for her, my mind warns.

If I thought watching McBride dance with Serene was terrible, then its torture watching Livingston. He’s pulling out all the stops as he flirts with Serene right in front of my face.

Ignore him. He's trying to get a rise out of you.

But when they make a turn, I see his hand on the small of her back, fingers splayed, and something inside me snaps.

“Étienne!” I turn in time to see Theodore Hunt, a successful cotton broker, come closer. “Just the man I wanted to speak to.”

I finish my drink (and Livingston's for good measure) and place it on the closest surface possible. “Not now,” I half-growl before I stalk toward Serene and Livingston. I tap my brother on the shoulder. “Mind if I cut in?”

Livingston pulls back. I keep my eyes fixed on his hand lightly resting on her waist before I look him in the eye. An uncomfortable silence descends around the three of us.

“Be my guest,” he finally replies. His eyes dance mischievously. “She is your wife, after all.”

I look at Serene. “That she is.”

She gives me a nervous smile and eyes me warily. I find that ironic, considering she's been mingling with veritable hyenas all night. All around us, people pair up and wait for the next dance to begin.

Expectantly, I hold my hand out and quietly wait. After a few seconds, Serene places her hand in mine. I remain a step behind her as she takes short, dainty steps forward, then elegantly turns toward me. I raise my arm to allow her to spin once. Then we face each other. Her left hand gently rests on my shoulder, whereas my right settles against the middle of her back. Her right hand is clasped in mine.

Like the rest of the couples, we move in tandem. When her foot tips forward, mine moves back. Serene's lips are in a firm line as we move across the room.

Then she whispers, “What was that?”

I give her a blank look.

Serene rolls her eyes before she puts on a false smile and says out of the corner of her mouth, “You know what I’m talking about. You practically ripped your brother’s head off, and all he did was dance with me.”

“You clearly don’t know my brother.” I may have overreacted, but I’m not about to admit that to her.

To my surprise, we move in full circles. Not polished like everyone else, but good enough that no one looks twice at us. Serene’s shoulders are pushed back; her chin is at a stubborn tilt.

“What were you and McBride talkin’ about?” I ask, making sure my voice sounds indifferent.

She frowns. “You mean Trevor?”

“You two are on a first-name basis?” I counter.

Serene sighs. I unconsciously tighten my grip on her hand, making her arch a brow. “We talked about nothing important. He asked if I was enjoying myself tonight. Complimented my dress.”

“I’m sure he did,” I mutter.

Serene pointedly ignores me. “This is my first time meeting him. He seems like a nice guy.”

“You two shared a laugh,” I say with a hint of accusation.

Our feet slide across the floor. We pause long enough for me to transfer her right hand to my left, allowing her to gracefully turn. Our positions change, and now we’re side by side. Her shoulder is directly below mine and inches away. She holds out her left arm, slightly bent at the elbow, and gently rests her hand on mine. My right hand settles directly above her right hip. She places her hand in front of mine and her fingers curl so her knuckles rest against her hip.

“Étienne, were you watching us?” she asks innocently, but I hear the curiosity in her voice.

Before I answer, I see Trevor cloistered with a group of men, all of whom I've spoken to a handful of times, yet I now view them as enemies. They see the Old Serene in their midst, but they realize something isn't quite right about her. They're all intrigued.

My hand reflexively tightens against her hip. "I wasn't watching. You were directly in front of me. Where else do you propose I look?"

Serene obviously isn't convinced, but she doesn't say a word. We continue across the floor. Every so often she stumbles over her feet but immediately rights herself.

"What about you and that woman?" she says out of the blue.

My brows become tightly knit. "What woman?"

She rolls her eyes impatiently. "That lady you were talking to. The brunette?"

"Oh! You mean Phoebe?" Serene stares at me.

It occurs to me that she has been doing some watching of her own. "What do you want to know?"

"Have you... seen her before?" she asks casually.

When she says "seen," I know she means something else entirely. She wants to know if I've been intimate with Phoebe. I've shared nearly everything else about my life with Serene, so would I hide this? Yet I find myself hesitating, even feeling a bit guilty.

"Yes. I have."

Her body stiffens. "Do you still see her?"

Serene is jealous. Serene is jealous of Phoebe. That shouldn't thrill me, but it does.

I let the silence between us extend for a few more seconds before I reply. "No, I don't."

She glances at her feet and exhales before she looks me in the eye.

“Good.”

The music comes to an end as we face each other. Her mouth opens and closes. She wants to say something. I feel like one of those lovesick buffoons who have been watching her all night, anxiously waiting for the next words to come out of her mouth.

I want to tell her that I’m sorry for not believing her the handful of times she told me she wasn’t my wife. But I’m not exactly known for being eloquent with my words. The confession would come out more like a bark and probably frighten her off.

Right then, Nat walks up, breaking our staring contest. Serene looks away first.

My sister gazes at me with bleary eyes. “Étienne, I’m exhausted.”

“It’s only a quarter after ten.”

“I know, but Serene woke me up early this mornin’ to take a walk, and I’ve been dancin’ the entire night. My feet can’t take much more.”

I glance at Serene. “Are you ready to leave?”

I expect her to grab onto my words like a lifeline. Here’s her opportunity to escape.

Instead, she blinks a few times before she glances around the room. “I think I want to stay.”

Nathalie yawns and looks close to falling asleep on my shoulder.

I step closer to Serene and lower my voice. “You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to. You did fantastic. You’ve shown your face, and now we can leave.”

She remains impassive as she stares at me. It’s impossible to tell what’s running through that dangerously bright mind of hers. “I know, but I’m having a fun time.” She smiles at me.

“You’re not staying here by yourself.”

She looks at the ceiling, and a long-suffering sigh escapes her lips before she mutters, “How did I know you would say that?” Then she focuses all her attention on me. “Livingston is still here. I’ll ask him to take me home.” She has this all figured out. “I’m enjoying myself.”

And then she tucks a wayward lock of hair behind her ear. It’s such an innocuous, feminine action. One I’ve rarely seen Serene do because she’s always too stressed about finding a way back to her time, too terrified that she’ll never leave this place. Who am I to steal a night of carefree fun away from her?

Against my better judgment, I find myself nodding.



sixteen

“LIVINGSTON, I NEED your help.”

Livingston, who is talking to some blonde, gives me a quick look. “I’m a bit preoccupied right now.”

I lean in. “It’s urgent.”

He gives the blonde a sultry smile and holds up a finger before he turns toward me. His smile disappears, and he looks exasperated. “What could you possibly want?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt this love connection of yours, but I just want to know if you can take me back to Belgrave later.”

“When is later?”

“I don’t know. An hour or two from now?”

“That means I’d be gone for an hour but still have enough time to come back here,” Livingston mutters. I clear my throat, and he glances at me. “Where’s your snappish husband?”

“He left.”

Livingston’s brows lift. “Without you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I sigh. “Because Nat was tired and I wanted to stay.”

“So you could bother me?”

“Look, the quicker you answer, the quicker you can get back to blondie.”

On cue, Blondie shoots him a sultry look that has him hooked.

“Yes, I’ll take you home,” he replies instantly, giving Blondie a devastating smile.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course,” he says before he stalks back toward his flavor of the moment. I could’ve asked him for a kidney and a million dollars, and he would’ve agreed.

With that done, I exhale loudly, look around the room, and begin to strategically smile at this person and say hi to that person. I do laps around the room, waiting until Livingston is distracted enough to stop glancing my way. Then I can slip into the hall and find Asa’s office.

Asa Calhoun is a successful man. Better yet, he’s an arrogant man. I’m hard-pressed to believe he wouldn’t have a place in his home where he could relax with some brandy or a cigar and muse over his greatness.

After my fourth lap around the parlor, I say hi to one of Étienne’s employees, Edward. He has kind eyes and a sincere smile that always puts me at ease. Every time I see him, his glasses are cockeyed, and I have to fight the urge to straighten them.

For a moment, I take in the room and the people inside it. From the dresses to the furniture and lighting, everything about this time has a romanticism attached to it that I’ll probably never get used to.

I glance at Livingston, leaning against the wall. The drink in his hands is almost empty. I'm clear across the room, but even I can tell he's tipsy.

Now is my time to move.

I slip out of the room without anyone the wiser. Could be that most people have drunk so much they're perilously close to being wasted. A man to my left laughs uproariously. No one is around him. He heavily slumps against the wall, his drink spilling onto the floor. Yep. Drunk and possibly crazy. But I'm okay with that; it makes sneaking into Asa's office all the easier.

Their voices become faint as I move down the hallway. Asa's home is impressive, similar in design of the Old Serene's parents' home. Three stories high with the narrow side facing the road. Typically a piazza runs the length of the house, and rooms are spread out across each floor.

I doubt Asa's office is on the third floor. Second? Maybe. When Étienne and I stepped into the foyer, we were directed to the left, where the dinner party was located. The whole time, I kept in the back of my head that there was a closed door to the right.

That door is now fifteen steps ahead of me. My body tingles in anticipation. I quicken my steps but remind myself to slow down. If anyone's behind me, I need to make it look as if I'm taking a small breather from the party.

Then up ahead of me, I hear crying. It's so soft, so indiscernible, at first I think it's in my head. But the sound becomes more distinct. I step into the foyer and see a blonde sitting against the wall. The round foyer table and massive floral arrangement partially obscure her from view.

I look around to see if anyone else might swoop in and help her, but there's no one. I'm half-tempted to walk past her, but then she lifts her head and makes direct eye contact with me.

I could continue moving down the hall as if I hadn't seen her, but that would be a huge bitch move on my part.

I take a few steps in her direction. When I'm close enough, I awkwardly clear my throat. "Are you okay?"

She straightens her bony shoulders and attempts to wipe her tears with shaking hands before she looks at me. "Yes. I-I'm just having a bad night."

I've become so accustomed to the Charlestonian accent that it takes me a second to fully absorb her English accent. It's such a stark contrast that I find myself leaning closer. "We've all been there. If I had a tissue, I'd give it to you," I finally reply.

"That's quite all right. It's the thought that counts."

The two of us stand there stiffly as we try to fill the silence. There's something familiar about her.

I speak first. "Is it a guy problem?"

She blinks rapidly, her lashes fluttering like butterfly wings. She seems hesitant to answer and looks at the pine floors, then back at me. "Yes, it is."

I move closer and slide down the wall until my butt hits the floor. I want to cross my legs, but this dress is too uncomfortable. Instead, I mimic her posture. I'm not the best at small talk or breaking awkward silences, but dear God, this lady makes me look outgoing. I drum my fingers on the floor and exhale. "Look, you don't have to tell me, but—"

My words are cut short when I glance at her left wrist. It bears four narrow lines in red with an undertone of blue. I'm sure if she turned her wrist around, I'd see one more line to complete the handprint. She goes to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear but freezes when she sees what I'm staring at.

She drops her hand like a dead-weight in her lap.

It's none of my business. I don't even know this woman. I should give her privacy and pretend I didn't see a thing. Yes, privacy is probably what

she wants. But who am I kidding?

“Did he do this to you?” I ask bluntly.

Immediately, she crosses her arms. Her bruised wrist disappears. “Yes.” She sighs. “He did.”

My brows raise; her willingness to tell the truth is the last thing I expected. I look at my laced fingers, mulling over what to say next. Suddenly, it occurs to me why she’s so familiar. She was one of the many ladies Livingston flirted with tonight. “Did Livingston do this to you? If he did, I could kick his ass for you. Do you want me to?”

“No! It wasn’t Livingston!” she says urgently. “It was someone else.”

“Are you married to this guy?”

She looks at me from the corner of her eye and shakes her head. “No... no, I am not.”

I want to ask her who he is, but I don’t want to break the moment. We’re sharing a sense of anonymity that brings a sense of freedom with it. We don’t know each other and have no clue whether we’ll ever cross paths again.

“Do you love him?” I ask.

She smiles faintly. “I suppose I do. When he does this, though...”

I find myself nodding and leaning in, anxious to hear what she’s going to say.

She sighs loudly before she closes her eyes and gently taps her head against the wall. “It’s impossible to explain my situation.”

“That’s okay. You don’t have to.”

Once again, she becomes silent and remains unmoving, her eyes still closed.

“If you want some privacy, I can leave,” I offer.

Her eyes flash open. “No. Stay. I appreciate your company more than you know.”

Longingly, I glance toward the hallway, straining to hear any footsteps heading this way. I settle back against the wall and stare forward.

Seconds pass before the woman softly clears her throat. “I know you’re wondering if he’s done this before.”

I turn my head in her direction. I could lie, but what’s the point? “I am, but you don’t need to explain to me. Just know that weak is the man who hurts a woman.”

The lady’s lips slightly part and she stares at me.

“I know it’s none of my business, so take everything I say with a grain of salt. He sounds like a complete piece of shit. And you seem like a great girl. It sounds cliché, but you deserve better. You know that. Right?”

By the time I finish my corny speech, her eyes are a bit glassy. Her mouth opens, but before she can utter a word, a door slams somewhere within the house. Her eyes widen imperceptibly, and she jumps to her feet. I follow her. Shit. Is the guy who did this still here?

“I should be going.”

“Are you sure?”

She nods and casts a furtive glance toward the party.

In an act of desperation, I grab her hand. “Do you need a ride somewhere? Granted, I won’t be the one driving, but I’ll drag Livingston’s horny ass out of the ballroom and make him take you wherever you need to go.”

She gives me another appreciative smile before she moves toward the front door. “No, I assure you, I’ll be fine.”

“I’m sorry.” What for? I don’t know; the words just slipped out of my mouth before I could think twice.

She gives my arm a small squeeze. “You have nothing to be sorry for. Thank you for keeping me company.”

I watch her slip out of the front door, and I stand there for a few seconds, trying to figure out what the hell happened. Should I go after her and make sure she's okay? Something tells me that if I tried, she would rebuke my efforts once again. The honest and sincere moment we had has been broken.

Sighing loudly, I shake my head. I need to focus on the task at hand—finding his office and searching it.

The hallway is empty, so I hurry toward the closed door mere steps away. When my hand curls around the knob, I brace myself for the door to be locked. Surprisingly, there's a small click, and the door creaks open. Instead of basking in this minor stroke of luck, I creep into the room and shut the door.

Asa Calhoun's office isn't much different than Étienne's, from the plush Tabriz carpet to the linenfold oak paneling. What, does everyone in this time have the same interior decorator?

The desk is directly in front of me. The only thing that sets his office apart from Étienne's is the fact that Asa's isn't nearly as organized. Papers are haphazardly strewn across the surface. A fountain pen with the cap tossed aside bleeds black ink onto a blank document.

I don't know where to search first or what to look for, and I know I don't have much time before Livingston finally looks around the parlor and realizes I'm not there. Or until Asa decides to visit his office. I hurry across the room, sit behind the desk, and frantically scour the papers dispersed across the desk. Most of them are correspondences. So far, there's nothing of interest in plain sight.

I move on to the drawers.

The narrow drawer in the middle opens up immediately, but it's filled with office supplies, matches, and a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles. The two drawers on the left are locked. So is the upper drawer on the right. As I reach

the bottom right drawer, I touch the back of my hair to fish out a hairpin. It's a long shot, but I have to at least try to get into the drawers. I become so preoccupied with untangling strands of hair from the pin that it takes me a few seconds to realize that the bottom drawer has opened right up. Immediately, I abandoned the pin and riffle through the drawer. Unsurprisingly, it's filled to the hilt with papers and more papers.

Wedged between the papers in a ledger of some sort. I lean in to get a better look as I lift a stack of documents and place it on my lap. The spine is a dark red, and the front and back are black. I thumb through it, and I'm only a few pages in when I realize it's an accounting ledger. Every single page is filled with transactions and balances. It dates all the way back to September 3rd, 1911 and stops on April 12th, 1912. The day I arrived.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

The ledger is incredibly detailed, yet all this proves is that Asa Calhoun is a competent accountant. As I skim through the ledger a second time, I notice small, impeccable writing at the very top of one of the pages. It takes me a few seconds before I realize it's the name of Étienne's company and the words "Copy Two."

Copy two? How many copies of this ledger are there and why?

"If you come this way, we can speak in more depth in my—"

My head jerks up.

"Shit," I hiss and hastily shove all the papers back into the drawers before I slam it shut.

Frantically, I hunt for a good place to hide. There are no closets. The curtains aren't an option. I could hide behind the desk, but that's too great of a risk. My heart slams against my ribcage, desperately seeking a way out of this situation. Just like me.

I turn to the right, look past the painting on the wall, and see the

windows. I do a double take. The windows facing the front of the house are the narrow latticed kind. Shimmying out of them would be impossible. But the ones behind the desk are casement windows with glass panes in the shape of diamonds. My hands shake as I lean the ledger against the window and unlock the fastener. There's a soft rush of air and the hinges squeak in protest as the window opens inward.

I snatch the ledger and lean out the window to see how far the drop is. Not bad at all. The worst that can happen is I'll get a few scratches from the hedges, but I'll take that over getting caught in Asa's office any day.

Without a second thought, I drop the ledger into the shrubbery, where it softly lands. I grab the hem of my dress and draw the material up to my knees. I extend my left leg out the window, then I'm awkwardly straddling the windowsill. When I twist my body to the left, the right sleeve of the dress becomes snagged on the side paneling of the window and tears. There's no time to look it over because Asa's voice is getting louder and louder. He's seconds away from opening the door.

Unceremoniously, I jump from the window. That's a bit of a stretch. More like fall in a giant heap onto the ground. Hastily, I scramble away from the shrub poking my left side and blindly pat the ground around me for the ledger. A few seconds later, I find it. Right as Asa's office door opens.

His booming voice drifts toward me. I want to eavesdrop and find out who he's speaking with, but I don't want to be discovered. So as quietly as possible, I scoot back until my butt and shoulder blades touch the stucco. The plaster is cold against my skin, giving me goose bumps as I move away from the window.

It's only when I'm mere steps away from the backyard that I stop and take a deep breath. I close my eyes, tip my head back against the stucco, and smile triumphantly.

I didn't think it would work. I thought Étienne would be suspicious of me wanting to stay. I thought I'd be thwarted from even getting the chance to enter Asa's office, let alone searching the space.

But I did, and I succeeded.

I open my eyes and glance at the ledger. I have no idea if what I stole from Asa's office implicates him in anything, but it's all I've got to go on at this point. To be sure my eyes didn't deceive me, I open up the ledger and look at the last logged transaction. It still says April 12th, 1912.

That isn't a coincidence. It has to mean something. Has to.

As my adrenaline high wears off, I come to my feet and try to fix my dress, although it's useless; I look like I've been drug behind a semi. There are dirt stains everywhere and equal tears to match. If anyone asks, I'll say I tripped walking down the porch steps. I don't think it'll pass, but I'll use it anyway. After dusting off my hands, I grab the ledger and head toward the front of the house.

“Coming from someone who's jumped from a balcony and a handful of windows, your technique was all wrong.”

Gasping, I whirl around and see Livingston a few steps away. How did I not hear him? His arms are crossed, and he's wearing that playful smirk. He's the picture of good-natured and mischievous, but his eyes keep volleying between the path I came from and the notebook I'm tightly clutching to my chest.

I could tell Livingston that it's not what he thinks and offer up some farfetched alibi. But he's probably used every excuse known to man.

I fake a yawn and rub one of my eyes. “I'd love to stay and chat, but it's getting late. I should be going.” I start walking toward the front entrance until Livingston's words stop me in my tracks.

“What were you doing in Asa's office?”

There's a good chance Livingston will immediately go back and tell Étienne what he saw. I can't afford to let that happen, so I turn around and face Livingston.

"I don't trust Asa," I admit.

"So you decided to break into his office?"

"No. I mean... yes." I take a deep breath. "I want to make sure that he's not doing anything... wrong behind Étienne's back."

"Even if he was, why would you care?"

"I know you think I don't care about your brother, but you have it all wrong. I do care. I care a lot," I say softly.

That wipes the smile off Livingston's face. His lips go into a firm line and his eyes narrow. He's never looked more like Étienne. He moves closer and peers at me intently. "I accept that you and Étienne have a unique marriage. Nat accepts it. Your friends accept it. The staff at Belgrave accept it. But what I can't accept is you cruelly pretending to care for my brother because you're bored."

"Is that what you think?" I ask. "That I'm bored?"

He crosses his arms. "Isn't that always the case?"

He doesn't know who you are. He's simply judging you on who he thinks you are, I tell myself over and over, trying to calm down. But it doesn't have the desired effect. "Look, Livingston, I understand that I've made some mistakes in the past."

He arches a brow in disbelief and gives me a stare that says, "Ya think?"

I exhale and look Livingston in the eye. "I've made a lot of mistakes, and I've been a selfish bitch. But I'm a different person from the one you knew. I've changed, and I want to correct my mistakes. I want a better relationship with Étienne. And I think... I think Étienne wants the same thing. You're not blind. I know you've noticed how well we've been getting along."

Livingston's silence is proof that I'm right.

"I see a different side of him now, and I want to make sure no one hurts him," I say.

There's a long stretch of silence between us. The parlor window is cracked open, allowing music and raucous laughter to drift our way. Having such a serious conversation with a party only steps away seems wrong.

"Do you love Étienne?" he says out of nowhere.

I take a small step back. "Excuse me?"

"Do you love Étienne?"

If I had been asked this question weeks ago, when I first arrived, my answer would've been no. Two weeks ago, I would've smiled softly and said no and explained that Étienne is strictly a friend. Right now, I have no idea how to reply because I don't know what I'm feeling.

Am I attracted to Étienne? Yes.

Is that attraction growing by the day? Yes.

Do I genuinely care for him? Yes.

But lust and love are easy to confuse; both override common sense and have lifelong repercussions. The idea that I could love someone from an entirely different time, someone I've only known for forty-three days seems absurd.

But it's a possibility.

My situation grows trickier by the second. It's a twisted ball of yarn with so many knots. I'm trying to untangle the gnarled mess, but I'm making things worse. Throwing in the feelings I'm starting to have for Étienne makes everything more convoluted and impossible to unravel.

"I don't know," I reply, looking him straight in the eye.

Livingston continues to watch me for a few more seconds before his shoulders slump ever so slightly. He sighs loudly and shakes his head. He

may not believe my answer, but even he can see how convoluted the relationship between Étienne and me is. “Come on. I’ll take you home.”

“I can get back home on my own.”

“You asked me to take you home earlier. Remember?” Livingston says.

“Oh yeah.” But that was before Livingston caught me falling out of Asa’s office window. As we walk toward the front of the house, I glance at Livingston from the corner of my eye. “You’re not going to tell Étienne what you saw tonight, are you?”

Livingston sighs. “I should. But I won’t.”

“Promise me,” I say.

We round the corner of the house, and he stops short and looks me in the eye. “My word is my bond.”

I’ve only known him for a short period, but I know that I can trust him to keep this between the two of us. My shoulders sag in relief. “Thank you.”

We’re silent as we get into his car and pull away from Asa’s home. Instinctively, my hands curl around the ledger.

It’s not until we’re on the outskirts of Charleston that I realize I referred to Belgrave as home.



seventeen

EXHAUSTION GRIPS MY entire body as I step out of the car. Livingston says good night and loudly slams the door. Slowly, I walk toward the porch. Livingston is in such a hurry to get back to town that he doesn't wait for me to get inside. Which works out for me, because I'm not taking the risk of carrying this account book inside. There's a good chance Étienne is still up, and I don't want him to see it. Yet.

I intend to take my time and look through the ledger before I give it to him. I sneak around the house and stop near a cluster of neatly trimmed hedges. It's so dark out that it's impossible to see my hand in front of me, let alone the ledger, so I blindly toss the notebook into the bushes. There's a rustle of branches and a resounding thump when it touches the ground. Early tomorrow morning, I'll come outside and grab the account book before it has a chance of being discovered.

Crickets chirp in the distance. My steps are whisper-soft as I walk

through the front door. Just as I'd hoped, the entire house is silent. Most of the lights are off. But in a home continually bustling with people, the silence is almost eerie.

I go to great lengths to quietly shut the front door and tiptoe to the staircase. Before I do, I glance in the direction of Étienne's office. The door is open and a light is on, but there's no movement coming from inside the room. I'm tempted to go inside and see if he's there, but I don't want to risk having a conversation with him. He's too astute and would immediately know I was hiding something from him.

I slip my shoes off and hold them with my left hand. The other hand curls around the railing. I've only made it up two steps before movement comes from Étienne's office. I quicken my pace and am halfway up when I hear him behind me.

"Where have you been, Serene?"

I freeze and close my eyes; I was so close to the second floor. So close. I turn around. "At the party. Where else would I be?"

Étienne casually leans against the wall. His jacket and bow tie are off. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, revealing tan forearms. The top two buttons of his white dress shirt are unbuttoned.

He stares at the rip on my dress. In his face, I see anger, but more than that, I see jealousy. "What happened to your dress?"

"It ripped," I say.

"I can see that," Étienne says evenly. I've never seen Étienne this calm. It's completely unnerving. He moves away from the wall and takes a few steps before he stops. "But who tore it?"

I walk down until there are two steps between us. I should have the advantage of looking down at Étienne, but he's so tall, his gaze is even with mine.

“I tore it,” I reply slowly. “It was an accident.”

His gaze narrows, and I know he’s not buying a thing I’m saying. “Where were you really?”

Avoiding his gaze, I toy with the torn material of my sleeve. “I already told you. At the party.” My gaze meets his. “Ask your brother. He’s the one who brought me home.”

Étienne mutters a curse as he moves up a step and grabs my hand. He tightly holds it. I swallow.

“Jealous, Étienne?” I ask softly.

A muscle along his jaw jumps. “No. I’m certain you’re lying to me. I don’t like liars, Serene.”

I firmly believe that lying is sometimes a necessary evil. It will eat at you, but in the end, you know you’re doing it to protect the people you care about. “Ask Livingston. He saw me at the party.”

“And he saw how you ripped your dress?”

I look him in the eye. “Yes.”

Étienne holds my gaze. There’s no question he’s going to grill Livingston on what happened tonight. I just need enough time to look through the ledger again. Then I’ll give it to Étienne and confess what I was really up to tonight.

Seconds slowly tick by, and Étienne still hasn’t let me go. “Were you with Trevor?”

At first, I have no idea who he’s talking about, then a face pops into my mind. My eyes widen. “God. No.”

“Then who?”

“No one!”

“Tell me,” he urges, his voice almost desperate.

“I know you said you aren’t jealous, but you’re giving me mixed signals right now.” Pointedly, I glance at his hand still holding onto me.

Étienne follows my gaze and abruptly lets me go. Cool air touches my skin, and I'm almost tempted to ask Étienne to come back to me. Almost. I'm too fascinated watching him. His hands are curled into tight fists. A muscle jumps along his jaw. There's this wild, untamable energy about Étienne that reminds me of a caged tiger. I'd give just about anything to know what he's thinking.

"If I'm actin' any certain way, it's because of you. You did this to me."

"What did I do?"

"What have you not done? The Old Serene and I had an understanding. I expected her to do the things she did and she counted on me to react the way I did. But with you..." He plants his hands on his hips. "With you, all of that is useless."

"Do you want me to pretend to be her?" I shout.

"Of course not!"

"Then what?" My temper is boiling and seconds away from exploding. It seems as if we're running around in circles. "Étienne, tell me what you want."

"I don't want you to leave."

I freeze. Once his words are out, Étienne takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and rubs his temples.

"I need to," I say quietly.

"Need to or have to?" he counters. "You think you belong in another time. Belong to another man. But maybe you have it all wrong. Maybe you belong here, with me."

I exhale loudly because everything he said, I've already thought. Many, many times. I just pushed them aside, but now Étienne's forcing me to face them head on, and I don't want to. "This conversation is over. Good night."

With the torn hem of my dress gathered in one hand, I hurry up the stairs.

Étienne is hot on my heels. “Don’t walk away from me!”

Abruptly, I turn, causing Étienne to almost collide with me. He places his right hand against the wall and curls the other around the railing as he leans into me.

I let go of my dress and mimic his actions. With him this close, my balance wavers, but I don’t back down. “Don’t tell me what to do!”

“I’ve been preoccupied at work. I’ve left work early. I can’t think straight and—”

“And that’s my fault?” I cut in.

“Who else’s would it be?”

“If you want to blame me, then go right ahead. Does that mean you’re going to blame me for the day at the pond or when we kissed?” I counter.

His nostrils flare at the same time his pupils dilate.

The yelling between us may have died down, but the intensity between us hasn’t. Deeply, I inhale him. A whimper of need escapes my lips. The push and pull between us is driving me mad. I find myself leaning toward him when I know I should be backing away.

He leans in, his lips inches from my own. He furtively glances between my eyes and lips. The longer we stay like this, the more torturous it becomes, until it takes all my willpower not to moan.

Finally, Étienne whispers, “Have you any idea how much I want you?”

Shivering at the sound of his voice, I shake my head. “Don’t do it.”

I see the yearning in his eyes. One simple touch is tempting. One perfect kiss is torture. Anything after that is irreversible. I know if he kisses me, I won’t be able to stop. Something tells me he won’t be able to either.

“You keep demanding I stop this. Why do you think I’m any stronger than you?” he says tightly.

I think every second, every hour I’ve spent here has led up to this

moment. I can feel it deep in my bones, and it scares me because everything is moving so fast and I have no control over it.

“I’m not your wife. Don’t think for a second that I’m yours.” I can’t tell whose benefit I say it for: his or mine.

My words just seem to make Étienne furious. “Yes, you are!” He takes a deep breath then gazes at me, the heat still in eyes. “You are.”

His chest is heaving as though he’s run a mile. He’s not alone.

All of a sudden, he captures my head between his hands and kisses me hungrily.

We’ve kissed before.

We’ve kissed every time our eyes connected. We’ve kissed when our hands join and our bodies brush against each other. We’ve kissed when we both laugh at something.

We’ve had practice. But nothing can prepare me for this.

I’ve always believed a good kiss should make your heart speed up, but now I see the difference between a good kiss and an unforgettable kiss. I feel my heart race, but everything around us is forgotten. It’s just the two of us.

Instinctively, I close my eyes. My hands wrap around Étienne’s neck as our bodies align.

With ease, his lips move over mine as he smoothly adjusts our positions until he’s half-looming over me. His tongue sweeps past my lips and glides against my own. My hands drag down the rigid muscles of his back as I try to move closer. Our hunger for each other is overwhelming. No matter what we do, it isn’t enough.

To get Étienne out of my system, I have to get him out of his clothes. I have to touch him everywhere. Kiss the hell out of him. My hands move to the buttons of his waistcoat, and when I’m done, I jerk the hem of his shirt from his pants.

He grabs my hands before they can go any further, and he pulls away long enough to say, “My room.”

Wordlessly, I nod and wrap my legs around him. One of my shoes is left behind on the stairwell, but we don’t stop to pick it up or even to make sure the coast is clear. I continue to taste him as he strides toward his room. Greedily, I suck on his tongue, suggesting other sexual acts I want to do.

A harsh groan slips from Étienne. He stumbles, and my back slams into the hallway wall, inches away from an unlit wall sconce. I tilt my head back, exposing my throat. I shiver when I feel Étienne’s lips on my skin. My body hums with appreciation as he gently sucks on my neck. His lips eventually drift back to my lips as he moves us away from the wall and toward his room.

With one hand, he reaches behind me and turns the knob. The door creaks as it opens. He strides into the room and kicks the door shut as he walks us toward his bed. I slide down his body to stand before him. He tears my dress, exposing my bra to his hungry gaze. I’m wearing the one I had on the day I first came here. To say my black lace push-up bra is daring compared to the undergarments of this time is an understatement.

His hands land on my sides of my stomach and slowly trace my curves. His thumbs brush against my ribs, making me jump slightly. Lightly, his fingers brush against the undersides of my breasts. I arch back, making a moan escape his lips.

“Are you going to stare all night or can I undress?” I tease, sounding a bit breathless.

Étienne’s heated gaze meets mine, making my smile fade. He takes a small step back. “Take off your clothes.”

My heart pounds as I slide my hands out of the sleeves. The dress is partially torn and immediately drops around my hips. I point at him. “Your turn.”

Like that day at the pond, he's completely unfazed by my request and unbuttons his shirt. As he works on his pants, I shimmy my dress down my hips and let it pool around my feet.

Taking off clothes should be the easy part. But what's happening right now is a different kind of naked. With every touch and whisper of his breath against my skin, I feel as though my soul is being cracked open.

Desire pools in my stomach before it slowly spreads through my body, warming my veins and making me wet between my legs.

Leaving his pants unbuttoned, giving me a tantalizing glimpse of the muscles around his hips that disappear underneath his pants, he gestures to my bra. "I can't figure out whether I want you to take it off or leave it on."

Instinctively, my fingers toy with the hook between my breasts. His eyes zero in on the movement.

"I say off," I reply.

Slowly, I unhook my bra. The straps fall down my arms. I hold the material in place though, before I slowly let it slip away.

A savage growl tears from his throat. Like an animal, he pounces. I fall back on the bed with Étienne on top of me. His tongue slides against my own, so slowly it's erotic. I drag my fingers through his hair to hold him in place, but my attempt is futile. His lips soon descend down my body, leaving a hot trail. He stops when he reaches my breast. He cups them, gently kneading them, and the pads of his thumb repeatedly brush against my nipples until they're hard points.

"They fit my hands perfectly," he says tightly.

I arch against him; his restraint is driving me mad. As though he can read my mind, he presses my breasts closer together, my nipples inches away from his lips. He looks at me from beneath his lashes as he licks one nipple, then the other. He moves back and forth methodically. My legs scissor kick

against the bed.

Maybe later I might comment on his patience and dedication, but right now, I'm restless. My nerve endings are tingling. My skin is on fire.

I need him. Now.

Étienne is oblivious though. He takes his time and switches from licking to sucking. He starts out gently, then he begins to pull, his tongue flicking against the tip.

Gasping, I hold him closer. Peeling one eye open, I watch him switch to the other breast. "Étienne..."

He lifts his head. His hair is wild from my hands, his cheeks slightly red and his lips wet. I've never seen him more attractive. I'm the one who made him look like this. Who made him lose control.

Cupping his face, I pull him up toward me. His arms bracket me as he looms over me. I drag my hands over his biceps, loving the feel of his sinewy muscles, then up the strong column of his neck, through his hair, and jerk him toward me.

"Fuck me, Étienne," I say against his lips.

His eyes flare at my demand. He kicks off his pants, and his underwear soon follows. He rubs the head of his cock against my pussy.

He closes his eyes. "You're so wet."

Forming a coherent sentence is beyond me at this point. Right now, I want one thing and one thing only. "Now."

Watching Étienne lose control is an aphrodisiac. It has to be the same for him as I become wild and a bit unhinged because he licks his lower lip and rocks into me slowly. I spread my legs farther, allowing him to go a bit deeper. Étienne breathes deeply as his forehead touches mine.

This is hardly my first time. But with Étienne it is, and that makes everything feel new and different. Almost sacred. I'm hyperaware of every

thrust and the way his strong hands curl around my shoulders, holding me in place, giving him better momentum and the perfect rhythm.

My body shakes; there's no part of me he isn't claiming. I feel myself pulsating around him. He hisses in a breath and slowly pulls out until only the very tip of him is inside me.

It's a delicious sort of torture that has me moaning his name.

He slams into me, more powerfully than before. He grips the edge of the headboard for better balance and rolls his hips, and my toes curl.

My eyes flash open, staring blindly at the ceiling. How many women before me have stared at this very ceiling? And how many have sunk their nails into his back? Did they moan like me as he picked up the pace?

Did he tighten his grip and pant into their ear?

I squeeze my eyes shut and wrap my legs high around his waist. My fingers drag down his back. I hope there are marks tomorrow morning. I curl my fingers around his jaw and jerk his face up. His eyes widen in shock for a second, then I kiss him hard. My teeth sink into his bottom lip. Everything I'm doing is animalistic, almost dangerous, but I have no power to stop it. Something is taking me over. It's terrifying, yet thrilling.

All it'll take is one more thrust, two at the most, from Étienne and I'll come. My body is trembling, blood is roaring in my ears, and every muscle is tight and ready to let go. But I don't want this to end. Not yet.

"Étienne," I moan.

He lifts his head, eyes blazing. "You belong to me."

His words ignite a small sense of fury in me. He thinks I belong to him, but can the same be said for him?

Without a second thought, I switch our positions until I'm straddling him. Étienne blinks rapidly and stares at me with shock. My knees are tightly pressed against his chest as I stare down at him. His dick lays hard and wet

against my leg. Étienne's hands latch onto my hips as if he's getting ready to lift me back onto his dick, but I grab his hands and press them back against the bed. He could push me off him with a simple flick of his wrist, but he doesn't. I think he's waiting to see how far this goes.

If I'm perfectly honest with myself, so am I. Never have I been driven by need and blinded by lust like this. It's making me do things I've never done before.

Slowly, my fingers make an unhurried walk down his chest.

"Will you ever be mine?" I ask, watching as his rigid abs become taut beneath his skin. When he doesn't reply, I wrap my hand around his dick. I watch him as I rise to my knees and ever so slowly rub him against my slit. I'm trying to tempt him, but I can't stop the moan that escapes my lips. "Will I ever have the chance to own your heart and body?"

Étienne bites back a curse. "You are gonna kill me, Serene." His chest heaves as he pants. When the wait becomes too much for him, he makes a grab for my hips.

Holding his hands close to my breasts, I look down at him. "Answer me."

His eyes open into thin slits. If I were anyone else and we were anywhere else, I know I'd pay dearly for teasing him this way, but all is fair in love and fucking.

"God yes," he bites out.

The cocky, self-assured man everyone knows him to be is gone, replaced with a man who looks half-starved. For me. It sends a shiver down my spine and makes me lean into him. I dip my head and go straight for his neck. I kiss the right side before I gently bite his skin.

He groans loudly and arches his neck. I smile in triumph. I never guessed bringing this alpha into submission would be so addicting. I could get used to this.

Sitting back up, I grab his large hands and place them on my breasts. Languidly, I lower myself onto his dick and groan. The way he fills me and gently squeezes my breasts while brushing his thumbs across my nipples is almost too much for me.

I kick back my head and close my eyes as I ride him. My knees sink into the mattress. The sheets become tangled around our ankles and soon fall onto the floor. Every muscle in my body is screaming, begging me to stop. But I can't, because I see the look in Étienne's eyes.

And I know it's the same look in my own eyes. This connection we share is undeniable. It transcends time and all logic. Nevertheless, it's there. Utterly owning us and pushing us out of our comfort zones until all we have left to cling to is each other.

"Étienne," I pant.

He's cupping my ass, steadily guiding us into the perfect tempo. "You feel... so good."

As I stare at him, my vision becomes hazy. Sweat makes a path down my stomach and drops onto Étienne's lower abdomen. Our skin faintly claps together. My sighs mixed with his groans brings everything to a fever pitch.

"Faster," he bites out. He takes control by holding my hips in place and furiously thrusting. "Faster!"

Tilting me back, he pushes even deeper. My core tightens, and I shake. Étienne comes first, roaring my name. I feel him lengthen inside me, and I watch as his face contorts in a blended mixture of pain and pleasure.

I don't know whether I scream his name or shout every cuss word under the sun. I just feel white-hot heat sweep through me, making my legs spasm.

With a blissful sigh, I drop my head against his chest, listening to the rapid pounding of his heart. My body is incapacitated. Every muscle feels like jelly, but my eyes are blinking rapidly. Minutes pass, yet Étienne doesn't

roll me off him, and I don't try to move.

Finally, I lift my head, push my hair out of my eyes, and gaze at Étienne. He's staring at the window. As though he can feel my stare, he meets my gaze. We're both silent, but there's an understanding between us that makes him gently guide my head back to his chest. I swallow loudly and close my eyes.

What the two of us know but won't say is that irrevocable damage has been done.

And there's no going back.



HOW DOES SOMEONE act after they've had sex with someone who isn't their fiancé?

There should be a magazine article that doles out advice for this scenario. Although chances are I wouldn't find said article in any magazine here. Or even one in my own time. I imagine that if I did, it would tell me to immediately confess to cheating.

Cheating.

There's no reason to sugarcoat the situation. That's what I did. Remorse lingers inside me, but it's not destroying me. Which makes the situation worse. A good person would be consumed with guilt.

I'm in an impossible position. In this time, Étienne is my husband. Sleeping with him is entirely acceptable. I'm falling for him, and my heart is telling me that what I did last night is okay. My heart is telling me that I resisted as long as I could.

My mind says something else entirely. It tells me that I'm an engaged woman in the present day. It reminds me that I'm not trying to stay in this time. It tells me that what I did was wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

I feel sick to my stomach because I know both sides are valid.

I take a deep breath and inspect the front of my dress to make sure there are no wrinkles and my belt is secured around my waist before I walk into a dining room.

I didn't encounter Étienne upstairs. In fact, I haven't seen him in hours. During the early hours of the morning, I slipped out of his room and crept back to my room. The chances of seeing him during breakfast are high. I have to get this over with. The sooner, the better.

I drop my hands to my sides and breeze into the room with a smile. "Good morning."

Livingston and Nat lift their heads. Étienne is nowhere in sight.

"Good mornin'," Nat says brightly.

Livingston merely arches a brow and smirks at me before he goes back to eating.

I make my way toward the table. When I sit down, I give Étienne's empty chair a cursory glance. Where is he? In all the time I've been here, Étienne has never been late to well... anything. Plus, I don't want to let my built-up courage go to waste.

I say thank you to a servant who fills my plate with eggs, toast, bacon, cornbread, and grilled ham. I'd love to say there's no way I could finish this, but I'm starving. Especially after last night.

I grab my fork to dig in when I notice Livingston and Nat staring at me. I

lower my fork. “What?”

Instantly, Nat looks away. Livingston shrugs a shoulder and leans back in his chair.

My eyes narrow. “You two are acting bizarre. Is everything okay?”

Livingston turns to his sister. “I’m fine. Are you fine, Nat?”

“I’m fine.”

“Well, look at that,” I reply. “We’re all fine.”

For a few minutes, there’s only the sound of cutlery clanging against plates. I can’t help but notice how Nat and Livingston sneak glances my way. They’re up to something. Whatever it is, I don’t want to be a part of it; I have enough problems of my own.

I’m close to being done with breakfast when Étienne enters the room, whistling. He sees me sitting there, and a slow smile spreads. It quickly disappears when he sees his siblings sitting across from me.

“Mornin’, Étienne,” Livingston drawls out slowly.

He nods his brother’s way. I look out of the corner of my eye, waiting for Étienne to brush past me, but he never does. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up when a shadow spills across my plate. Étienne curls his hands around the top of my chair.

Almost immediately, the air changes. It’s becomes charged and heavy with all the things Étienne and I did last night, every indecent word he whispered in my ear. My breathing becomes ragged. My back is ramrod straight; I can feel the heat radiating from Étienne’s body. Livingston watches us with interest. I know Étienne’s waiting for me to tilt my head back and acknowledge him, but I’m not going to.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you have a home in Charleston, correct?” Étienne asks, still behind me.

“Of course. I thought it would be a pleasant surprise if I had breakfast

with my siblings and wonderful sister-in-law. Also, I thought that...”

What Livingston says next drifts right past me because two fingers hook around the material of my dress and gently tug until I’m sitting back in my seat and my head is brushing Étienne’s lower abdomen. Étienne continues to converse with his brother as though nothing is amiss, but in reality, those agile fingers of his graze my shoulder blades through my dress. I try to eat, but my hands are shaking so badly half of my food drops back onto my plate.

Their conversation comes to a close and Étienne steps away, but not before his hands brush against the back of my neck. I completely freeze up when he walks past me. My grip on my fork tightens as I fight the urge to scoot closer to him.

Immediately the servants place breakfast in front of Étienne. He digs in with gusto, eating as if this is the first meal he’s had in weeks. I had an appetite when I first came into the room, but now adrenaline is coursing through me, making it impossible for me to swallow. Nat is staring at me oddly, and Livingston is smirking at me as if he knows. Which is impossible.

After a few minutes of blissful silence, Livingston clears his throat and wipes his mouth with his napkin. “How are you today, Étienne?”

Étienne doesn’t bother to lift his head. “Great.”

“You’re awfully quiet.”

Étienne pauses. “I’m always quiet.”

“But you’re suspiciously quiet today. Don’t you think so, Nat?”

Nat’s brows furrow. “I’m not sure. Are there different types of quiet?”

“Yes. And I think we’re gettin’ a glimpse of those types as we speak.”

Étienne drops his fork onto his plate, sighs, and stares at his brother. “Are you done?”

“Not at all.” There’s that shit-eating grin again.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I glance at the opposite side of the table. If

growing up with siblings has taught me anything, it's that when your brother or sister give you that grin, they have something on you. Something you don't want anyone to know about. And they're going to dangle it above your head for as long as possible.

Livingston doesn't live here! He couldn't possibly know about last night... could he?

"Étienne, did you sleep well last night?" Livingston asks with mock concern.

Shit. Livingston knows.

Étienne's fork pauses midway to his mouth before he goes back to eating. "Yes."

"Mmmm..." Livingston turns his attention to me. "So, Serene..."

Reluctantly, I meet his gaze. "Yes?"

"You look a bit flushed."

"Livingston!" Nat admonishes.

"What?"

"You shouldn't talk about a lady's appearance. It's not appropriate."

"Nonsense. It's Serene. She's like a sister. Besides, I'm sayin' what everyone else is thinkin'."

Nat doesn't reply.

"Am I wrong?" Livingston prods.

"Well... no," she concedes.

"Exactly!" He singles me out again. "As I was sayin', you look a bit flushed. Did you sleep all right?"

Gingerly, I set down my fork and gulp my orange juice. "Yes."

Étienne glares daggers at Livingston. "What is the purpose of these questions?"

Livingston fixes the cuffs of his white dress shirt. "I'm simply curious.

When I arrived this mornin', I heard two of the maids talkin' about how they overheard loud noises coming from your room, Étienne."

Étienne, who's in the middle of taking a sip of his coffee, coughs loudly while I fight the urge to slide under the table where I can privately die of mortification.

Livingston glances between us. When neither of us comments, he smirks at Étienne. "Know anything about that?"

"I don't know what they're talkin' about."

"Hmm. That's rather a peculiar remark to make. Don't you think?"

"It is," Étienne agrees. "Perhaps they misheard; I did not hear a thing."

"Interestin'." Livingston turns his gaze to me. "Serene, did you hear any noises last night?"

"Nope," I reply, making sure to keep my voice neutral.

Livingston doesn't reply, and I don't know what his facial expression is because I'm confident that if I look at him, he'll see guilt written on my face. The room goes quiet. After a few minutes, I grow hopeful that perhaps Livingston is going to give the conversation a rest and take me out of my misery.

That, unfortunately, doesn't happen.

"What makes this entire situation so compellin' is Nat mentioned to me that she too heard some loud noises last night." He glances at Nat. "I think your actual words were, 'Sounded like there was a beast in the house.' Did I get that right?"

"Quite right." Nat fights to keep her face neutral, but fails miserably.

"And the way the maids were describin' it, it sounded like we had a wild animal on the property."

"Perhaps," Étienne replies tightly. "But this is my home. You don't live here anymore."

“True. This is my childhood home though. So to hear that these noises went on almost all night is deeply concernin’ to me. Do you think we should —”

“Enough!” Étienne sharply interjects, much to my relief.

Nat stares at her plate. Livingston, however, seems utterly unfazed by Étienne’s sudden burst of anger and grins. Étienne’s jaw is clenched as he stares at his brother. Something tells me that if there weren’t a table between them, Étienne would be beating the shit out of Livingston.

Quickly, I stand. “Étienne, can I talk to you? Alone?”

Before he can reply, Livingston cuts in. “Now whatever could you two possibly want to talk about privately? We’re a family.”

Étienne grunts and stands, tossing his napkin onto the table. “I would love that, Serene.”

Happily, I walk out of the dining room, away from Livingston’s knowing gaze and twenty questions.

“My office?” Étienne asks once we’re in the hall.

I nod, and we move toward the foyer with only the sound of my heels clicking on the floor to keep us company.

Ben doesn’t bat an eye as we walk past him. I give him a weak smile.

Étienne opens his office door and gestures for me to precede him. I take a deep breath and watch as Étienne’s shoulders visibly relax when we’re alone. He slowly turns my way. Last night, I hoped that all the tension building between us would be expelled, but that didn’t happen. It’s still there. If anything, it’s grown stronger, more potent. I feel as though an invisible thread between the two of us is gradually pulling us toward one another.

Étienne strides toward his desk. “You left my room early.”

I lace my fingers in front of me. “I thought that might be the best idea. So things wouldn’t be awkward.”

He's silent. "Fair enough. What is it you needed to speak with me about? I need to leave for work soon."

I smirk; even though we slept together, that doesn't mean Étienne's blunt way of speaking is magically going to be rounded out. I prefer it that way. He says what he means and means what he says. It encourages me to speak the truth and say what's on my mind.

"I wanted to talk to you about last night."

He frowns and looks me up and down before his eyes widen in alarm. "Are you okay? Was I too rough with you?"

I can't help but roll my eyes. "God, no. I'm not a china doll."

"Then what? Do you regret what we did?"

At that question, I look at the floor. I should feel guilty. But I don't. Does that make me a terrible person? Absolutely. But it's the truth.

I look Étienne in the eye. "No. I don't regret anything about last night. What I wanted to talk to you about is the fact that it can never happen again."

"Why not?"

"I have a fiancé."

Étienne crosses his arms. "But you're having sex with a man you're married to. Correct me if I'm wrong, but a husband overrides fiancé, yes?"

Challenging his logic is hard. "Yes. Even so, I'll know the truth."

Étienne's jaw clenches as he stares at me.

"So we can never have sex again," I say, trying to sound firm but miserably failing.

Once again, Étienne doesn't say a word.

"Don't get me wrong," I rush out. "It was nice."

He arches a brow. "Just nice?"

"It was amazing. But it's off the table."

"Of course."

“It’s wrong.”

“Obviously,” he says with amusement.

“And irresponsible of us.”

“I agree.” He riffles through one of the desk drawers.

I continue speaking. “I mean, clearly we have this... sexual tension between us.”

“Clearly,” he remarks.

“And we had a great, great time. But no more.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Étienne says distractedly. He finds what he’s looking for and walks to the door.

Pivoting, I watch him. “Are you even listening to me?”

“Of course,” he says as he slides a skeleton key into the lock and turns it before facing me. “You’re givin’ me excuses on why we shouldn’t be together.”

“They’re not excuses,” I rush out, though his words thrill me.

Étienne walks toward me, an intent look in his eyes. My heart races so fast, it feels as if it’s going to jump out of my chest.

This should be a pivotal moment where I stand firm, but who am I kidding? I need him like I need my next breath.

“God, I want you.” I grab Étienne’s face and kiss him hard. Soft lips against mine instantly fill the ache that’s been building inside me since the minute I left his bed. I groan and press my body into his. I curl my hands around the back of his neck, jerking him closer. Deepening the kiss, I move my tongue against his. The heat coming from his powerful frame makes me kiss him harder; I can’t seem to get enough.

He groans and curls his hands around my thighs. Instinctively, my legs wrap around his waist. With his jacket already off, I make record time unbuttoning his shirt. Étienne works the long row of buttons of my dress, and

almost immediately, I feel the material pull away from my skin.

I tug his tie up and over his head. Our hands collide as we move clothing aside to feel each other's body.

His hands slip beneath the sagging material of my dress, touching my stomach. His fingers dig into my hips. Without breaking the kiss, he lifts me and walks us toward his desk, where he places me on the very edge. He jerks my legs apart and moves between them.

"I can't stop thinkin' about you," he says between kisses.

"That's a bad thing?"

"It's terrible," he rasps. "I have things to do, yet I see you wherever I go. I smell you on my clothes."

His words hold me captive. I don't care that the sleeves of my dress sag around my arms. Or that the hem is bunched around my waist, revealing the garters holding my silk stockings in place. I place my hands on the desk and tilt my head back, meeting his gaze.

My black bra is revealed to Étienne's hungry eyes and he moans, his thumbs brushing against the upper slopes of my breast. Minutes ago, he was anxious to bare my skin and now that I'm exposed for him to touch, he's taking his sweet time, staring at my bra as if it's a piece of art.

"Did I mention last night how much I love this?" he asks.

"Not really, but I got the feeling you did."

The wait is driving me crazy, so I unhook the front clasp. Before cool air can touch my bare skin, Étienne's hands are on me. My skin breaks out in goose bumps when his thumbs brush my nipples. When he rolls them between his fingers, my back arches.

Étienne looks me up and down, a feral gleam in his eyes. He exhales loudly before his body sags, and his forehead touches mine. "Tell me how I can get you out of my system."

“The second I find the answer, I’ll let you know,” I pant.

And I mean it. Every day that I stay here, my heart remains at risk. I know it’s wrong to become comfortable in a life that’s not my own. To want someone who will never—and never can—be mine.

But I don’t want to think about that right now. I curl my fingers around his jaw, lean in, and lick his bottom lip before I gently bite it. He tilts his head to the side as I stroke my tongue against his. He tugs the sleeves of my dress and straps of my bra down my arms, and I lift my hands away from his body long enough for him to free my arms. The material pools around my waist. I lay my palms flat on the desk and tilt back my head. Étienne leans into me. Our bare skin touches and he groans.

While my hands run over his chest and across his six-pack, his hands move between us, cupping my breasts.

“I want more,” he whispers.

“What do you want?”

Étienne swallows loudly and gently tugs on my nipples, eliciting another gasp from me. “I want these in my mouth.”

I nod anxiously. I couldn’t form a coherent thought at this point even if I was paid to.

Étienne bends his head. He’s been teasing my breasts for minutes, making them tender. When his tongue draws a circle around my areola, I moan in relief. He switches to the other side. My hands go to grip the edge of the desk, but I miss and slip back, taking Étienne with me. My elbows save my fall, but I end up lying on his perfectly organized desk. Everything’s now scattered across the floor.

“Sorry,” I pant.

Étienne’s arms bracket me. His nose brushes against mine. “Doesn’t matter.”

With his palms flat on the surface, he looms over me. He flicks the tip of my nipple with his tongue. Over and over. His eyes meet mine as he finally he pulls the nipple into his mouth. The whole time, he fondles the other breast. Gently, he bites my nipple, sending jolts of pleasure through me before he switches to the other breast. The whole time, my hands are laced through his hair, holding onto him for dear life.

Étienne licks and sucks at my breasts for so long, I forget people can hear us and I shout his name.

When he pulls back, he's panting. I glance down at my chest and see the tips of my swollen breasts are covered in a glossy sheen. My breath is stuck in my throat, my body won't stop shaking, and we've barely begun.

"Turn around," he commands.

"So you can touch me but I can't?" I ask.

"No, I-I didn't mean that. I just need you... now."

"I need you too." I curl my index fingers into the hem of his pants and tug him closer. Étienne doesn't object as I work the buttons.

With my eyes on his, I wrap my hand around him. I touch him as he touched me—urgently, yet with barely restrained patience. Up and down, I move my hand. My heart is pounding, but I make sure to keep my pace slow and even. When I increase my grip, Étienne groans, panting against my neck. He presses his lips against my neck and sucks gently. My thumb brushes across the head, and I feel moisture on my fingers. My lips kick up into the smallest smirk because I know he's so close to losing control.

"Enough, enough." He pushes away and stares at me in a half-daze. "Turn around." Once again, he speaks with a commanding voice, but there's an underlining sense of urgency and desperation.

Any other time, I'd tell him to change his tone and say please. But I've already pushed him to his limits. I hop off the desk and turn around. My bare

stomach touches the cold desk, making me jolt. But the feeling's there and gone within seconds because Étienne's hovers over me, his chest to my back. He nudges my legs apart with his knee. I rise on my tiptoes so my ass aligns perfectly with his lower stomach.

There's only the sound of our harsh breathing, then I feel him. His dick moves against my slit once, twice, before he pushes inside me. In this position, he fills me completely, making a moan slip from my lips.

His hands move to my waist as he moves in and out. His tempo starts out slow, almost teasing, but the speed quickens, and I find myself holding onto the desk to push against him.

"Faster," I say.

He complies and surges even deeper, his pace quickening until all I hear is the slap of our skin. I'm so close to release, I can feel it all the way down to my toes. Just one more push and—

Someone knocks on the door. My shoulders tense. I lift my head and stare at the door in horror.

"Go!" Étienne barks.

"Do you know where Serene is?" Nat asks.

Étienne rests his forehead against my shoulder. I swivel my hips, eliciting a groan from Étienne. When I look over my shoulder at him, his eyes are practically glazed over with want. He's doing everything in his power right now not to come.

He bends close, his skin damp with sweat. "Stop."

"Étienne?" Nat asks louder.

"No, I don't know where she is. Now go!"

Étienne doesn't wait for the tell-tale sound of her footsteps before he pumps into me furiously. Any thoughts other than this moment fly out of my mind. His grip on my waist becomes almost painful. I don't mind though,

because the faster he moves, the farther he sinks into me.

I lift my head. Across from us is the fireplace, a large mirror hanging above it. I can't see myself, but I have a clear view of Étienne from the waist up. Hair wild, sweat beading on his temple, brows forming a tight V while his mouth is open. Shirt unbuttoned, revealing his sculpted chest.

How I once didn't find him gorgeous, I'll never know.

His eyes meet mine in the mirror. I'm so close to losing control. He knows it too, and he guides himself in and out with deliberate slowness. He swivels his hips, and my eyes shut.

"No," Étienne half-growls. His right hand curls around my stomach, pressing me closer to him. "You were watchin'. Don't stop now."

I watch as Étienne's eyes close. His mouth forms a perfect O as his body spasms uncontrollably. Resting my forehead against the desk, I do my best not to scream his name. My name slips from Étienne's lips in a feral groan that makes my lips curl up into a lazy smile.

He slumps against me as my body shakes from one the powerful orgasms I've ever had.

It takes a few seconds for me to drift back down to reality and when I do, my body is relaxed and I feel almost euphoric. Before I can suck in a deep breath and tell Étienne how amazing that was, he spins me around and presses me against the wall, shielding me from the room.

Suddenly the door opens. "Étienne, Nat said she had to talk to—"

I peek over Étienne's shoulder and see Livingston standing frozen in the middle of the doorway. He can't see me, but without a doubt, he knows what we've been doing.

"Uhh... wrong room," Livingston announces loudly before he quickly closes the door behind him. In the hall, he tells Nat I wasn't in Étienne's office and that Étienne is busy.

I slump against Étienne and groan. “That wasn’t embarrassing at all. How did he even get in?”

Étienne wraps his arms around me and rests his chin on the crown of my head. “I gave him a key. Which I’m now regrettin’. Could have been worse, I suppose.”

I lift my head and stare at him. “How so?”

Étienne shrugs with a weary smile. “Livingston could’ve walked in on us durin’ sex.”

He steps away, buttoning up his pants and fixing his shirt. I adjust my clothes as best as possible, although it’s futile. My hair is mussed in a way that screams, “Hey! I just had the best fuck of my life!”

I drop into Étienne’s chair. “I’m not going to be able to look your brother in the eye for weeks.”

Chuckling softly, Étienne leans against his desk, crossing his legs at the ankle. “He gave us a hard time this mornin’, but I promise he’s a good sport.”

“One can hope,” I murmur as I sit back in the chair.

Étienne’s gaze lingers on my face. After sex, his features soften, making him seem younger. Boyish. I love seeing him this at ease. It needs to happen more often.

He gives me a secret smile. “I want to do it again.” His voice is so quiet, I almost don’t hear him.

I swallow. “I don’t know if that’s the best idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m engaged to someone else!”

“It doesn’t matter. You are my wife,” he whispers.

I exhaled a shaky breath. “In this life, but not my own.”

His face falls, then he turns abruptly and walks over to windows.

I feel awful. If I could take back what I said, I would. If I’m honest with

myself, I'll admit that I want to be his wife.

But I'm engaged to someone else. Someone I'm supposed to love. But do I?

My time with Étienne is making me realize that everything I thought about love—the bliss, the perfect contentment—is false.

Love is hoarse cries. It's anger. It's sadness.

It's happiness and laughter.

It's everything wrapped into one.

Love is one of the heaviest of words to exist.

It's a miracle anyone survives it.

It'll be a wonder if I survive it.

Étienne pushes away from the window and makes his way back to me. He wordlessly turns me around and buttons up my dress with deft fingers. When he's finished, his large hands move to my shoulders for a second before they band around my stomach. He presses me back against his body. I put up no struggle and fall against him.

"If you were given the choice to stay here or go back, what would you choose?" he asks.

"Don't make me choose," I plead.

"I need to know."

I turn in his embrace and face him. "Why?"

His hands curl tightly around my shoulders. "Because every day you stay here, the further I fall for you."

With my eyes on his and my heart pounding, I say, "I'd stay here."

His brows are slanted low as he searches my face. "I love you," he says abruptly and sternly, as though the words are too hard to say.

It's the angriest "I love you" in the history of I love yous. But I understand. Here's a man who views emotions as a weakness, and in his life,

being weak is never an option.

He brushes his thumbs against my cheeks. “I love you, and I don’t know how to share you with another man, and I don’t want to learn.”

For once in my life, I’m speechless. My mouth opens, but no words come out. I may look calm and composed, but on the inside, I’m a riot of emotions. His declaration thrills me and makes my heart practically sing.

Étienne Lacroix loves me.

He. Loves. Me.

And I feel the same. I think I’ve known for a while how I feel, but I’ve been in denial about it. But I do. I love Étienne. And I know it complicates matters and this shouldn’t happen, but it’s the truth.

Tell him how you feel, my heart chants. Tell him right now!

I don’t though. Instead, I say with a smile, “Right now you don’t have to share me. Right now, I’m yours.”

Étienne doesn’t smile back. He cradles my face. “It’s not enough for me, Serene. I want you to stay. Forever.”



THAT NIGHT, I listen to Étienne's steady breathing. In and out. In and out. The noise is so soothing, it almost lulls me to sleep. I force myself to stay awake. With wide eyes, I stare at the ceiling.

Don't do this.

Don't do this.

Don't do this, my heart chants.

However, it's imperative that I do. I couldn't live with myself if I did nothing. The minutes tick by ever so slowly, and when I'm sure Étienne (and the rest of the house) is fast asleep, I slowly pull back the sheets and get out of bed.

I tiptoe across the room. When I open the door, I look over my shoulder. Étienne hasn't moved. Something tells me he's a sound sleeper. I hesitate as multiple images of Étienne and me in the morning dance through my mind. Him shirtless and dead to the world. I tickle him and do everything in my

power to wake him. Another image is the two of us waking up in each other's arms, just like this morning. The last is the image of me with three little kids, all with mops of light brown hair. I press my index finger against my lips for them to be quiet as we approach the bed where Étienne's sleeping form lies. I count to three, then the beautiful kids shriek and jump onto the bed, waking him. He groans, but smiles and proceeds to tickle them all. I sigh as the vision fades away.

I have to do this.

The hallway is dimly lit, giving me enough light to make my way to the stairs. The first floor is deathly quiet. I don't think I'm easily spooked, but it's so dark, my imagination takes hold and I'm almost tempted to run back upstairs. I unlock the front door. Like last night, the outside is quiet and pitch black.

I was so focused on slipping out of Étienne's room unnoticed that I forgot to grab a pair of shoes. The ground is cool beneath my feet. Pebbles from the gravel driveway dig into my heels when I reach the outskirts of the sidewalk. I swallow a curse and tiptoe as though I'm walking on hot coals. I round the corner, and when I feel the wet grass beneath my feet, I sigh in relief. Last night, I hastily placed the ledger in the bushes before I went inside. It was pitch black, making it impossible for me to locate the exact area now. I can only guess.

I get on my hands and knees and blindly grasp soil between the hedges. After a few seconds, my fingers graze something soft and smooth. I grab the ledger between my thumb and forefinger and drag the notebook toward me.

"Gotcha," I whisper victoriously.

I brush the dirt off the front of the ledger, stand back up, and hurry toward the house. I do my best to shut the door behind me as quietly as possible. I turn the lock and head to Étienne's office. The room is pitch black. I shuffle

forward until I reach his desk.

Clutching the ledger, I stare at his desk. I could hide this ledger and pretend I never found it. I could listen to my heart and stay here. I love the people here. I love Belgrave. It's begun to feel like home. I could spend the rest of my life happy, content, and safe with Étienne by my side.

But putting my needs and wants first would make me a terrible person. I have to do this. And you never know, I might be overplaying this in my head. Maybe when Étienne discovers the ledger, absolutely nothing will happen.

With a heavy sigh, I place the ledger on his desk where there's no possible way he can miss it. Before I leave, I spot the master key next to a pile of papers. My fingers itch to snatch it because I don't know what tomorrow will bring and I want a piece of this era. Proof that I lived, I survived and I loved in this time. At the last second, I grab the skeleton key, placing it in my pocket, and hurry out of the room.

I run up the stairs because I'm afraid if I hesitate, even for a second, I'll turn back around and hide the ledger.

What's done is done. I should feel relieved. I did the right thing. So why is my stomach churning? A small headache builds, making me rub my temples.

Ignoring the pain, I creep back into bed and wake Étienne by kissing him. It doesn't take long for him to react, and soon we're making love. I cringe at the phrase. It sounds melodramatic and cliché. So what do I call what I did with Étienne last night and thirty minutes ago?

It wasn't "making love."

Sex isn't fitting enough.

It certainly wasn't fucking.

It's a combination of the three. Deliberate and desperate and mind-consuming enough to numb the guilt that encompasses me, but it slams into

me like one giant wave minutes later.

That's the problem with following your heart. It may soothe you for a second, but it can never override your gut instinct. Right now, mine is screaming that I've made a permanent—potentially dangerous—choice by falling in love with Étienne.

When we're finished, I rest my head on Étienne's chest. His hands idly brush through my hair.

"Where did you go?" he asks.

"I couldn't sleep, so I went down to the kitchen for a snack."

Étienne doesn't reply, and soon his hand stills on my head. I stare idly at the window, my heart thumping wildly. Tomorrow, I'll admit to him that I broke into Asa's office and found that ledger.

Right now, I'll tell him the essential truth. I exhale loudly. "Étienne, I love you."

Once the words escape my mouth, I feel relief. I've lied so many times since I've been here that it's beyond amazing to tell the truth.

It feels so good, I want to say it again.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," I whisper against his chest.

Étienne feels so deeply embedded in my life that it wouldn't matter how much time passed. I can't forget him.

Étienne tightens his hold on me. "I love you too."

"I don't want to go back to my time." The words aren't as hard to say as I expected, though it certainly doesn't make it any easier. "Does that make me a bad person?"

Étienne rubs his hand up and down my arm and remains quiet.

"I know it does," I say.

"If that makes you a bad person, then so does me wanting you to stay." He kisses the top of my head. "It's late. You can't think about that. I love

you, and you love me. That's all that matter."

He's right.

After a few minutes, Étienne's breathing evens out. My eyelids flutter rapidly, and I drift off to sleep.



A LOUD NOISE wakes me.

I sit up in bed and hiss in pain. My headache is so painful, I close my eyes. The noises start again. It's the sound of laughter and clapping.

Opening my eyes, I see my old apartment living room. The sight of it steals my breath and leaves me with a deep-rooted fear.

And then it happens—the feeling of invisible fingertips trailing up my spine before they curl around my shoulders and gently, yet insistently pull me back. Thousands of needles prick my skin, making me feel as if my nerve endings are on fire.

It's happening.

What do I do?

I fight because I recognize what's occurring. But it's pointless.

Helplessly, I turn to Étienne, but he's sound asleep. I try to scream, but not a sound escapes my mouth. When I glance at my body, I see it's fading away, starting at my toes and traveling up my body.

The walls collapse gradually. Furniture dissipates into thin air. The ceiling is yanked up, greedily destroyed by the sky. The floor caves in, and I fall with it.

My hands slash at the air as I desperately try to grab onto something, anything. Nothing works as I'm pushed back. No amount of screaming for

Étienne. No amount of pleading for someone to help.

Nonetheless, I continue to cry out for Étienne. The whole time, the pain in my head increases until I'm praying for the blackness to take over so I no longer have to feel this suffering.

And then it does.



part two

“Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.”

—Søren Kierkegaard



THE SILENCE SURROUNDING me is deafening. Only my shallow breathing keeps me company.

I should open my eyes, but I'm too afraid of what I might see. So I stay perfectly still. My cheek pressed against something soft.

My heart beats like a drum, and the longer I lay here, the more I panic. My left hand rests against my stomach. My right dangles in the air, my fingertips grazing a cold surface. Mere seconds ago, I was with Étienne. In his arms. Feeling his breath tickle the hairs on my neck.

My chest rapidly moves up and down as I take small, short breaths and try to calm myself. After a few seconds, I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling before I turn to my left. The room is dark except for the street lights sending silver streaks across the floor and the glow of the TV illuminating the room.

I'm back in my time. In my apartment.

“No, no, no,” I whisper frantically.

Very slowly, I stand. My legs wobble, and I stumble toward the patio doors like a wasted person leaving a bar. The blinds are cracked open, as I always have them. The city lights twinkle brightly. A car drives by, its lights reflecting off the road. I hear a dog barking. I look at the scene with a sense of wonderment and dread.

I turn back around and stare at the apartment. Everything is the same as when I left. The blanket is lying on the floor. The remote control is on the armrest of the sofa, and my cell phone is on the coffee table. I hurry toward the coffee table, snatch my phone, and click on the lock screen. It’s midnight and the date is December 20th.

That’s impossible. I’ve been gone for almost eight weeks.

The room tilts around me, and I think I’m going to be sick. I swallow back the bile in my throat as I half-run and half-stumble to the bathroom. Just as I did at Belgrave when I realized I’d time traveled, I vomit into the toilet. Funny how I’m feeling the same emotions now as I did then.

Minutes tick by. Once I’m positive there’s nothing left in my stomach that’ll come back up, I sit down, my shoulders grazing the wall behind me. I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. I keep waiting for my heart rate to slow down. It never does.

“Serene?”

I twist around, my elbow slams into the door.

Will stands in the doorway, rubbing his eyes. His hair is messy, and he’s wearing only his boxers. “What are you doing up?”

My mouth opens and closes repeatedly.

Here’s my fiancé, yet all I see is a stranger. I’ve pictured my homecoming so many times. I always envisioned running straight into Will’s arms and telling him everything that had happened. We’d marvel at it all, and

everything would be okay. Because I was home.

But I don't run into those familiar arms, and I don't utter a single word. My shallow breaths punctuate the silence. Over and over I tell myself to get up and go to him, but I stay perfectly still. The walls seem to close in on me. It's getting harder to breathe.

My eyes close, and I press the heels of my hands into my eyes until spots dance behind my lids. "This isn't happening."

"What isn't?" Will asks, oblivious. "Are you still pissed off about that picture?"

My hands drop from my face. I stare at him.

Will yawns and shrugs. "We have to talk about it sometime."

Perhaps I'm wrong. Maybe more time has gone by than I thought. "What are you talking about?"

"Our argument after dinner?" He crosses his arms and leans against the wall. "I know we said we'd never go to bed angry, but I honestly didn't think you'd sleep on the couch."

My mind is spinning, trying to keep up with everything he's saying. "We were arguing?"

"Yeah," he repeats just as slowly.

The events of the night come rushing back to me. "The picture!"

I run toward the fireplace, ignore the poker, and move the ashes around with my bare hands.

"Serene!"

Ignoring Will, I continue to move the ashes around. My hands become covered in soot.

"Serene! Stop!" Will comes up behind me and grabs my arms and shakes me. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

I push away from him. "That picture has a man who needs my help!"

Speaking the truth should feel good. It should make me feel as though a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. But Will stares at me as though I'm losing my mind.

Impossible. I've never been surer of anything in my entire life.

Will steps back from me and links his hands behind his head as he gazes at the ceiling. And for a tense moment, we say nothing.

Finally, he looks at me. "I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd react this strongly."

Everything he's saying is going in one ear and out the other. All I can think about is Étienne. Mere minutes ago, I was lying in bed with him, his arms wrapped around me. And now I'm... here.

"What the hell are you wearing?"

Will's words pull me out of my thoughts. I blink him into focus. "Huh?"

He flings a hand toward me. "What are you wearing? Is that something new?"

Glancing at my clothes, I see I'm still wearing the nightgown. I brush my fingers across the silky material, smearing soot across it. "I—"

"Look..." Will sighs. "It's been a long night, and I don't want to fight with you." He places his hands on my shoulders, gently kneading my muscles, and I fight the urge to pull away from his touch. "I love you. You know that." He smiles.

"I-I know," I reply, my voice faint.

"Good." He kisses my forehead. "Now, how about we go to bed? Together?"

"Okay."

With his arm draped over my shoulder, he guides us toward the bedroom, making sure to turn off the lights behind him.

I walk around the bed to my side. The sheets are cold against my skin.

The mattress dips as Will gets into bed. He moves around a bit, trying to make himself comfortable. It only takes a few minutes before he's asleep.

I lay on my side, staring blankly at the clock. I feel numb, as though pieces of my heart have been ripped out and scattered throughout time.

My mom once told me to find a man who gazes at me as though I'm the sun, moon, and stars. But what she failed to tell me was how to move on from a love that spans decades.



twenty-one

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up bleary-eyed and disoriented. My muscles scream in protest when I sit up. I look around and immediately get the sense of déjà vu. This was the exact feeling I had when I woke up at Belgrave.

It takes me a few seconds, but last night's events come back to me. I remember sleep never came and lying in bed next to Will seemed wasteful and wrong. I went to the couch, but I was too restless to sleep, so I paced the living room, feeling as if I was going to crawl out of my skin. It was the most unnerving, terrifying feeling. I'm back in the era I belong in—the one I was born in—yet I'm looking at everything with new eyes, and it's a shock to my system.

It was only when the sun started to rise that I calmed down, sat on the couch, and promptly fell asleep.

This all feels like a bad dream that I don't know how to escape.

Around seven, Will's alarm goes off. A few minutes later he comes into

the living room and stops short when he sees me sitting on the couch. Before he can ask, I tell him that I couldn't sleep. He's too tired to question my excuse and heads to the kitchen.

"I can make the coffee today," I blurt.

What I'm offering is not our normal routine and Will knows it. He glances at the kitchen and over my shoulder at the bedroom before he shrugs and heads to the bathroom to get ready for work. That was easier than I thought.

It's ridiculous, but I'm nervous to be around him. I don't know how to explain everything that's happened. Pretending that nothing is wrong is out of the question; he knows me too well.

The same feelings I had as I tried—and failed—to be the Serene of 1912 come rushing back to me. Will expects the Serene he went to dinner with. In reality, he's living with a stranger. He just doesn't know it yet.

My movements are unhurried, almost robotic, as I move toward the kitchen. I'm on autopilot as I make a pot of coffee. Leaning against the counter, I watch the oven clock, anxiously waiting for Will to walk through the doorway. I don't want to see him. For a second, I entertain the idea of grabbing my coat and keys and getting the hell out of here, but never in my life have I gone out of my way to avoid Will. We've always gotten along so well, there's never been a need.

At seven fifteen on the dot, he comes walking in smelling like his body wash. Will hesitates when he sees me leaning against the counter, and I know he's thinking about last night.

"Thanks for making the coffee." When he walks by me, he kisses the top of my head.

I clutch my coffee with both hands as I stare at the tile floor. "No worries."

He takes in my disheveled appearance. “Why couldn’t you sleep last night?”

Wordlessly, I look at the nightgown. It’s a physical reminder that I didn’t dream up Étienne or time traveling. It happened. I wait for Will to bring up what I said last night about helping one of the men in the picture. It was a big bomb to drop. He’s silent as he makes himself breakfast. The quietness is speeding past the bounds of awkward toward painfully uncomfortable.

Tell him everything, my mind chants. Just get it all out in the open! But when I open my mouth, my tongue suddenly becomes three sizes too big.

“I-I...”

Will takes a bite of his toast and glances at me. “Maybe you should call Liz and tell her you’re not feeling well so you can catch up on your sleep.”

Work.

Shit.

I’d completely forgotten about Past Repeat. “That’s a good idea.”

“In all seriousness, you look like shit.”

“Thanks,” I say deadpan.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” Will steps toward me, and without thinking, I back away. Immediately, he stops in his tracks and stares at me with hurt in his eyes. I didn’t mean to recoil from him. It simply happened.

“I’m not feeling well,” I say weakly. “I’m going to lie down.”

The silence between us becomes so strained. I fight the urge to leave the room and escape his keen gaze.

Will looks at his coffee mug and clears his throat. “All right. Feel better, okay?” He lifts his head. Hurt still lingers in his gaze, but now it’s accompanied by a handful of questions I don’t want to answer.

“I’ll call you later.” I don’t know if I will. It just seems like the right thing to say.

My delivery must've been off-target because he mutters, "Sounds good." Then he turns and walks out the front door.

My shoulders slump in defeat. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. That went wrong.

Outside, the world's coming alive. People in our apartment complex are slamming front doors, their footsteps echoing in the hall. I walk back to the living room and peer through the blinds as people start their cars. All this bustling activity is overwhelming and reminds me that I'm going nowhere.

Not forward.

Not backward.

Standstill. That's me.

I was so convinced when I first time traveled that I needed to help Étienne in order to go back to the present. But here I am, and I didn't help him. At least I don't think I did. I knew there could be consequences for stealing the ledger and placing it on Étienne's desk. But I think more than anything, it's me falling in love and sleeping with Étienne that sent me back to my own time.

Étienne still needs my help.

There's a good chance we'll never see each other again. There's a good chance time will dull the sharp ache of missing him, but I won't forget him.

I should try to move on. Before I found the picture, my life was pretty damn good. I had a fiancé I loved deeply. I had a store I was passionate about.

I had it all.

None of that seems to matter now.

I've been home not even twenty-four hours, and already I feel disconnected from Will. More than anything, I want to tell him the truth. I know that the chances of anyone believing me are incredibly slim. Most

people will probably think I've gone insane and recommend the nearest therapist. But this is Will. If anyone will give me a chance to explain what happened, it's him.

I can't tell him everything. I can't disclose how I feel about Étienne without genuinely sounding batshit crazy.

I can see it now. *Hey! I'm in love with someone born more than a hundred years ago.*

Yeah, that won't go over well at all.

Sighing, I lean against the wall as I continue to watch people go about their day and tuck my hands into my pockets. My hand meets cold metal. I lower my head the same time my fingers curl around the metal, pulling the key out of my pocket. Sunlight glints off of the skeleton key as I slowly turn it back and forth.

My heart starts to pound. So much has happened since I had come back that I completely forgot about the key. My left hand tightly grips the key as I hold it close to my chest. I'm not letting this out of my sight.

I don't have the photo anymore.

But I do have this.



twenty-two

I BELIEVE THERE are many ways to lose your mind.

But nothing consistently drives people to the brink of madness like love. That emotion is a sure-fire way to fuck up your heart. It makes you do things you would never think of doing.

I breathe. I live. But I'm barely functioning, and I want to blame Étienne. His memory is a second heartbeat that echoes against my own. It's driving me insane. If I hadn't fallen in love with him, I wouldn't be awake at 3:34 a.m. I wouldn't be pacing my living room in the pitch black like a madwoman.

If I hadn't fallen in love with him, my life would be going in a different direction, but the fact is I did fall for him. Everything happened so fast, I didn't notice the fall down, and now I have to figure out what to do. But I'm struggling to climb away from the memory of him.

The problem is my mind will not rest. Even though my body is ready to

collapse from exhaustion, I know when I lay my head on my pillow, I'll be haunted by Étienne. His face refuses to leave my memory. His eyes taunt me with the knowledge that I left him when he needed me the most. I didn't want to go, but I had no choice.

Does he know that? He has to know that.

I know it sounds crazy, but I smell him. Moments when I seem like a functioning human being, I'll get the smallest sniff of his cologne, and it sets me into a frenzy.

I keep thinking about the night left Étienne's time and went back to my own.

What did I do wrong?

What did I not notice?

The questions swirling in my head are enough to drive anyone to the point of delirium.

"Yoohoo? Is anyone there?" Liz snaps her fingers in front of my face, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I straighten my shoulders and give her a smile that never reaches my eyes. "Sorry. I was thinking about something else."

"I can tell." She's standing across the desk, a stack of old magazines between us. We're supposed to be organizing them by year, yet at this point, she's doing all the organizing. "You've been out of it all day. What's going on with you?"

I grab the first magazine and pretend to be busy. Exactly how much time does Liz have? Because I'd need a whole day to explain what's happened to me. Instead, I say, "I've been having a hard time sleeping."

She lifts her head. "Really?"

I nod.

Liz drops the magazine in her hands, drags a chair from across the room,

and sits next to me. “I’m all ears. Tell me what’s keeping you up.”

Just then, the bell attached to the front door dings. Her shoulders sag as she sighs.

“Shit. I better go back out there. Hold on one second.” She holds up a finger for emphasis and disappears through the door. Before the door clicks shut, I hear her happily greet a customer.

That should be me right now—interacting with people, taking an active interest in my business. But I’m so detached from the present; I can’t, for the life of me, think of anything but the past.

For the umpteenth time, I glance at the calendar hanging next to the corkboard. No matter how many times I look at the date, it still says December 22nd. The year is 2017. I squint my eyes, willing the numbers to disappear and turn into 1912.

It doesn’t happen.

With a groan, I drop my head into my palms and close my eyes. What am I going to do? The picture is gone, as though it was never taken. In my mind, it’s my only link to the past, but there has to be another way back to Étienne.

There has to be.

Moments later, Liz walks back into the room. “Okay. What were we talking about?”

“Me not sleeping.”

“Yes!” She snaps her fingers and drops back into the chair. With her elbows resting on the desk, she leans forward, her attention riveted on me. “So why can’t you sleep?”

I toy with my cuticles, trying to figure out how I can tell her the truth. There’s no way of knowing how she’ll react. True, she’s a lover of the past, but what I’m about to confess is more than finding an antique at an estate sale. What I’m about to tell her requires her to suspend belief in reality. I

know that's asking a lot, but I need to tell someone the truth.

Liz covers my hand, and I lift my head. "Serene, tell me what's going on."

With a sigh, I sit up straighter in my chair. "Do you remember the conversation we once had about how amazing it would be if we could time travel?"

Confusion clouds Liz's expression. "Yes."

"You said you wanted to go back to 1820s and I picked the 1930s. We talked about how surreal and fascinating it'd be to experience that time in real life. Remember?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I did it." I lean in and whisper, "I time traveled."

Liz carefully backs away. "Come again now?"

Now that I've said the words once, they slip off my tongue much faster. "I time traveled."

"I..." Liz's mouth opens and closes. She shakes her head. "What do you mean you time traveled?"

I stand and pace when I feel the adrenaline coursing through me. "I'm telling you I went back in time. Well, to 1912 specifically." Whirling around, I face her. "You know I was there when the *Titanic* sank? Well, I wasn't there-there, but I saw the newspapers. I was actually in Charleston."

"Charleston, South Carolina?"

I nod vigorously. "Yes. I wore the clothes of that era, brushed shoulders with the elite, walked the streets, carved my name into a tree. I saw it all. I even had a husband."

Liz frowns, but I'm too pumped up to care. It feels so good to get this all off my chest. I can't stop now.

"His name is Étienne. Remember those boxes you brought in a while

back from the flea market? There was a photo of four men, and he was in it. We didn't get along at first. In fact, I hated him. But then I got to know him better, and now I love him."

Liz is silent, absorbing everything I told her. "So you were in 1912, where you had a husband you loved."

I nod and faintly smile. "He's amazing. He's intimidating to most people, but once you get to know him, you can't help but fall in love with him."

She blinks at me. "How long were you in Charleston?"

"Almost two months, but when I came back to the present only minutes had passed." I take a deep breath and smile. "Can you believe it?"

Liz, my understanding and kind best friend, does not return my smile. She stands and approaches slowly, places her hands on my shoulders, and looks me in the eye. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine. I'm just trying to find a way back to Étienne. He's in trouble and needs my help."

"This is quite a story," she says speculatively.

I stop and get a good look at my friend. She's looking around the room, at her feet, at the chair. She looks at everything but me. Liz is such an honest, open person, and the fact that she seems so nervous and closed off should've made me nervous. But I was so focused on opening up to her, I didn't notice.

Until now.

"You don't believe me," I say numbly.

"I didn't say that."

"But I can tell. You think I made this all up."

"I think you're exhausted. We've been working long hours, and maybe you're sleep deprived." She guides me out of the office and toward the front door. I'm in such shock that this conversation epically backfired that I let her. When we reach the door, she turns and faces me. "I'm your best friend, and I

appreciate the fact that you told me this.”

“That’s what someone says right before they have their loved ones committed.”

She avoids my gaze. “You know what you need to do?”

I’m so lost, so desperate for some sort of direction, that I stare at her hopefully. “What?”

“You need to go home and talk to Will. Your fiancé,” she enunciates the last word slowly. “The one person who loves you the most. Once you do, the two of you will figure everything out.”

You are so stupid, Serene, my mind whispers. Why did you ever think she would believe you?

“If you give me a second, I’ll lock up the shop, and walk you back to your apartment.”

Her words jerk me back to the present. “That’s ridiculous. I’m not a baby. I can walk myself across the street to my damn apartment.”

The doubt in my best friend’s face causes anger to fester inside me. She thinks I’m crazy. I brush past her toward the back of the store.

“Where are you going?” she says.

“I’m getting my stuff,” I mutter as I walk into the office. I grab my purse and coat and an unopened box on the floor that hasn’t been itemized. “I’ll work from home.”

Liz blocks the entrance. “Serene, I’m—”

I hold up a hand. “Not now. I’ll talk to you later.”

“When is later?”

I brush past her. “When you decide to believe what I’m telling you.”

“You understand what you’re saying is insane, right? You sound like a crazy person!” she calls behind me.

It is crazy. But it happened. I know it happened, yet I can’t prove it.

Before I leave the store, I turn around. Liz is standing near the cash register, something akin to fear in her eyes.

“Fuck off.” I slam the door behind me.



I’VE BEEN HOME for two hours and have over ten missed calls from Liz. I don’t answer; I have more pressing matters. Like what I’m going to say to Will when he comes home. If I gleaned anything from my conversation with Liz, it’s that I do need to talk to Will and come clean about everything. He deserves to know the truth.

As I pace, Will walks through the front door and jumps back when he sees me standing in the living room. “God, Serene! You scared the shit out of me.”

I’m too nervous to smile or even reply. Straight away, Will notices that something’s not quite right. He shuts the front door, keys jangling in his hand, and hurries over to me.

Loosely, he curls a hand around my wrist. “What’s wrong?”

He won’t believe you, my mind warns.

There’s a good chance he won’t, but I need to know that I tried. Even if it costs me the relationship we’ve had for so long.

Exhaling loudly, I gesture to the couch. “I need to talk to you.”

“Sure. Of course.”

My palms are sweating so profusely that when I sit down, I discreetly wipe them on my jeans. It doesn’t seem to help.

Will sits next to me. “What’s up?”

With my eyes fixed in front of me, I start at the beginning. From finding

the photo to time traveling, I tell Will everything. Except for Étienne. I save that part for last because I'm anxious. This could go one of two ways: he'll believe what I'm saying and be crushed by the fact that I cheated and fell in love with another man, or like Liz, he'll think I've gone completely unhinged.

I stop to take a deep breath and glance at him from the corner of my eye. His brows are furrowed in confusion. "There's also something else."

Will patiently waits for me to continue.

"I was married to someone else in 1912. His name was Étienne Lacroix. At first, we couldn't stand the sight of one another, but over time, we grew to understand each other, and I fell in love." In desperation for Will to place confidence in what I'm saying, I grab his hands and hold them close to my chest. "Now you know why I was so upset when you threw the photo in the fireplace. It's my only link to him."

Will stares at me, blinking slowly as though he's seeing me for the first time. He pulls away and rubs the back of his neck. It's a mannerism he does when he's pissed off.

"Do you honestly expect me to believe that?" Will jumps up from the couch. He drags his hands through his hair. "What you're saying makes you sound crazy. You get that, right? Absolutely fucking crazy."

My hands drop into my lap. "You don't believe me."

"No, I don't believe you because it's not possible!" he yells.

I stand and face him. "What could I possibly gain by creating this story, huh?"

"I don't know. For starters, how about attention?"

I throw my hands in the air. "I'm not doing this for attention!"

Will steps closer. "You can tell me the truth. Am I not spending enough time with you? I know my schedule—"

“It has nothing to do with attention, and I’m trying to tell you the truth. You just won’t listen.”

“Oh, I’m listening. That’s the problem.” He backs away and derisively snorts. “I just hope you haven’t opened your mouth and told anyone else this little story.”

Fuming, I take a deep breath. “I told Liz.”

His eyes widen, and he stares at me as though I’ve grown three heads. “You told her? You’re fucking nuts!”

“She’s my best friend.”

“Ex-best friend if you keep it up.”

“You know what?” I open my mouth, practically salivating to hurl a string of curse words his way, but I don’t. So many things are being hurled out into the open right now, and I don’t want to say something I’ll regret. That’s the things about words. Once they slip from your lips, you can never get them back. I lift my hands and drop them to my sides in a gesture that says, *I give up*. I walk toward the bedroom.

“Don’t walk away. Say what you were gonna say,” Will says.

Abruptly, I whirl around. “I told you my story because I figured you deserved to know the truth. I was hoping you would listen to what I was saying and truly believe me. That’s all I want because I’m trapped between the past and the present. My life has been put on pause. I’m trying to find the play button, but I can’t. And you know what? It’s terrifying.”

Will falls back onto the couch and stares at the ceiling. He takes a deep breath before he looks at me. “Serene, I love you. That’s why this story is so worrying. I don’t want people to get the wrong idea about you.”

“I don’t care what the world thinks of me. I just care what the people I love think about me.”

“Your fiancé doesn’t believe you.”

“Then we have a big problem.” I close the bedroom door.



twenty-three

THE PAST TWENTY-FOUR hours have been tense between Will and me, to say the least. We never fight or have wild, crazy arguments. The majority of the time, we're cordial to each other.

The simple relationship we once had is gone. Both of us know it. Neither of us has made a point to talk about it. Our relationship is hanging on by a thread. I imagine that tends to happen when you tell your fiancé that you love another man, but I don't regret telling him. He has the right to know.

The only thing I regret is hurting him. He doesn't deserve that.

Last night, I slept on the couch. He took the bed.

This morning he announced he was working from home. The entire day, I've felt nothing but his eyes on me, as though he's waiting for me to go off the handle. It's inching closer to seven and he's still hovering around me like a mother hen.

He thinks I'm fucking crazy.

It's almost impossible to reconcile the Will I fell in love with to the man he is now.

He never changed, my mind whispers. You did.

Numbly, I've gone through the motions of doing inventory on a few items for the store. In my time, I was hardly gone but in Étienne's world, eight weeks went by. My life has been altered, and with that came changes to my heart. It's been restructured, and now I see everything differently. Simple tasks that I usually wouldn't have thought twice over, I now compare to Étienne's time.

I spin my engagement ring around my finger. I used to go on Pinterest and look up wedding reception ideas and beautiful locations in Virginia. I no longer do that. Soon I'll have to give back this ring and explain that he may not believe my story, but I can't go back to how things used to be. Everything has changed for me.

Out of nowhere, the door buzzer off. Will and I typically avoid answering the door, but today he's there, pressing the intercom button with a renewed vigor.

"Come on in," is all he says.

I push back from the kitchen table and twist to face him. "Did you order food?"

"No."

"Then who is it?"

"Just some friends," he replies without making eye contact. He tucks his hands into his pockets as he paces between the kitchen entrance and front door.

I watch him, trying to piece together what's going on right now. Minutes later, there's a knock on the door. Will all but runs to the door and flings it open.

Who is on the other side? My brothers, Bradley and Ian.

To say this impromptu visit is bizarre and unexpected would be the understatement of the year. My brothers and I saw each other months ago. Typically, we talk via group text. Occasionally we call one another. But visiting? Never.

For a few seconds, all I can do is gawk at them. They smile awkwardly and give Will the signature bro-hug before they ask how he's doing. They make small talk ranging from the weather to how their drive was. Then my brothers look my way and the energy changes. From their stiff smiles, I know they're not here because they want to be. Someone has been talking behind my back.

"Hey, Se. How's it going?" Ian asks in his jovial voice.

Instead of answering him, I look at Will. "What's going on?"

He doesn't reply. Instead, he shifts from foot to foot.

Standing, I cross my arms. "What's going on?"

Finally, Will looks at me with guilt and sorrow in his eyes. "I'm worried about you."

I stare at him in disbelief. "So you called my brothers?"

"I didn't know what else to do! You scared me."

"He means well," Ian says. "Will told us what's going on. And I think—"

"You told them?" I cut in.

Will holds his hands out in front of him as if I'm a wild animal about to attack him. Which just fuels my anger even further. He went behind my back, and who knows how he relayed our conversation to my brothers to cause them to be at my doorstep?

"I talked to your brothers and we're all in agreement that maybe you should take some time off from work. They suggested you come back home for the holiday and relax."

“Mom and dad would love to see you for Christmas,” Bradley says.

It’s the day before Christmas Eve. Normally, Will and I always have Christmas with one of our family’s. It’s clear to see that’s not happening this year. I’ve been so consumed with Étienne to even think about the holidays.

“And how long do you all think I should ‘relax’ for?”

The three of them stare at each other.

Ian speaks on behalf of their newfound trio. “For however long you want.”

I can’t believe this. It’s bad enough that I haven’t figured out a way to get back to Étienne. Even worse that I have no one to vent and explain my story to. I’m in a lose-lose position.

My brothers and Will stare at me expectantly, acting as though I have the final say. Apparently, I don’t. This is something that has been planned behind my back. I don’t have the energy to fight it.

Collectively, they look desperate. Almost lost. Can I blame them though? I’ve disrupted their lives with my claims. If I could make everything okay again, I would. In a heartbeat.

“Let me go pack,” I say emotionlessly.

Turning on my heels, I walk toward my bedroom. I grab the first suitcase from the closet and blindly pull items from my dresser. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but I don’t pack lightly. My gut is telling me that I’ll be away longer than a holiday visit.

Out in the living room, Will and my brothers are talking. I grab a few pairs of pants from the bottom drawer before I creep toward the door and try my best to listen to what they’re saying.

“Some time away from work might be the best for her.” That’s Bradley.

“You think it’s a mental breakdown?” Ian asks.

“Guys, I don’t know. I’m just worried about her.” There’s a small pause.

“I’m gonna go check on her real quick,” Will says.

I hurry toward my suitcase on the bed. Will knocks once before he opens the door. I drop my jeans into the suitcase and continue to grab random items from the closet and bathroom. As I walk back and forth, Will stands there, leaning against the doorframe.

I have nothing to say. My blood is boiling. A small part of me understands why Will called my brothers and that he’s coming from a place of love and concern. But a bigger part feels betrayed. It’s as if he took all the trust that had been built between us throughout the years and crushed it with one hand. I have a feeling that when I walk out of the front door, I’ll also be walking away from Will.

“Please don’t be mad,” he finally says.

“I’m not mad,” I reply as I brush past him toward the bathroom.

“I know you think I did this to hurt you, but I didn’t. I’m concerned about you.”

Dropping my makeup bag into the suitcase, I finally turn and face him. “I know you’re concerned. But there’s no need to be.” He opens up his mouth, but I raise my hand, effectively silencing him. “Last night I told you my story, expecting you to believe me. I have no expectations now. I know it’s the truth and that’s all that matters.”

Will breaks eye contact and doesn’t say a word. I pause for a second, trying to remember if I’m missing anything. I can’t think of anything off the top of my head, but I’m sure I’ll think of it once I get home.

Home.

I try to let that word sink in for a bit. For a long time, my home has been wherever Will is. I know that sounds cheesy and cliché. Like something you’d read on a Hallmark card or embroidered on a pillow, but it’s the truth. I look around the room, knowing that it’ll never be “our” room again.

Nothing will ever be ours.

“Just so you know, I didn’t tell your brothers everything, all right? They just think you formed some obsession with a picture.”

“Oh, thanks. That’s lovely,” I say dryly and zip up my suitcase. At the doorway, I stop and face Will. He looks as lost as I do right now.

His mouth opens and closes a few times before he says, “This was the last resort. You know that, right? I was afraid that if I didn’t do anything, you’d go mad.”

I smile sadly, my fingers brushing against his cheek. “I went mad a long time ago.”

Will doesn’t reply. I think we both know that whatever we had has been lost. The next time I come back to this apartment, it will probably be to either an empty place or to pack my things and go. A small piece of my heart aches at the thought.

“What happens to us now?” he asks.

“Nothing, because everything has changed.” I swallow and force myself to keep talking. “I think we both know it’s over. We just don’t want to admit it.”

Will goes silent, but he doesn’t object. When I walk out the front door, I’m also walking away from our chance at a future. A big part of me mourns the loss. Even though Will no longer has possession of my heart, he’s still a fixture in my life.

“So that’s it?” he replies. “We’re done?”

“Will you ever believe me?”

He leans in close, agony etched in his features. “What you’re trying to convince me of is impossible. I want to believe you. I just can’t.”

I nod and remove my engagement ring. My hand shakes as I place it on the dresser. “Then I guess we have our answer.”

He looks as though he wants to say so much, but nothing he can say can fix us. We could certainly try. I could attempt to push Étienne out of my mind, but he will always be there. He will never go away.

“Bye, Will,” I say softly.

“Bye, Serene.”

Slinging one of my bags over my shoulder, I walk into the hallway where my brothers are waiting. They’re wise enough not to give me a hard time as we walk down the stairs. Our footsteps echo loudly.

When we reach the first floor, Ms. Whitmore, a woman in her early eighties, peeks her head out of her front door. “Going somewhere?”

“Just a small trip to visit my family for a bit,” I say with false enthusiasm.

Ms. Whitmore doesn’t blink, just smiles back. “Have fun, Serene!”

Outside, Ian pops open the trunk. He tosses one of my bags in then turns to me, slapping his hands together. I give him my duffle bag, walk around the car, and get into the backseat. I drum my fingers on my jean-clad thighs. I’m anxious, and I have no idea why.

My brothers slam their doors, and before they can say a word, I lean forward. “Let’s get this trip started.”

“It’s not a death sentence,” Bradley says as he starts the car.

“It’s almost three hours in the car with you two. It’s pretty close to a death sentence.”

“Why?” Ian asks. “I can’t speak for Bradley, but I’m a fantastic travel buddy.”

“You both will talk for a total of ten minutes and then say nothing else the entire time.”

“Just buckle up, all right?” Bradley says as he puts the car into drive and merges onto the road.

Twisting around, I watch my apartment building and my business until

they become small black specks that blend into the background.



MY PULSE IS pounding, keeping in tempo with my small gasps. My hair sticks to the back of my neck as I run down a dark, dank hallway with no end in sight. But the worst part is I can feel someone behind me. Their breath trails against my skin, making me shiver in fear.

“There’s no need to run!” a voice says, but I can’t place it. I know I should recognize it, but it’s heavy and disjointed.

As I continue running, I look over my shoulder. A figure shrouded in darkness appears. I don’t know who he is, but I know he’s a man and he wants to hurt me. Deep in my gut, I can feel it.

So I pick up my speed. I run as though my life depends on it. I run so hard my lungs burn and my muscles ache. My knees give out, but before I crash to the ground, the figure behind me eats me alive.

I gasp and jerk in my seat, and find Ian staring at me.

“We’ll be home in an hour,” he says.

I sit up, my neck aching from falling asleep at an odd angle. Rain falls hitting the car at a slant. Cars drive by, their headlights illuminating the drops on the windows and turning them into diamonds. For a second, I can see Étienne’s face in a single raindrop. Heart pounding, I lean my forehead against the window and watch as Étienne’s features become shuttered before he drops his face into his palms. I blink, and the image is gone. I feel more alone than before.

In cursive, I write Étienne’s name then wipe it from the window with one clean swipe of my palm. “How long have I been asleep?”

Bradley glances at the clock on the dashboard. “Only two hours.”

I rub my eyes and stretch as much as I can. I’m almost tempted to ask if we can stop somewhere so I can stretch and get something to eat, but that would put us at nearly four hours in the car, so I bite my tongue and try to get as comfortable as possible.

For the next forty minutes, the car is filled with silence. Just as I expected. My brothers have never been much for words. Most of the time, keeping any conversations going is up to me. I used to love trying to think of different topics and bringing up old, forgotten memories from our childhood, but right now, I don’t have it in me to be that happy version of myself. I stare listlessly out the window, watching the endless stretch of land flash past me.

“You guys didn’t have to do this,” I say.

“Of course we did,” Bradley replies. “Will told us about the picture. It sounds like you’re going crazy.”

“I’m not crazy.”

Bradley continues talking as though I never spoke. “If you keep it up Ian and I are going to take you to Fairfax.”

He’s teasing, but I sit up straight. Fairfax is a psychiatric facility in McLean. Everybody knows about it, but it’s never mentioned. Anyone who does have a family member there merely says that they’re “away.” As though it’s a retreat or an adult camp.

As a kid when we drove by, I would peer out the window and try to see if I could spot anyone. Once, I struck gold and saw a few patients sitting beneath an oak tree. Nurses hovered all around them like mothers watching their kids in a park. Everything looked so normal. Until I saw a few patients in hospitals gowns. It cast a gloom over the whole image.

Years have gone by since I’ve seen that place, but I’m still terrified of it.

“Lachlan’s wife was there,” Ian says.

A chill sweeps through me, and it isn't from the mention of my brothers' good friend, Lachlan Halstead. It's the thought of his wife, Naomi. All of us were neighbors. Lachlan's family lived to the left. The Carradines, Naomi's family, were in the middle, and our land was on the right. I was close in age to Naomi but knew nothing about her. Growing up, she hid inside her house. She was an only child and homeschooled. The only times I saw her were when she rode her horse or during the few dinner parties her parents invited us over for. Everyone would remark that she was a quiet but kind girl. But there was something off. To me, it was the look in her eye. She didn't stare at you but into you. It always unnerved me.

"I'm not crazy," I repeat, louder.

"You do realize that's what every crazy person says, right?" Ian retorts.

"I mean it!"

They're teasing. They're teasing. They're teasing! My heart is pounding because I've never given much thought to how my family would react to everything that's happened. I automatically assumed they would trust that what I was telling them was the truth.

It's clear to me now that the people I love most will not believe me. And if I attempt to tell them the truth, there could be potential repercussions. Would they actually commit me to a place like Fairfax? Probably not. But you never know.

"Call Mom and tell her to hide all the knives," Bradley jokingly tells Ian. He lifts a hand from the steering wheel and mimics a stabbing motion.

Leaning forward, I whack his shoulder. "Come on. Cut it out."

Both of them laugh. I don't.

"We're kidding," Ian says. "You know we don't think that about you."

"If you don't think that then why did you come pick me up?"

Ian twists around his seat. "You tell us. What's the real reason why we

made this impromptu road trip?”

He knows somethings up between Will and me. Of course he does. Will’s explanation was shaky at best. My brothers would see through it immediately. I trust them both to keep anything I say in the strictest of confidence, but if I start talking about Will and me, I’m afraid it will quickly lead down the path toward Étienne and me. And I don’t want to add yet another name to the list of people who don’t believe me.

If there’s anything to learn from confessing the truth to Liz and Will, it’s that I have to watch everything I say from here on out.

“Real reason?” I scrunch up my nose. “I don’t know where you’re going with this.”

“Yes, you do,” Ian says, watching me carefully. “I’ve been waiting for you to tell me the truth for the past hour, but you never did. So now I’m asking.”

If I’m stubborn, then Ian’s downright bullheaded. He won’t back down until I answer him. Truthfully.

“There’s nothing to tell.” I look at my hands. “Will and I just called off our engagement.”

Ian stares at me with disbelief. Even Bradley gives me a look in the rearview mirror.

“Are you kidding?” Ian asks.

I raise my left hand and wiggle my fingers, showcasing my now-bare ring finger.

He whistles. “Told Mom?”

“No. Not yet. Besides, telling Mom is the least of my worries.”

Bradley snorts, which draws my attention to him.

“Since you guys have asked me some tough questions, it’s only fair that I do the same,” I say.

“Technically, it was Ian who asked about Will.”

I wave away Bradley’s words. “Doesn’t matter.” Resting my elbows on my knees, I glance at Bradley. “Why are you so cranky?”

“I’m not cranky.”

“Well, you’re certainly not your normal self. What gives?”

Ian makes a cut-it-out gesture.

I frown at him and mouth, “What?”

He whispers, “We’ll talk about that later. Okay?”

Judging by the way Bradley’s jaw clenches, I know he heard Ian. I may have slept half the trip, but the moments I’ve been awake, I’ve felt the tension coming off of Bradley in waves. He jokes with Ian, but his heart isn’t in it. When he thinks no one’s looking, his lips pull into a tight line and his eyes harden. What has happened to my brother to make him like this?

“Anyway,” I say, desperate to change the subject, “how have Mom and Dad been?”

“Good, good,” Ian says. “They’ll be happy to see you.”

“Do they know I’m coming?”

“Of course. We told them before we left that we were picking you up. I’m sure Mom is staring out the front window with all the porch lights on.”

Glancing at the dashboard clock, I see it’s a quarter til eleven. Sighing, I sit back in my seat. It’s not that I want to avoid my parents. I’m just exhausted and need to think about what I’m going to say to them when they ask what brought me home and why Will didn’t come along.

We drive into the outskirts of town, and a part of me wants to sigh with relief. With everything that’s happened, recognizing everything around me feels nice. Ian could blindfold me and tell me to drive the rest of the way home and I could.

Compared to Arlington, McLean has a small-town vibe. A small town

with luxury homes and residents who have more money than God, take pride in their elitist behavior, and always have an air of gravitas surrounding them. My parents rub shoulders with most of those residents.

Growing up, my brothers and I attended Potomac School, a disciplined school of hard academics. I consider making it out alive as one of my greatest achievements.

“Do you miss McLean?” Ian asks.

“Do I miss McLean?” I muse. “I miss knowing every single street and the memories I have here. But no, I don’t miss McLean. I formed a life in Greensburg.” *And an even better one in Charleston.*

The streetlamps illuminate the now-closed stores and the few open fast food chains. We pass numerous subdivisions, the traffic slowly becoming sparse until the road becomes two lanes.

Bradley turns onto our road and puts on his brights; no one will pass us. That’s a perk of living out in the country. You’re close enough to town in case you need anything, but whenever you’re overwhelmed by the heavy congestion of traffic and people, you can escape. I forgot how much I missed that until I’m watching the open space around me. Even though it’s pitch black, I know the landscape. The ditches flanking the road are rarely, if ever, mowed. The cluster of woods a mile behind our house travels past the Carradines’ land and reaches the Halsteads’ property.

Bradley turns into our driveway and stops to put in the passcode. The wrought-iron gates slowly open, and we drive under the archway with the word RAVENWOOD proudly displayed for any passersby.

Ian may have been joking when he said that the porch lights would be on, but he was completely right. The entire house is lit up, as though it’s six at night instead of eleven.

“Home sweet home,” Bradley says dryly as we get out of the car.

Collectively, we groan with relief to be out the car. The cold air is a welcome comfort. I breathe deep and close my eyes. For the first time in weeks, I feel a little bit of myself sliding into place.

“Are you coming in?”

Opening my eyes, I find Ian and Bradley looking at expectantly, my bags slung over their shoulders.

“Yeah. I’m glad to be home.”

“Well, while you reminisce, I’m gonna drop your bags in your room and take a piss,” Bradley mutters before he strides toward the door, Ian beside him.

I follow, taking stock of the home that has been in our family for... well, forever. It’s all I’ve ever known. My family’s sprawling, exorbitant two-story home stands proud against the bitter winter weather. Four massive pillars poised in front of the house support the veranda that travels the length of the second story. In between the black shutters are large, gleaming windows.

I’ve always been awed by the beauty of this house, and proud that my family has maintained and run Ravenwood for as long as we have. Along with the house, the farm too was established over a hundred years ago. Our family’s farm quickly became the most prestigious training, breeding, and racing farms in Virginia. Our name is known in racing circles and gives us the advantage of having access to only the best horses.

“Serene? What are you still doing out here?” In the doorway stands my mom, light from the foyer pours out around her.

With my arms crossed, I hurry up the walkway then hug my mom. For a second, I allow myself to relax, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. She still smells of soap and lilac, a comforting combination from my childhood. It reminds me that even though my life has been flipped upside down, some things remain the same. It doesn’t matter how old you get; there are times

when all you need is a good hug from your parents to make you feel as if whatever you're going through can be repaired.

When Mom pulls back, I see the worry on her face. I know that my brothers won't say a word about my engagement ending, but my mom isn't stupid; she'll quickly unearth the truth. What will her reaction be when I tell her that the wedding is off? Will she be angry or supportive? I hope for the latter because she's my mom.

"How was the drive?" she asks as she ushers us into the warmth of the house.

"Cramped," Ian cut in before I can reply.

Mom looks to me for confirmation. I shrug. "I think it went by fast."

"You weren't the one driving," Ian mutters before he walks down the hall, probably toward the kitchen.

"Neither were you," I call.

He flings a hand in the air and keeps moving.

Before we're interrupted again, I face her. "I know you want to talk and catch up, but I'm exhausted."

And it's the truth. Since I got back home, sleep had eluded me. Even when I'm dead tired and my eyelids continually flutter shut, I remain awake. My mind can't seem to stop running. But exhaustion is finally taking over.

Small lines appear between her brows as she frowns. "Oh. I was hoping we'd have a small chat before you went to bed." Disappointment coats her words. She gives my arm a small squeeze. "We'll just catch up over breakfast."

I give her an unsteady smile. "Absolutely."

I feel a sliver of guilt. My mom is one of the kindest, most understanding people I know. Growing up, she was nurturing, yet firm with my brothers and me.

With her small, turned-up nose, sharp cheekbones, golden hair with strawberry-blond strands, and wrinkle-free skin (that may or may not be thanks to the help of her plastic surgeon), Kate Parow looks more like my older sister than my mom.

Those kind eyes are patiently staring at me, and I find myself giving in.

Don't say a word, my mind warns.

“Hey, kiddo.”

At the sound of my dad's voice, I turn around and smile. There's so much I want to tell him. And so much I can't. Instead, I give him a bright smile. He hasn't changed at all. His hair is becoming grayer. He's of average height and on the lean side but jokingly says that if he keeps eating sweets, it'll catch up to him. He's had the same pair of glasses for the past ten years. Every time he takes them off, the upper edges of his nose are red. Ian favors Dad the most, but I got his light eyes.

Dad gives me a side hug before he gives a quick once-over. “Good to see you.”

“You too.”

My brothers filter back into the foyer, and everyone starts talking at once. The sound of their voices is almost as soothing as my mom's hug. I find myself repeatedly yawning and wanting to curl up on the nearest couch.

“I think we're keeping Sleeping Beauty up with all our talking.”

I'm so sleepy, I can only grunt. Dad laughs.

“I think I'm going to head on up to bed. I can barely keep my eyes open,” I say, punctuating my sentence with a long yawn.

I mutter a weak good night to everyone, grab my nearest duffle bag, and trudge upstairs. I'm not even out of earshot when I hear them murmuring about me and how I acted on the ride here.

I'm too tired to care.

I walk into my childhood bedroom without bothering to flip on the lights and belly flop onto my bed.

I've called off my wedding.

My living situation is up in the air.

I'm not on speaking terms with my best friend and business partner. And I'm no closer to finding a way back to Étienne.

I have no idea what tomorrow will bring, but I can't give up, even though the odds are against me.



“I NEED EVERYONE to stay perfectly still,” Nat demands.

Shading my eyes with my hand, I stare in Nat’s direction and watch as she sets up her camera. “How much longer is this going to take?”

Not long ago, she confided in me that she had spoken to Serene about her desire to purchase a vest pocket Kodak. That was all I needed to hear and immediately bought one for her.

“A few minutes. Be patient,” Nat replies as she deftly handles the expensive equipment.

Since I’ve purchased the camera, she’s been using it constantly, taking pictures of the property and staff as practice. Watching her become more confident with each use has been my one joy since Serene left.

It’s been a week since Serene disappeared. I’m starting to hate that word, but it’s the only way to put it. One minute she was there. In my arms. In my bed. And the next, she was gone, snatched from me.

Poof.

Never to be seen again.

And I blame time. It is a thief that stole her from me.

I've done everything in my power to find her, but I can't go against time. All I have is hope that she'll come back to me.

"Nat, if I continue to smile like this, I'm afraid my face is gonna become cemented in this position," Livingston says out of the corner of his mouth.

"Patience," Asa says, leaning around me to get a better look at Livingston. "She's takin' her time."

"She has been takin' her time all day, loadin' that film, and I'm startin' to get hot under the collar."

"Why? Because she's enjoyin' her camera and this is takin' up half your day?"

"Precisely."

Asa laughs and crosses his arms as he leans against the brick pillar. "Be honest with yourself. You weren't doin' anything important anyhow."

Resting his arms on his knees, Livingston grunts before he glances at Edward to his left, then Asa, and finally at me. "I'm confused."

Edward leans forward. "By?"

"Well, you, Asa, and I are dressed like gentlemen. Étienne looks... homeless."

"Your brother's observation is compelling," Asa remarks. "You do not look..." He gives me a cursory glance. "Well."

I touch my facial hair. I haven't shaved since Serene left. And my clothes? I look down at them. I need to change my shirt, but I've been spending late nights in my office and just falling asleep at my desk, attempting to get some work done. I will admit that I haven't spent much time focusing on my appearance. Compared to my brother, Edward, and Asa,

I look similar to a vagabond. I couldn't care less.

“Brother, don't be afraid to ask your valet to pick up the razor and clean you up a bit. If Serene sees you like that, she'll run for the hills.”

If my Serene saw me like this, she wouldn't think twice.

After she left, I told Livingston and Nat and her fill-in parents that Serene decided to take an impromptu vacation to New York. It didn't seem to faze anyone, considering the Old Serene had a deep-rooted love for New York and tried to visit any chance she could.

But sooner than later, Serene will need to come back home. What do I say then? I need to confide in Livingston and tell him the truth. That there's an excellent chance she will never come back. But not now. Right now, if I have to extend Serene's "vacation" by saying she decided to tour all of Europe, I will. Anything to buy some time.

“All right,” Nat cheerfully announces, “I am ready. Now everyone look at me, please.”

“Gladly,” Livingston mutters before he plasters on his mega-watt smile.

Edward and Asa face the camera, their backs resting against the pillars. Stubbornly, I stare at the camera. Not smiling like Livingston. Or posing like Edward and Asa. I'm just... here. And I'm only here because I love my sister and she asked me to do this.

She raises her head and stares at me with concern. Nat knows something is wrong. She's happy and always buoyant, but she's far more astute than any of us give her credit for. Our eyes hold for a handful of seconds before she sighs and looks through the small viewfinder.

Raising her hand, she snaps her fingers. “Everyone look at me.” She counts down from three with her fingers and takes the photo. Once again, she looks at me. This time, impatiently. “Étienne, can you try to smile?”

“No.”

“Please?” She gives me an optimistic smile.

“This is all you’re gettin’ from me, Nat.”

Her shoulders fall. “Fine. You can leave. The rest of you, stay.”

Before she can finish, I’m up off the steps, heading down the drive for a much-needed walk. I need to clear my head.

Behind me, Livingston groans. “Oh, God, why do I feel as though I’m gonna be here all day?”

It’s only until I’m halfway down the drive that I realize I took the photo Serene claimed to have found in her time.



THAT NIGHT, I stare at the flames licking the surface of the chopped up wood. I roll my shoulders, trying to ignore the tension building there. Behind me, the door opens. I turn to see Livingston.

His expression is grim, yet I still ask, “Nat done with her photo session?”

Livingston goes directly to the sideboard and pours himself a drink. “About fifteen minutes ago, she blissfully ran out of film.” He drains the amber liquid in one gulp and pours some more.

I smirk and stare at the flames. Livingston is oddly quiet. Even though he appears nonchalant as he walks toward me, I know he wants to discuss something.

I wait patiently.

Resting his arm on the fireplace mantel, Livingston swirls his drink. “Serene isn’t in New York, is she?”

“No. She isn’t.”

He leans in. “Then where did she go?”

I hesitate. "I don't know."

"Did you two have one of your fights and she left?"

Sharply, I stare at my brother. "No. We didn't fight."

"Then what happened?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

The entire time Serene was here, I kept the truth of her time traveling secret because I wanted to protect her. No one would believe her, and it's a wonder that I did. Since she's been gone, the idea of confessing the truth has crossed my mind more than once. I always hold back though, because I don't want anyone to dispute Serene's arrival into my life.

I didn't make her up. The fact that Old Serene hasn't come back only solidifies that Serene does exist. To me, it's also a sign that my Serene changed something in this time.

Or maybe we did. Perhaps the second I let Serene into my bed, the past and future collided and everything was irrevocably changed.

Placing his drink on the mantel, Livingston gives my shoulder a firm pat. "Try me, Étienne. I'm your brother, and you can tell me anything."

Perhaps it's exhaustion that lowers my defenses, or maybe the burden of carrying this weight on my shoulders makes me give up. Either way, I open my mouth, and I tell my brother everything, from the beginning to the last time I saw Serene.

He stares at me, looking perplexed. He shakes his head. "You are tryin' to tell me that Serene is from the future?"

"Yes, 2017. And there's no tryin'. Tryin' implies I need to convince you, and I'm not gonna do that. I just needed to get the truth off of my chest."

"You understand that your truth is beyond the bounds of possibility, right?"

"Yes, that is why I've never told you."

Abruptly, Livingston turns his back to me. He doesn't say a word as he walks around my office. With his head down and brows furrowed, I know he's deep in thought. I accept that he's going to declare me of unsound mind. He's already said that what I've claimed is impossible.

But then he faces me. "Serene has been actin' bizarre these past few weeks."

I hold my breath, not daring to interrupt him.

"She was kinder to the staff. Her frivolous soirees stopped. And better yet, the two of you seemed to be gettin' along. Naturally, I assumed the two of you were giving your relationship a chance." He snorts. "However, in all the years I've known Serene, she's never behaved that way." My brother steps forward, unsmiling as he looks me in the eye. "You're my brother. I may regret this later on, but right now, I believe what you're saying."

For the first time in days, a genuine smile spreads across my lips.

Before I can utter a word, Livingston holds up a hand. "But this cannot leave your office. Just as Serene was lucky for you to believe her, the same applies to you. Your friends and colleagues will not be as forgivin'."

"I agree."

"Until you get"—he glances at me—"a handle of yourself, perhaps it's best if you lay low at work."

Of all the things I expected him to say, that isn't it. "That wouldn't be for the best at all."

"Étienne, even I can see you're not focused at work."

He's right, and I know it. Before Serene came along, I loved my job. I could go to work and immerse myself in each investment. I had all the power. People relied on my thoughts and opinions.

But now I can't focus on a single thing.

I walk toward my desk. Typically it's organized, but now paperwork is

scattered about. It's a mess. I lay my palms on the cluttered surface, hunch my shoulders, and take a deep breath. "What do you suggest I do?"

"The only thing you can do. Move on."

Whipping my body around, I glare at Livingston. "Move on?"

"Of course." Livingston throws his hands in the air. "My God, it's been a week. The chances of her ever comin' back are low. The quicker you accept that, the faster you can move on. And move on is what you need to do because you cannot continue the way you are."

I don't reply because deep down, I knew she's gone. I can feel it in my bones—a hollowness I've never felt before. She has left my time. Disappeared from my hands and left traces of her scent and memories of her laughter and body.

But to move on and give up on the possibility of her coming back? Not an option.

I laugh humorlessly. "You don't understand. You never will."

"I can tell you're furious with me, but I want you to be happy."

I don't reply.

"There're other—"

"Don't even say it."

"Why not? Someone should!"

"There will be no one else."

"Why not?"

"Because." Squeezing my eyes shut, I rub the bridge of my nose before I mimic Livingston's actions and pour myself a drink. My newfound relationship with brandy is the only thing keeping me subdued. I want the pain to leave. I want the memories to disappear. I want to silence all the questions running through my head. "Serene has a stubborn heart, and I have a stubborn mind. We fit. I love her because neither one of us knows how to

give up.”

“And while that’s a trait some might admire, it could very well be your downfall. You need to accept that you might never see Serene again.”

“I will never accept that.” For me, it’s not an option. I love the Serene time gave me, not the one life gave me. I love the one who came to me when I needed her the most. My devotion to her borders on pathological. “She’s coming back.”

“But what if she—”

“I said she’s coming back!”

“You need to accept the possibility she won’t!”

What Livingston’s saying is too much for me to handle. With my hands on my hips, I pace the room. No one will understand how I feel. I know I can find her and I know I’m close to finding the solution. I just can’t reach it.

“Why don’t we go out? Have a drink, eh?” Livingston tries to place a hand on my shoulder, but I shrug him off and ignore his suggestion. “You need to get ahold of yourself. Look at you. You’re a mess.”

“Please leave.”

“Étie—”

Twisting around, I point at the door. “Go!”

My brother covers his mouth with his hand and rubs his jaw. He steps back and shrugs. “Fine.”

The door slams behind him. And even though he’s gone, his words linger, surrounding me, choking me.

I’ve begun to lose my mind, and I have no idea what to do.

In a fit of rage, I hurl my empty glass against the wall. It breaks apart into thousands of little pieces littering the floor. I laugh because the room resembles the rubble of my life. I place my palms against the wall and close my eyes, breathing deeply. I need to get ahold of myself.

I walk back over to my desk and sigh loudly as I sit down. There's a stack of papers in front of me. If I go through the entire stack, it will take me all night. But it's not as though I'm going to bed any time soon. Might as well do some work.

Methodically, I stack the paperwork that needs my signature, and when I'm done, I move to the files that need to be read. I need more time for that. I push those aside and continue to clean my desk until I can finally see the surface. Dear God, it's only been a week. What would my desk have looked like after a month?

I shudder at the thought.

It's close to three in the morning when I spot the black ledger in the middle of my desk. I frown; this is the type of ledger my accountants use, not me.

I flip through pages and pages of numbers. All it takes is a matter of seconds to realize that this is the company's subsidiary ledger. This ledger has an updated and correct balance of the company account. It details all of the money coming in and out of my company. There are gains and declines in stocks. Everything seems to be in order, but on the last page, something catches my eye. I do a double take and grab my glasses to get a better look. After a few seconds, I remove my glasses and rub my temples. I've been wrong the whole time.

Serene was right.

I've been betrayed.



twenty-five

FOR THE UMPTEENTH time, I glance at my watch. It's 1:23 in the afternoon on Christmas Eve. Is it Christmas Eve for Étienne? I don't know. Either way, I bet he's focused on his work. I can picture him hunched over his desk, pouring through paperwork, glasses perched on his nose. At five sharp, he'd leave and go home to Belgrave.

Has the Old Serene replaced me? Is he back in his loveless marriage? The thought fills me with envy so powerful that my hands curl into fists. She can't have him. I should be living her life with the man I love. The cruelest part of all of this is I'm obsessing over someone who isn't even alive.

"Serene?"

My lashes flutter rapidly as I blink away my dark thoughts and focus on my mom. She's standing behind the kitchen island; lines appear between her furrowed brows as she stares at me. We've made small talk since this morning, but I know she's merely waiting for me to open up about what

happened with Will. Her eyes keep veering to my now-empty ring finger.

“Sorry,” I say. “What did you say?”

She sighs. “I was saying that I need to go up in the attic and get the rest of the Christmas decorations down before tomorrow and I need your help.”

I twist around and stare at the family room that’s decorated to the nines with tinsel, lights, Santas, and angels. There’s no possible way she could fit any more decorations into the house. I know my skepticism is written on my face because she gives me a stern look.

“Mom, the house looks like pages 3-7 in the Pottery Barn Holiday Catalog.”

“I need to get the tablecloths and decorations for the dining room. Relatives from out of town will be here tomorrow,” she explains.

I take a bite of my sandwich. “How many?”

She shrugs and continues to clean the counters. “Around fifteen.”

I stifle a groan and keep my mouth shut; I know how much mom loves entertaining. “Sure. I’ll help you.”

“Fantastic.” She stands and claps her hands. “Let’s get started.”

“Wait, you mean right now?”

“Why not? Is there something else you have to do?”

“Well, no. But—”

“Come on, sweetie. No excuses. Let’s get it over with.”

She walks out of the kitchen toward the stairs. Reluctantly, I follow her.



ATTICS FREAK ME out.

It’s the ominous feeling that I can’t stand. I’ve been up here twice. Both

times were with my brothers when we were kids. They wanted to snoop around and play, and I was frozen in place, staring at the haphazardly stacked boxes. Furniture that looked as though it had seen better days was pressed against the walls, and what appeared to be mouse droppings were scattered around my feet.

Our mom found out about our visits and told us it was dangerous to be up there. I never questioned her words.

Going back up here now, after all these years, I can see that not much has changed. Just more junk has been added.

“Mom...” I look around the small space in disbelief. “I think you’re a hoarder.”

She stops rummaging through plastic containers long enough to roll her eyes at me. “I know it looks bad.”

“No, it doesn’t look bad. It is bad.”

“I’ll admit it isn’t as organized as I would like. But it’s not as though I have dinner parties up here, so I think I’m okay. Think of this as a fun adventure; you love antiques and history. You should be elated to go through all of this.”

She has a point. But typically when I rift through boxes from flea markets or go to estate sales or auctions, they aren’t held in small attics. “When did you acquire all this stuff?”

“When your father’s mom died. His sister claimed she didn’t want the stuff. Said she didn’t have the room.” Mom says the last two words with air quotes before she sniffs and turns away. “Yet now I’m stuck with all this junk.”

“Point me in the direction of the antiques.”

“They’re over there,” Mom replies, flinging a hand toward the right.

I’m guessing she’s referring to the old leather trunks stacked by a broken

dresser that I'm pretty sure was once in one of my brother's rooms. Carefully I move in that direction. I pass a broken, gilt floral design mirror, a baby carriage that I'm pretty sure I saw my dad photographed in, and a stack of miscellaneous boxes.

With both hands, I brush away the dust on the top of the trunk. In the right-hand corner are some letters. Squinting, I peer closer. "What does T.A.P. stand for?"

My mom doesn't look up from the box in front of her. "Who knows? Probably someone from your father's family."

Once upon a time, there was a lock on this trunk, but it's long gone. Probably yanked off from its past owner or just fell apart from wear and tear. Opening the chest brings an onslaught of dust and a moldy scent that has me coughing.

The trunk holds musty faded clothes, old books, and a stack of photos with a black ribbon holding them together. I can't stop my heart from racing as I untie the ribbon. My photo of Étienne is forever gone, but getting the chance to see pictures from the past is always exciting to me. I sit on the dusty floor, cross my legs, and flip through the photos. The first few are of dad and his sister; that makes me smile. Then there are a lot of people I've never seen before. I come to the very end, feeling let down.

I reach back into the trunk and pull out a dusty bible. It's a leather bound, King James Version Bible with the spine ready to fall apart. I open the first page and see the inscription, "This Holy Bible is presented to." In thin cursive letters is the name Clara Beckett Parow. Beneath that, is the date: September 8, 1912.

I quickly skim through the pages, not expecting to find anything, and a picture drops into my lap. Highlighted in on the thin page where I found the picture is the verse Exodus 34:7. "Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving

iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.”

Written on the side, near the verse, are the initials E.G.H and the year 1913. The writing is underlined three times. Whoever underlined those initials pressed down on the pen so hard they broke through the page.

I read and reread the scripture. Each time, goose bumps break out across my skin.

With shaking hands, I pick up the picture and carefully stare at it.

There's nothing special about it. It's a black-and-white photo of a couple holding hands. Their backs are to the camera, but the woman twists around and smiles at the camera. With her free hand, she holds back her hair from whipping across her face. She's petite with dark hair and a big smile. My eyes, though, are drawn to the man. Something about the set of his shoulders that gives me a massive sense of déjà vu. I've seen this man before, and I think I know who it is.

Eagerly, I walk over to mom. She's elbow-deep in a sea of tangled-up garland. I have to nudge her to get her attention and shove the picture in front of her.

“Who's this?”

Mom squints at the photo. “Hmm...”

My hands are shaking so hard, it's impossible to keep them still. Mom remains silent, and it takes all my willpower not to reach out and shake the answer out of her.

“You know, I think that's your great-great-grandfather.”

“What's his name?”

“Theodore Parow. If I remember correctly everyone used to call him Teddy.”

“Are there any more photos of him?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Your dad told me that he met Teddy once and he was very private. Didn’t like his photo taken too much. But I’m sure there’re a few more somewhere.”

I’ve heard of people being camera shy, but having only one photo taken? Damn near impossible even for his time. I flip the photo over and see the same initials that are engraved on the trunk. Beneath it is the date September 8, 1912.

When I was younger, my mom told me that if I felt a gut instinct, I couldn’t go wrong. If something feels off, it’s because it is. If something feels right, it’s because it is. And right now, my gut is telling me that this picture is a link back to Étienne. It sounds like a reach, even for myself, but I can’t ignore the hunch.

“How come I’m just now seeing this?” I ask.

“Because it’s been here for years.” Mom snatches the picture from my hands. I reach out for it, but she doesn’t notice. “You know, he has a fascinating story.”

“How so?”

With the picture in her hands, she sits on a milk crate. I grab one and sit next to her. “He came from nothing. His father passed away at a young age, and it was just him and his mother. Back then, jobs women could take were limited. She was a seamstress, so he had to bring in money. He did odd jobs here and there, but he never stopped working.”

“What was his mom’s name?”

“You know, I’m not sure. I don’t think your dad is even certain what her name is. There’s a lot of mystery around him. For all his hard work, he was a very cold man.”

“I would think so, if he only met his grandson once.”

Mom shrugs. “That’s how it was in your father’s family. They weren’t exactly the most affectionate family.”

“That didn’t bother Dad?”

“I’m sure it did when he was younger, but maybe not as much now. That’s why he was so hands-on with you and your brothers. He didn’t want you to have the same childhood he did.”

She hands me back the photo and stands, ready to get back to work, but I’m still stuck on the picture and Dad’s family. I jump up. “What else can you tell me?”

Mom turns around and looks at me. “Not much. Like I said, your father’s family was bizarre. The only thing they were solely devoted to is Ravenwood. Any stories your father and I have heard have been passed down through generations of family members, and I’m sure some of the information became twisted. I know you got your love of history from your father, but a few years ago, I became curious about my ancestry. I joined this site and got caught up in seeing how far back I could trace my family.”

I lean in. To me, the story of the Parow family is a parable highlighting all the things that are wrong with our family. “How far back did you go?”

“In some cases, I could date my family all way to the 1600s. But a lot of them had roadblocks.”

“I wonder why.”

Mom shrugs. “I think in some instances, it depends on the family upbringing. If you struggled, your only imprint in the past—with the exception of a family Bible—would be in censuses. Whereas a family with money would more than likely have photos, deeds, wills. It’s easier to find them. Naturally, my family doesn’t have the money the Parow side does, so it’s harder to research my family members.”

“Does Dad have a family tree of the Parow family?” I ask anxiously.

“Why are you suddenly so interested in your dad’s side of the family?” Mom asks with a short laugh.

There’s no question about it—I cannot tell my mom anything about what’s happened to me. She’s a realist, plain and simple. She’s the kind of person who wants the facts laid out in front of her, and if something is presented to her that isn’t completely clear, she won’t believe it. When I told my parents my desire to start the business, she was the one opposed to the idea. My dad was more optimistic.

“I’m curious. That’s all.” I glance at the photo. “Don’t you think it’s interesting how this person is our key to the past?”

Mom muses over my question for a millisecond. “I suppose so. But this stuff”—Mom gestures to the items around us—“this is your thing. You love the past.”

Oh, she has no idea.



AFTER DINNER, I finally catch my dad alone in his office.

He’s looking at something on his computer, his glasses low on his nose as he intently stares at the screen. I smile.

Growing up, I would watch documentaries or pour over old photos with my dad. My brothers would roll their eyes, and my mom would shake her head. More than anything, I want to tell Dad about my experiences at Belgrave. He would love it and ask me dozens of questions. But I can’t handle the thought of him staring at me as though I’ve lost my damn mind, the way everyone else does.

Softly, I knock on his door.

When he sees me, a smile spreads across his face. “Serene. This is a pleasant surprise.”

“Are you busy?”

He pushes back from his desk and gestures to the seats angled to face his desk. “No. Come in, come in.”

“What are you reading?”

“A newspaper that your uncle Barry found on an archives site. Very informative.”

“Year?” I ask as I sit down across from him.

“1913. It’s the year your great-great-grandfather opened Ravenwood.”

My heart speeds up. I’ve been thinking of the proper segue into a conversation surrounding Parow history, and he just handed it to me on a silver platter. I lace my fingers together. “What did he do before he bought the farm?”

Dad leans back in his chair. “Various jobs,” he replies, pride coating his words. “Your grandmother always told us how he came from nothing and had to work hard to every penny.”

Damn. The same answer I got from Mom. “Mom and I found some interesting things in the attic.”

“I have no doubt that you did. I’ve been meaning to go up there and sort through the trunks.”

“You need to. But I came across this photo.” I pull the black-and-white photo from my back pocket and hand it to him.

He puts his glasses back on and scans the photo, taking in every detail. After a few seconds, he hands it back to me. “That’s your great-great-grandpa and his wife, Clara.”

“You know her name?”

“Absolutely. Throughout the years, I’ve worked on the Parow family

tree.”

“That’s what mom was telling me about. She mentioned some site to research her family.”

He nods and smiles. “It’s called Ancestry.com. I suggested it to her. They’ve upgraded their site and added tons of content to the point you can find anyone.”

All of a sudden, an idea takes root in my mind. I sit up straight in my chair. “Anyone?”

“Anyone,” he repeats.



I CUT MY conversation with Dad short and hurry upstairs to my laptop. I’ve already signed up for Ancestry. The homepage is beckoning me, but before I research the Lacroix family, I do something I should’ve done when I first arrived back in my own time. I’m going to Google Étienne.

The blinker taunts me to type something into the search bar. Funny how I left dad’s office with renewed hope, and now I’m too afraid to type in Étienne’s name. The truth is, I’m terrified of what I’ll find. Terrified I’ll see he went on to remarry and had a handful of kids. Or worse, that something terrible happened to him.

I carefully type his name without the acute accent, hoping that maybe his name will automatically appear in the search bar. Before I even type out his last name, a handful of Étiennes pop-up. None of them have the last name of Lacroix though.

My stomach sinks when I press enter. It takes 0.67 seconds for 49,300 results to pop-up. That should’ve given me an inordinate amount of

optimism, but I know that within all those search results, only a handful will be aimed toward my Étienne.

Instead of clicking on the links, I go to the pictures. What I need right now is proof, an image to reassure my heart I didn't make him up. In my mind, his appearance is fading, and that's a terrifying thought.

But none of the pictures are of him. Sure, a few of these men could've been relatives, but deep in my heart, I knew they aren't. The smiles are off, and the features are all wrong.

I go back to the links. They're mostly generic: how to pronounce the name Étienne, the meaning behind Lacroix. A few LinkedIn pages for an Étienne Lacroix from France. Nothing stands out.

I continue to click on link after link. After a good hour of searching and finding nothing, I finally go back to the search bar and type in "Belgrave Plantation." I press enter, but at the last second, I change my mind and add "Charleston, South Carolina" to increase my odds.

When the page loads and I see pictures of the Lacroixes' home, I suck in a sharp breath. There it is, inches away from me.

With my elbows on my thighs, I lean closer to the laptop screen and scroll down. There's a painting of Belgrave during its glory days. That's the only one I can find of the Belgrave I remember and lived in. The rest of the images are in black-and-white and reveal the decayed remains of a home that tried to withstand the harsh hands of mother nature and failed.

It's surreal to see what's left of the estate and know what it looked like in its prime. My heart aches for what it used to be. I rub the pad of my thumb against the fourth window to the right on the second floor. That had been my room. I saw sunrises and sunsets in that room.

Why can't time leave everything as it is?

After a good thirty minutes of scrolling through the pictures available, I

click on the Wikipedia link. To the left is a black-and-white thumbnail image after the back portion of the house had collapsed.

Immediately, it gives me the backstory:

“Belgrave Plantation was built in 1850 and was owned by Everett Livingston, a sugar planter, who hired a well-known architect from New York, Peter Johnson, to design the mansion. It took nearly six years to complete building and was considered the largest plantation in the South.

In 1879, Everett’s only child, Charlotte, married Adrien Lacroix, from the prosperous Lacroix family who operated Lacroix Shipping Company. Upon marriage, Everett gifted Belgrave to his daughter and son-in-law. Years later, Adrien sold his share of the sugar plantation, leaving him with only two hundred acres of the original one thousand, so he could focus his attention on the shipping company.

Tragically, on March 8, 1901, Everett, along with his wife and son, Julian, died in a train accident. The company was split between his two older sons, Étienne and Livingston.

More tragedy struck the family when on June 15, 1912, a fire started in the east wing of the mansion. It quickly spread throughout the house. By the time the fire was put out, the east wing had completely collapsed. Ten servants died from the blaze, along with Étienne and his sister, Nathalie.”

“Holy shit,” I whisper and sit back against my pillows.

I wasn’t expecting that last paragraph. My heart aches at the idea of Étienne and Nathalie’s life being cut so short. Dragging my hands through my hair, I try to take a deep breath. I tell myself to calm down and there’s nothing I can do, but my body doesn’t find that good enough. My legs are itching to jump up and do something. Something isn’t right about how

Étienne died. Deep in my heart, I know it. He suffered, along with Nathalie and the ten staff members. My nails dig into my scalp.

“Breathe, Serene, breathe.”

If someone walked into my room right now, they would think I was fucking crazy, but what I’m doing is a lot better than what I want to do, which is scream in agony.

There’s nothing I can do. I didn’t watch Belgrave burn, but I swear I can feel the flames attempting to lick my skin. Traces of smoke fill my lungs, and my eyes burn.

It’s all in my mind. I know that. But it feels so real. After a few seconds, I open my eyes and blink my room into focus. I take a few deep breaths and continue reading, even though I don’t want to.

“The fire resulted in widespread media attention. There was initial outrage in Charleston that foul play was involved. It was announced in September 1912 that the cause of the fire was electrical complications and deemed an accident.

As the sole survivor of the family, Livingston Lacroix inherited the ravaged remains of Belgrave and Lacroix Shipping. He never married and enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1914. He died in combat in May 1915.

With Livingston having no will in order and the property not placed in a trust, the plantation was sold to Asa Calhoun for \$30,000 in 1916, with the aspirations of restoring the home, but very little was done. In 1924, Mr. Calhoun sold the property for the meager sum of \$12,000 to a foreign investment company. They wanted to build a luxury hotel out of the remains but were denied permits. As they refused to sell, the Great Depression swept across the nation, and Belgrave withered away. The roof caved in, windows were broken out, and vandals stole valuable pieces of the skillfully crafted

mansion.

The plantation became a local hot spot for photographers, capturing the decay of a once-beautiful estate.

In 2009, Belgrave was donated to the National Register of Historical Places of Charleston County. 2010 brought the announcement they were raising funds to restore the plantation. They estimated the cost to be around three million. Soon after, work began on clearing all debris, trimming trees and grass so the driveway could be accessible. In 2011, structural work started on the East Wing. It was revealed that the budget was brought to four million. Funds began to dwindle, and all work on the plantation was put on pause for two years. It was proposed in 2012 that a better, more cost-effective option would be to demolish Belgrave. During a city council meeting, the Preservation Society of Charleston countered that Belgrave was a historic landmark.

In 2013, it was announced that tours around the Belgrave grounds would be available to help raise funds. The misfortune surrounding the Lacroix family and the sad demise of the plantation swiftly caused Belgrave to become a tourist attraction, with their busiest times between June and September.

They estimate that by the summer of 2018, they will have the funding available to restore Belgrave, and rehabilitation will promptly resume directly after. Once restoration is complete, tours will extend to the home.”

What I read has me frozen in place. I blink rapidly as I gawk at the screen.

Do something, my heart urges.

It isn't right that all of the Lacroix's' hard work went down in smoke and Belgrave's legacy is a tragedy instead of triumph.

Do something.

I get up from my bed and pace my room. It isn't right that Étienne and his family are written down as people who left the earth too soon.

Do something.

Frustrated and heartbroken, I rest my forehead against the cold window pane. My warm breath fogs up the surface. I wipe the window clean and continue gazing at the landscape. If I squint and tilt my head at the right angle, the trees that line our driveway become the ones at Belgrave, and if I close my eyes, I'm touching the window pane in my room in Belgrave. The scent of wild honeysuckle drifts into my room, and the curtains billow lightly. The plush green and the marshes in the distance create a breathtaking view.

Do something.

My eyes flash open. All this time I've been waiting for time to take me back, but what I've failed to realize is that time is all around me. I just have to reach out and touch it.

I don't need that photograph of Étienne. I need to go back to the place where we fell in love. I need to go back to Charleston.

And that is something I can do.



twenty-six

MY HEART ISN'T in it this Christmas. I smile and talk to relatives I haven't seen in over a year. But my mind is decades away, fixated on a person who needs me more than any other person in this room.

I have a plan, and now it feels impossible to sit still. Christmas dinner is torturous, and the idle chit-chat afterward has me inching toward the hallway. By the time the last relative leaves, it's ten at night. I fly up the stairs, shut my door, and grab my laptop.

There's so much I need to do, and the first step is booking a flight.

One hour and three sites later, I've booked my ticket. I found a flight from Washington, D.C. to Charleston for around a grand. That includes my hotel and rental car. I winced at the cost, but only for a second, because if this is what I have to do to get back to Étienne, it's worth it. I spread the cost over two credit cards and max one out in the process.

Even though it's only been five days since I left Étienne, it feels as

though it's been an eternity. My mind frantically whispers that I need to go to Charleston. Not today or tomorrow but yesterday. Time has been wasted, and my overwrought heart doesn't want to lose any more.

After I'm done packing, I creep downstairs as I used to when I was a teenager trying to sneak back in after curfew. Only this time, I'm an adult who can do what I want and there's no secrecy to what I'm doing. I merely want privacy to go through the family photo albums, and if I do that around any of my family members, they'll bombard me with questions.

Best to do this when they're all sleeping.

All the lights are off downstairs. There's only the sound of the grandfather clock ticking in the dining room and the refrigerator quietly humming in the kitchen to keep me company. It's slightly eerie.

I'm making my way toward the living room when I spot a thin slice of light slipping through the cracked door of my dad's office. I hear the murmurs of two voices inside, so I approach the door and peer into the office.

"The bitch jacked up the fucking price again," Bradley says bitterly.

"How much is it now?"

"Three point five million."

Ian whistles. "Damn." He leans forward and toys with the Newton's Cradle on Dad's desk. "She's smart though. Everyone knows that land is hard to come by in McLean. She's going to use that to her advantage."

"But three point five? It's too much."

"She's claiming that the price is so high because of the house."

Bradley snorts and slams a fist against the desk before he leans back in his chair. "I'm going to get that land."

"Good luck with that. A lot of people are bidding for it."

"I'm going to win," Bradley says with steely determination.

The conversation shifts to a different subject. I slowly back away from

the door and walk toward the living room, trying to piece together my brothers' conversation. What land are they talking about, and why do they want it so badly?

I make a mental note to ask Ian later and turn on a lamp on the end table. It fills the room with a soft glow. There're two living rooms in the house: the first one immediately to the left of the front door and this one close to the kitchen. My brothers and I call the first living room the "palace of perfection" because nothing is ever touched. No one goes in there, so the vacuum lines the maid creates each week? They stay there. The one I'm sitting in now is lived in: worn-out carpet, leather sofa that has small indents from where one of us favors a particular spot, blankets that are used but never folded.

Mom stores all the photo albums in the entertainment center, directly beneath the TV. When I open up the cabinet and see the stacks of photo albums, I remember just how meticulous my mom is about preserving photographs. It takes me two trips to grab all the photo albums, sit on the floor cross-legged, and start the tedious task of going through each one.

As I skim through the photographs, I think of what I read about Belgrave. So many things stood out to me, but the one sentence I can't stop thinking about is how Asa Calhoun bought Belgrave after Livingston died. I've always been suspicious of him. That he ended up owning their land is convenient for him.

And that photo of my great-great-grandpa with his wife? It looked like Asa's back, so now I'm searching for Asa in the family photos to see if my outrageous theory is correct. There are photos of my parents' wedding, their senior pictures, photos of them as children, and even pictures of their parents as children, but no pictures of Teddy. What's more interesting is that in the photos of the De Valc side, my mom's family, they're all smiling and happy. They seem to genuinely love each other. The Parows though, they're solemn.

Rarely smiling and never seeming to have fun. I never once thought anything about the fact that I never saw my grandpa Parow. I assumed that was normal behavior.

My mom once explained to me that grandpa Parow didn't know how to show affection because his father never showed him affection.

Ian walks into the room, drops heavily onto the sofa, and stares at the stack of photo albums beside me. "Isn't it a little late to take a walk down memory lane?"

"Isn't it a little late to be working?" I retort.

He smirks. "Touché."

Neither of us says a word as I turn the page of the photo album. I scan the pictures at lightning speed. This is photo album number three that is filled with nothing but pictures of my brothers and me growing up. I know some albums are solely filled with great-grandparents and relatives. At least I thought they were.

"What are you looking for?"

"I'm trying to find a photo of our great-great-grandpa Teddy."

"Why?"

"Because."

Ian sighs and sits up. "Does this have anything to do with the photo Will said you were obsessing over?"

His comment makes me narrow my eyes at him. I knew it was only a matter of time until Ian brought up what Will said to them.

"No," I lie. "It doesn't. I was up in the attic helping Mom, and I stumbled across a photo of our great-great-grandpa. Now I'm curious to see if there are any more of him."

Ian mulls over my reply then shrugs. "All right. Do you want some help?"

"Sure." I hand him a photo album. "The photo I saw of him today was of

his back, so just look for a really, really, really old photo.”

“Really, really, really old photo. Got it.”

The two of us become quiet, with only the sound of the crisp pages turning. Bradley appears in the doorway, rubbing his eyes. We both look up at him.

“Are you heading home?” Ian asks.

Bradley runs his hands through his hair and sighs. “I should be working, but I’m exhausted. I need some rest.” He opens his mouth to say more, but he hesitates as his eyes meet mine before they veer back to Ian. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?”

Ian’s oblivious to Bradley’s reluctance and shrugs. “Sounds good.”

Bradley gives me a half-hearted wave goodbye and leaves. The minute the front door slams, I abandon the photo album and sit next to Ian on the couch. “What was that about?”

Ian avoids eye contact and continues to scan the photo album in his lap. “Don’t know.”

“Liar.”

My brother exhales loudly and closes the album.

“Seriously. Tell me what’s going on,” I say. “I’m not blind. I know something’s up with Bradley.”

Ian doesn’t say a word.

“Is he sick?”

He snorts. “Definitely not.”

“In trouble?”

At that, Ian hesitates.

I pounce. “Tell me. He’s my brother too. I deserve to know if he’s in danger.”

Ian looks at me from the corner of his eye. “Did you ever think he’s

trying to protect you?”

I throw my hands in the air. “Protect me? What are we, in the mafia?”

“No. But that might be a better scenario,” Ian mutters.

“Ian. Start talking. Now.”

My jovial Ian becomes somber. “You know how our family takes pride in Ravenwood, right?”

I nod.

“And you know Bradley took over running Ravenwood after Uncle Jeff retired last year?”

Again, I nod.

“Well, what you don’t know is that when Uncle Jeff handed over the reins to Bradley, the company was in bad shape. Bradley has spent the past year trying to pull Ravenwood out of the muck.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “How much trouble is the farm in?”

“It’s in big trouble. Bradley already has creditors barraging him daily. He has restructured the company and found some more investors. Dad is on board with the idea that if we buy the Carradine land, we’ll have the opportunity to add more horses. And more land equals a better chance for equestrians to visit Ravenwood.”

Quickly, their conversation from earlier clicks into place.

“And Constance Carradine isn’t keen on selling their property to us,” I say.

“Bingo. Other companies and real estate investors are bidding for the land.”

In local media, the Carradine home has been dubbed “The House of Horrors.” What no one knew about the perfect Carradine family until a few years ago is that Naomi was sexually assaulted by her father, Michael, from a

young age. Three and a half years ago, she shot her dad in the family home in self-defense, but details of his death have always been murky. While the community tried to reconcile the fact that something so heinous was happening directly beneath their noses, all I could think was that Naomi's strange behavior as a child and being admitted to Fairfax suddenly made sense.

Naomi's mother, Constance, moved out of their five-thousand-square-foot mansion months after the murder. It's been for sale ever since. No one will go near that house with a ten-foot pole, but the land? Their land is an entirely different story. Everyone wants it and now there seems to be an all-out bidding war with no end in sight.

"But if Bradley is finding more investors with creditors nipping at his heels doesn't that put the farm in more debt?"

"Not if his plan to purchase the Carradine land goes as he plans."

"I don't know much about running a farm the size of Ravenwood, but a lot is at stake and Bradley is taking a big leap. Wouldn't it be easier to forget about the Carradine land altogether?"

"It would," Ian agrees. "But once Bradley gets his mind set on something he won't give up until it's his."

I lean in. "Why did you say that so bitterly? I don't understand what Bradley's doing, but he's trying."

Ian sighs and gives me a look filled with pity. "Serene, our family doesn't fight fair. We can be cutthroat, and when money is on the line, we'll do next to anything to get it." He looks away. "Greed can do that to you."

In the past, Ravenwood has had its up and downs, but our family views those problems with a hint of pride because we came out on the other side okay. And to be honest, I've always felt that way. But the way Ian describes our work ethic and business decisions makes it all seem insidious and wrong.

Ian slaps his hands on his knees and stands. "I better get going. It's getting late."

"Wait!" I jump off the couch. "I have an important question to ask you."

He groans. "Can it wait 'till tomorrow?"

"No."

Ian shrugs and nods toward the door. "Then ask me as I walk to my car."

I slip on my shoes and glance behind me to make sure no one's following us. When the front door softly closes behind me, I take a deep breath. Fine mist appears in front of my face before it disappears.

"What's up?" Ian asks.

"I booked a plane ticket to Charleston for tomorrow," I say in one giant rush as we walk down the pathway.

My brother's head whips in my direction. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. I booked the ticket a few hours ago."

For once, Ian seems at a loss for words.

"I got a call from Liz about a beautiful antique clock she found online," I lie. "She knows I have some free time on my hands and asked if I would go there to look at it."

This isn't a fabrication I made up on the spot. I knew I couldn't just up and leave my family the day after Christmas without a valid excuse. And this one is at least a bit plausible. I just have to cross my fingers that no one talks to Liz to confirm the story.

"And you have to fly all the way there to see it?" he asks skeptically.

"Well, you, Bradley, and Will thought it was a great idea I take a 'break' from work and now I'm bored out of my mind."

My brother goes silent. But that's not a bad thing. It means he's mulling over the situation.

"I only need you to drop me off at the airport," I add.

Ian narrows his eyes at me. “What time?”

At that, I hesitate. “Four in the morning.”

“Four in the morning?” he gripes.

“That’s the only flight they had available!”

Ian stares off to the side, muttering that four in the morning is too fucking early to get up. I stand there and don’t say a word. He hasn’t said no yet, and that means there’s still hope.

“It’s only a seventeen-minute drive to DC. Twenty tops,” I say quietly.

He closes his eyes. His shoulders slump as he takes in a deep a breath. When he opens his eyes and looks at me, I know that he’ll agree before he utters the words. “Fine. I’ll take you.”

I give him a big smile and fight the urge to hug him. “Thank you. I appreciate this.”

Ian shrugs and glances at his car keys. “Do Mom and Dad know you’re going?”

“No. Why would they?”

“I figure they might notice that you’re gone for a few days.”

“I’ll let them know where I’m going. But I’m an adult. I don’t need to ask for permission to take a trip.”

“I know that. It’s just…” Ian glances toward the house for a few seconds before he looks back at me. “Don’t you think this is a little extreme? Especially considering it’s the holidays. Families typically like to spend time together then.”

“For some people, this may seem extreme. But it’s just a short trip. Two or three days at most. You have to understand that a lot of times, you just can’t wait with antiques. They’re here today and gone tomorrow,” I say with a touch of sorrow and whimsy.

Ian stares at me for a long moment. I stare right back, refusing to look

away first. I've always been close to Ian. Growing up, there was nothing I couldn't tell him. When I had a problem, he always had a solution. I want nothing more than to tell him the truth, but not so long ago, I naively believed that if I told Will, he would trust me. That obviously didn't happen, and now I'm cautious about how much of the truth I tell and who I tell it to. Because no matter how close I am to someone, the chances of them trusting me are incredibly low.

Ian exhales heavily. "I'll be here at three thirty. Be ready, okay?"

I nod readily. "Thank you again."

"Yeah, yeah." He waves off my words as he walks toward his car. "See you bright and early, Se."



BEFORE I GO to bed, I open my laptop. I've researched all the information I possibly can about Étienne and his family, but I never typed in my name. It's a long shot, expecting to get any results with the name Serene Lacroix. I take my time typing my name in the search bar, even though my heart is begging me to hurry up.

I click Enter and wait. It took only a few seconds for info on Étienne to appear. The same can't be said for this search, and I'm close to closing my laptop and calling it a night when the page finally loads. As I scroll down, I see an Ancestry.com link with Serene Lacroix. My birth date April 6, 1883.

Eagerly, I click on the link, but the page goes all white. *Object not found!* It reads, with *Error 404* at the bottom.

I go back and click on the link over and over and over. Each time I hope that the link will somehow magically work, yet it doesn't.

But seeing the name Serene Lacroix and my birthdate instead of the Old Serene's brings a smile to my face because it means something has changed. Time has been altered in some form. There's still a chance for me to find a way back. It solidifies my decision to travel to Charleston.

I log onto Ancestry, but it takes me a few minutes to figure out what to do. I start with my family tree, beginning with myself, Ian, Bradley, and my parents. In a matter of seconds, there's a small green leaf on the right-hand corner of my dad's name. I click on the leaf and see the hints they have for me. Because my dad is still living, there's very little information on him—just past addresses, a phone number, and an Ancestry family tree. Quickly I figure out that it's my mom's family tree. She has far more info on the De Valc side, but she did work on the Parow side too. I see my dad's parents, Gregory Cain Parow and Olivia Austen. Gregory had three siblings Robert, Anna, and David. All of them have passed away.

Gregory's parents were Henry Cain Parow and Ella Kubrick. Henry also had three siblings: William, Mary, and Samuel. Samuel was stillborn, and Mary died in infancy. William died in 1942. I look closely between the birthdates of William and Henry. Henry's birthdate is October 3, 1912. William's is June 16, 1913. Eight months between the two of them.

Now, I've never been pregnant and I don't know much about babies, but I do know that the typical pregnancy is nine months. I check to see if Henry has a different mother, but he doesn't. His father and my great-great-grandpa are Theodore "Teddy" Cain Parow. He was married to Clara Beckett.

Theodore's date of birth is March 8, 1879. He died on January 2, 1936, in Virginia. There's no location for his birth. Clara was born on August 24, 1883. She died November 20, 1960. She was born and raised in Virginia. They married on September 8, 1912.

I search for more information on Teddy, but there's next to nothing

available on him. I find his death certificate. It's oddly exciting yet bizarre to be looking at a death certificate. Makes me feel as though I'm on some crime TV show. His death certificate shows the chief cause of death was a heart attack. The informant was Henry. It lists his address as Ravenwood's location. For Teddy's parents, there's just the word *Unknown*.

Frustrated, I move away from my family tree and type Asa's name in the search bar. My outlandish theory is debunked when I see that he lived and died in Charleston, South Carolina. Married a woman named Eleanor. They had two girls: Josephine and Cordelia.

I wonder if Nat hadn't died so soon, would she've ever gotten the chance to tell Asa how she felt about him.

The chances of Asa being the man in the photo or my great-great-grandpa are incredibly slim.

The second person I look up is that douchebag, Johnathan Whalen. He never married or had any kids. But the interesting part? He relocated to Falls Church, Virginia, in 1914 and lived there until he died in 1922. He was only forty-two.

I don't believe he's related to me, but I find it interesting that he lived a mere fifteen minutes away from Ravenwood. What would bring him here?

Doubting myself, I grab the photo of Teddy and Olivia and stare hard at Teddy's back. That can't be Johnathan, can it?

I grab a notebook from my desk and write his name, underlining it three times before I go back to searching.

I try to look up Serene Lacroix again, but the link is still broken. So I try my fake parents from 1912, Frederick and Delia Quentin. Impatiently, I wait for the results, wondering whatever happened to them. But no results come up. "I'm sorry. We couldn't find what you were looking for," is all it says on the page.

Frowning, I switch over to Google and search for them, but no results show up. It's almost as if they didn't exist.

Impossible! But if I've learned anything from my journey through time, it's that nothing is impossible and everything is a lie.



twenty-seven

AT THREE THIRTY in the morning, I quietly shut the front door and make my way to Ian's car. He's sitting behind the wheel, staring at his phone. I place my luggage and laptop bag into the backseat and shut the door.

"What are you looking at?" I ask as I buckle up.

He puts his phone in the cup holder and stretches. "The amount of time it takes to get to the airport."

"It's not that long."

Ian snorts and puts the car in drive. "I'm trying to wake up. It's way too fucking early for this."

"Now that is something I have to agree with."

My anticipation for this trip is so unyielding that there was no possible way I could sleep last night. I might've gotten one hour of sleep at the most. My eyelids are heavy, but my heart is like a jackhammer. Nervously, I toy with the strap of my purse.

“I know you already told me, but what time does your flight leave?”

“Five,” I reply.

My itinerary is tattooed on my brain. Flight leaves from Reagan National Airport at five in the morning. Lands in Charleston at 6:41 a.m. After I check into my hotel, the search will begin, starting with Belgrave.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Ian says out of nowhere as he pulls onto the road.

“There’s nothing to worry about. It’s a quick trip. That’s it,” I lie, because if I have any say in the matter, going to Charleston will lead me back to Étienne.

“Have you told Mom?”

“Not yet,” I say as I gaze out the window.

“Serene, you—”

“I’m going to,” I cut in.

“When? Right before you get on your flight?”

“Honestly? Yes. That’s the plan.”

Ian groans. “And then they’re going to grill me and ask how long I’ve known about this little impromptu trip of yours.”

“It’s not a big deal. I’ll text them before the flight takes off and when I get settled in my hotel, I’ll call Mom and explain that I’ll be back within a few days.”

Ian’s grip on the steering wheel tightens. Typically, he’s pretty laid-back and relaxed. To see him so edgy is strange.

“I know you can’t be this upset about me going to Charleston. Something else is bothering you.”

He doesn’t say a word, and I know no amount of prodding will get him to open up. I stare out the window as the world flies past me in a blur of onyx. At this hour, the roads are all but empty, making the ride to the airport go by

faster. Occasionally a car will pass by and their headlights flash across my face for a second, making me squint.

My legs bounce up and down. I don't know if this trip will be useless, but it's filled me with hope and anxiety and fear. Fear of the unknown. In the past twenty-four hours, I've uncovered so much information on Étienne family's and my own. I feel as though the moment I time traveled to 1912, a domino line was created and the moment I came back to my own time, a single domino fell. Now they're all dropping. The pace is increasing. Will it stop when I arrive in Charleston? I don't know.

I glance at the navigation system. "Please tell me you're not taking Old Dominion Drive. That will add an extra fifteen minutes to the trip."

"I'm not taking that route. I'm taking the parkway, so relax."

I take a deep breath, rest my forehead against the window, and close my eyes.

"Can you stop bouncing your legs? You're practically shaking the car," Ian says.

Immediately I stop and open one eye. "Sorry. I'm a little nervous."

"I would've never guessed," Ian replies, deadpan. He glances at me from the corner of his eye. "Are you worried about flying?"

"No," I say without making eye contact.

Street lamps begin to line the highway. Up ahead, I see the airport. The bright lights of all the buildings illuminate the pitch-black sky. The once-empty roads become filled with cars, buses, and taxis all going in the same direction.

Ian slows down as he switches to the drop-off lane for Terminal C. We pass shuttle buses. I look down at the lower levels and see where people can park their cars. Ian pulls into the drop-off lane and turns on his blinkers. All around us are tired people dragging their luggage, businessmen and women

with their coffees in one hand and on a mission to get to their gates. It's funny how while most of the city is asleep, airports are always alive and busy.

Before I get out of the car, I hesitate. *Are you going to do this?* my mind whispers.

I don't have another choice. I'm all out of options. All signs point to Charleston. With a sigh, I get out of the car and reach into the backseat for my luggage.

Ian steps out of the car and looks at me over the hood. "We can go back home, you know. Say the word, Se."

I sigh and sling my purse over my shoulder. "I have to do this."

He walks around the car, hands tucked in his pockets. "I'll see you later."

But will he?

If I have it my way, I'll find a way back to Étienne. The chances are incredibly slim, but this might be the last time I see Ian. All of a sudden, I hug him. I know it takes him by surprise because he hesitates before he pats me on the back.

When we separate, I give his shoulder a quick pat. "Thank you for taking me so early in the morning. I appreciate it."

He shrugs and musses up my hair. "No problem. You now owe me though."

I smile faintly as he inches toward his car. "Absolutely." Grabbing my luggage, I turn toward the airport.

"Have a safe flight!" he calls.

Looking over my shoulder, I give him a small wave as he gets into his car and drives away. I can hear the whoosh of jet engines as planes take off or slowly descend. A lady's voice on the intercom announces the final boarding call for a flight. My grip on my purse strap tightens as I walk through the

sliding glass doors.

Once, I drifted into Étienne's life, and in the process, wandered into love.
Can I do it a second time?

I'm about to find out.



twenty-eight

I'VE NEVER BEEN to Charleston. Not in the present day, at least.

Some of the adrenaline I felt on the way to the airport faded on takeoff. I even took a small nap. The second the stewardess announces that we were getting ready to land though, I peer out of the window. All I see is blue water surrounding land. We gradually descend, and the roads resemble long black ribbons. Cars that look like tiny specks begin to take shape. Buildings and houses look so small, as if they can fit in the palm of my hand.

I sit up straight and buckle up as the plane inches closer the tarmac. My hands curl around the armrests when the wheels touch down. I breathe a sigh of relief as the plane taxis toward a gate.

I'm here. I'm finally in Charleston, where it all began.

Everything is not smooth sailing from here. I wait a good thirty minutes at baggage claim as the luggage carousel delivers everyone's bags but mine. Finally, I find my suitcase, then I have to navigate my way through the

airport to find the rental car station. It takes me a while to find my rental car, a Nissan Altima, then I toss my bags in the trunk and get on the road.

In any other given situation, I would be incredibly nervous to drive in a city I'm not familiar with, but my memories remind me I've been here before and give me a false sense of security. A lot of time has passed since then though. Some people might say it's a whole new world. But as I keep up with traffic and follow the GPS to the hotel, I feel closer to Étienne, I know deep in my heart this was the right choice.

Checking into the hotel is a piece of cake. I drop my luggage off in my room and shoot a quick text to Ian that I made it here safely. I have seven missed calls from my mom and two voice mails. I take the coward's way out and text her that I'm sorry I had to leave, but I'll be home in a few days. I shut off my phone. Placing my hands on my hips, I exhale and lovingly gaze at the perfectly made bed. My body is shutting down. I want nothing more than to crawl beneath those sheets and fall asleep, but I can't. I only have a few days here. I can't waste a single second.

I grab my cross-body purse and head to the front desk. A woman whose name tag says Karen greets me with enough enthusiasm for ten people. "Do you have any information on the Belgrave Plantation?"

Karen's brows furrow. "Belgrave? Do you mean Drayton Hall?"

I shake my head. I don't know how it's possible to mix up Belgrave with Drayton. "No. I mean Belgrave."

"Hmm. I've never heard of it. But if you're interested in touring plantations, we have a wonderful selection." She proceeds to hand me brochures that show off the impressive gardens at Magnolia Plantation, the Drayton Hall she mentioned. Middleton Place, and a handful of locations that are all stunning, but certainly not Belgrave.

I hold on to the brochures so I don't seem like a bitch and try again.

“Are you sure you have the right name?” Karen asks. “Because I’m not familiar with that plantation. Even so, the chances of any tours operating the day after Christmas are very low.”

“Don’t listen to Karen. She’s new,” a lady to her left chimes in. “I’ve heard of Belgrave.”

Karen and I stare at her. Her name tag says Marilyn, and unlike Karen, she appears detached and somber. She looks younger than me. Probably got this job because it pays when she’d rather be anywhere else but here. Doesn’t matter. She could sprout three horns and claim to know where the portal to hell is and I wouldn’t care. What’s important is that another person just acknowledged Belgrave.

“You have?” I ask anxiously.

She gives me a dispassionate glance. “Yeah. My mom is into all that history stuff. She was, like, talking about it nonstop when it opened up for tours years ago,” she says in the most monotone voice I’ve ever heard.

On the website, it said Belgrave was open for tours today. Even so, I ask the bored girl just to make sure. My brief conversation with Karen has me doubting my info from the website.

She nods. “Yeah. It’s open.”

I give her my brightest smile. “Thank you! That’s all I need to know.”

“Have a good day!” Karen says.

“You too,” I call.

Roads and addresses have significantly changed, and if I didn’t have my navigation system, I’d be screwed. I type in the address for Belgrave that I found on Google: 1258 Ashley River Road. It comes up with a route that will take about twenty-five minutes.

“Turn left on Market Street,” a British woman’s voice says.

I tightly grip the steering wheel as I try to pay attention to her directions

and keep up with the flow of traffic. I want to gawk at everything around me—the buildings, the roads, everything—because so much has stayed the same, yet so much has changed.

“In 0.44 quarter miles turn left on Calhoun Street.”

The name Calhoun gives me goose bumps. I may be wrong about Asa. He may have nothing to do with what happened to Étienne, but I don’t know. At this point, everyone is a suspect to me.

Traffic becomes heavier as I merge onto the freeway. When I travel across the bridge, I see the Ashley River to my left and right, with numerous sailing boats dockside. I forget all about Asa and focus on Étienne; I’m getting closer to Belgrave.

I make a right on Exit 1, toward Summerville. Traffic becomes lighter as the road tapers off into four lanes. Commercial buildings and new subdivisions are everywhere. The only things that indicate I’m going to the right location are the beautiful live oaks flanking the road.

I know I’m inching toward Belgrave when the road becomes two lanes and I see a sign for Old St. Andrew’s Parish Church. My excitement grows.

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel. Buildings are becoming replaced by clusters of trees that threaten to reach out toward the road. I make a right onto a narrow road, where signs warn drivers to slow down, then up ahead, I see Belgrave. Or what’s left of her.

If it weren’t for the car behind me, I would stop and get out, because at first, it’s almost unrecognizable. The pictures couldn’t prepare me for this. The one thing that stands tall and proud are the Corinthian columns on the front porch. I keep driving, following the weaving road through the forest. A sign says the parking lot is to the left.

For the day after Christmas, you’d think this place would be a ghost town, but it’s relatively busy. Grabbing my purse, I step out of my car then pluck

my coat from the backseat, even though I probably don't need it. The air is dense, giving the illusion it's almost springtime instead of the heart of winter.

I stare at the live oaks and make a slow turn. I'm trying to find something familiar, but I think I'm too far away from Belgrave for that. Up ahead is a small green building that has WELCOME CENTER written above the door. A sign near the pathway has the hours of operation.

Stepping inside the building, I'm bombarded by memorabilia of Belgrave in its prime: coffee mugs, shirts, hoodies, blankets, cutlery, magnets, postcards, calendars, and coasters. Hell, there're even Christmas ornaments. There are books by local authors that center around the Lacroix family, and I flip through one of them. In the middle are colored photographs of Belgrave and Étienne's grandparents on his mother's side. I stop when I see a photo of Étienne. His hair is shorter, and his face holds a youthfulness that makes me think the picture was taken before his parents passed away. He's unsmiling, and his brows are furrowed. I smirk because his body language screams unrest. I can imagine he was counting down the seconds until the photographer was finished and he could leave.

I put the book back on the shelf and head toward the front desk, where I see a display of signature Belgrave candles. I hold one candle to my nose and breathe in the scent of wild honeysuckle.

"May I help you?" says a woman behind the counter. She's heavysset, with graying hair and a Southern drawl. The sound is so comforting, I'm tempted to rest my head on her shoulder and tell her all my problems.

Instead, I put the candle up and ask when the next tour of Belgrave will begin.

She smiles, revealing a small gap between her two front teeth. "Child, you got here just in time. The final tour of the day starts in fifteen minutes."

Smiling in relief, I pay the twenty-five-dollar admission fee. She hands

me my ticket, and I move out of the way for the next people in line, who are complaining—none too quietly—that the cost of tickets is too high.

My feet crunch on the gravel as I head toward Belgrave, holding my ticket as though it's a hundred-dollar bill. I notice the black wrought-iron gates around the acres of land. Probably to keep out any future vandals.

Up ahead, a cluster of people linger around the gated driveway, and my heartbeat thunders in my ears. In my mind, I can vividly picture those gates being opened by servants and promptly closed after a car drives through.

“Excuse me, ma’am.” A lady with a clipboard in her hand taps my shoulder. With her auburn hair cut around her shoulders and her Belgrave Plantation shirt tucked into her khaki pants, she looks like the perfect little tour guide. Her chin juts out as she gives me a brittle smile. “The line is to the left. The tour will begin in ten minutes.”

This lady, who according to her name tag is Morgan, thinks she knows so much about this place. If there were any other way into Belgrave, I would ignore her and go about my business, but I'm desperate to be next to anything that Étienne touched and this stupid woman can't take that away from me. I nod and walk toward the line of people.

I make my way to the back and stop behind a family of three.

“It's tragic, isn't it?” the woman next to me says. She has a camera hanging from her neck and a sleeping baby in Bjorn carrier.

A man who I assume is her husband stands next to her, flipping through the brochure with boredom.

I nod and go back to staring at the house, but the lady doesn't take the hint. She holds out a postcard of Belgrave in its glory days. “Look how beautiful it once was. It makes you wonder what happened to it.”

“Time, I suppose,” I say sadly.

The lady continues, “I mean, how could the owners let it slip into such a

state of ruin?”

My head snaps in her direction. “They would’ve done everything possible to keep this place alive.”

The woman veers back a little and quickly looks away. She seems like a nice person, and she probably thinks I’m insane. Not that I can blame her. I talked as if I had a personal relationship with the owners.

And I do. But here, in this time, that’s considered impossible.

Looking around and seeing all the people snapping pictures with their iPhones and digital cameras, I realize this might’ve been a bad idea. Can I listen to the tour guide talk while I stare at the ruins of Belgrave as though I’ve never walked through those doors? As though my hand has never glided up that mahogany banister?

Honestly, I don’t think I can, but what choice do I have?

For the next few minutes, I glance at my watch a dozen times.

Morgan, the tour guide, waits until it’s twelve on the dot to step forward. She clears her throat and pastes on the perkier smile known to mankind. “Good afternoon, everyone. I’m Morgan, and I’ll be your tour guide today.”

I raise my hand.

Morgan’s lips thin around the same time she narrows her eyes. Not even two minutes into the tour and this lady hates me. “Yes?”

“Which rooms will we be able to see?”

“Unfortunately, structural issues make touring the inside impossible. Come spring, we hope to have at least one of the rooms on the first floor ready to walk through. We will be touring the grounds around the plantation where you are all more than welcome to take pictures of Belgrave. There are acres and acres of land on this ground, but unfortunately, we’ll only see a portion of it.”

While the people around me nod enthusiastically about what they’re

going to see, Morgan pulls out an old skeleton key and slides it into the gate lock. I swear she's deliberately slow for my benefit. When the lock clicks open, Morgan, with the help of a tourist, pushes back the gates. They creak loudly, the sound ominous. It sends a chill down my spine and makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand.

People filter in through the gates. It takes all my control not to shove through the crowd to the front of the line. But before I walk through the gates, I stop next to the plaque. It has a shortened version of the information I read online. Directly above the plaque is another oval-shaped plaque with EST. 1850 in the middle and the words "Belgrave Plantation" around it.

When everyone is finally through, Morgan announces above the idle chatter, "We'll start the tour here to admire the grounds"—she pointedly makes eye contact with me—"and please try to save all questions until the end of the tour."

Bitch.

Once I tune out Morgan's voice, the walk up the driveway is one word—peaceful. The Spanish moss and old oak trees are still where they belong, and for a second, I feel as though I'm truly back in 1912. Some people stop to take pictures or pull out brochures and compare the present to the past. I don't need the brochure. I see the present-day Belgrave, but my mind superimposes the Belgrave from the past. The two integrate, and I shiver at the juxtaposition of the images.

As Morgan drones on about the beautiful landscape, I raise my hand. She pretends to ignore me. It only makes me lift my hand higher until I'm on my tiptoes.

She sighs. "Yes?"

"Whatever happened to the slave quarters?"

"I don't believe there were ever slave quarters on Belgrave property."

“Yes, there were,” I argue. If she’s going to give tours of Belgrave, she needs to know the history. The good and bad. “Before Adrien sold off his shares of the sugar plantation, there used to be slave quarters. There was even a general store on the property. It was near the pond.” Pivoting, I try to find the direction of the pond, but I have no idea where it could be now.

“Why did he sell?” the woman next to me asks.

“Well, Adrien wanted to focus on the shipping company, but if you ask me, I think he got out while he was still on top. Belgrave already had one year of bad crops,” I explain.

“Smart move.”

I nod. “I know, right?”

“Moving on,” Morgan says, her voice a high pitch.

As we inch closer to Belgrave, the woman leans in. “Are you from here?”

“No. I’m just visiting.”

“You sure know a lot about this place.”

“I, uh, had to do a history project on Belgrave once,” I lie.

She nods and moves ahead with the rest of the group.

The closer we get, the quicker my heart beats. I have to stop myself from breaking out into a full run.

Morgan stops the tour directly in front of the circular drive. The fountain is long gone. The shrubs that once surrounded it are still here. They haven’t been trimmed, but I think it would be odd to have pristine landscape against such a tragic backdrop.

Belgrave was once so vibrant, the stucco a pristine white and the windows gleaming in the sunlight. Now the stucco is gray from harsh weather and chipped off in some areas. Vines adhere to the foundation. Brambles surround the once-beautiful porch. The left portion of the porch sags. One stair railing has fallen off. All four of the Corinthian columns are

cracked.

Morgan leads the tour toward the porch, and I crane my neck, trying to see if I can see the derelict portion of the east wing. It's impossible to tell from here.

When I read that the total cost to restore Belgrave was four million, I thought it was a bit exaggerated, but now I see that so much needs to be done. It seems like an impossible task. It hurts to think Belgrave has become a thing of the past and chances are, no else will see it in all its glory again.

All too soon, the tour is over and we're walking down the long driveway. The people around me talk in excited whispers about what Belgrave once looked like, but all I can fixate on is that I gained nothing from this tour.

I'm no closer to Étienne. I swear the house has eyes and is looking at me. Every few seconds, I look over my shoulder at the imposing structure.

My heart tugs. It doesn't want me to leave.

Right now, I have to. I didn't spend all this money to come to Charleston only to give up on the first try. Come night time, I'm going to find a way into Belgrave. I'm going to walk through those rooms.

I'm going to try to find a way back to Étienne even if it kills me.



twenty-nine

HOURS LATER, I slowly walk along The Battery, taking everything in. A few puffy clouds that remind me of cotton balls shade the sun. It manages to peek out every so often, bathing me in a warm glow. If it weren't for the clouds, I wouldn't need my coat. A soft breeze brings in the scent of salt water.

Tourists walk along the unsteady promenade, stopping every so often to take pictures or admire the endless view of the water to their left and the palmettos lining the streets. It's beautiful, but I'm more enamored with the mansions to the right. They stand there, tall and imposing as ever. I smile sadly at them because they somehow survived time. Belgrave didn't.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel a bit defeated, but I still plan on breaking in tonight. I don't know how, but I'll find a way in.

I hurry across the road and walk past the row of mansions. Most are private residences, but I can see one is a bed-and-breakfast. Palm trees dot the

landscape. Most of the narrow homes have tilted porches, which I'm assuming is so water will fall off the side when it rains. Still, these homes reveal the glamour and sophistication that once was. I think that's what makes Charleston so alluring to people—it holds so many pieces of the past that the rest of the world has lost.

I make my way down the sidewalk, lost in thought. Soon, I stop in front of one of the beautiful mansions. It's not the grandest of them all, but it's probably the most well-kept. The siding looks freshly painted. Black shutters flank the windows.

Asa Calhoun's home stood the test of time.

Immaculate shrubs line the fence in front of the yard. I continue down the sidewalk but stop when I see the iron gates to the property are open. Its private property and I have no business walking through here, but I can't help myself; something is pushing me forward, beckoning me closer.

Ignoring the voice in my head that's telling me this is a bad idea, I step through the gate and into the backyard.

The brick pathway is as uneven as the cobblestone streets around Charleston. A large magnolia tree to my left shades half the yard. Wisteria vines are tangled throughout the fence surrounding the property. At this time of year, hardly any flowers are in bloom, but I can imagine how beautiful this backyard is during the springtime.

A fountain stands in the middle of the circular brick pathway. A lone swing hangs from a thick oak branch in the far corner of the yard. It sways gently in the breeze, squeaking slightly.

“It's a beautiful garden, isn't it?”

Jumping, I turn around and come face to face with an older woman leaning heavily on a cane. Her gray hair is pulled up into a loose bun. Wrinkles line her face, especially around her eyes and lips. But her blue eyes

hold a twinkle that not even time can steal.

“I’m sorry I’m trespassing.” I point toward the iron gate. “I’ll leave right now.”

She sighs before she holds up a hand. “Nonsense, child. You’re here now. Might as well get a tour.”

Rapidly, I blink. I was not expecting that. “A tour?”

“Of the grounds, of course. Not the house. I’m not that generous,” she says wearily.

I smile. “A tour would be nice. I was just thinking how beautiful this place must be the springtime.”

I follow her deeper into the backyard. She moves slowly, but that’s okay. It gives me time to inspect her from the corner of my eye. She has to be one of Asa’s descendants. I want to say daughter, but that might be a reach.

“Yes, it is,” she says. “Once the camellias, azaleas, and hydrangeas are in full bloom, it truly is a sight to behold. Of course, they come at different seasons, but I prefer it that way.”

I wait for her to give me more info or point at something I don’t notice (because isn’t that the point of a tour?) Instead, she heads toward a small secluded spot in the far corner of this private paradise. White wicker patio furniture, shaded by the live oaks, centers around a wicker coffee table. I imagine her placing trays filled with delicious food and tea on the surface as her friends and or family talked and laughed. A good distance from the furniture sits a white, weather-beaten rocking chair. Only minutes in the presence of this woman, but I can easily envision her being someone who prefers to sit and watch everything so she misses nothing. She sits and she leans her cane against the side table.

She gestures to the seat next to her. “Sit.”

I sit and stare at her expectantly. Boldly, she stares back. Maybe it’s my

mind playing tricks on me, but I see Asa's steely determination in her posture.

Shaking my head, I hold out my hand. "I'm sorry. Where are my manners? I'm Serene Parow."

"Cordelia Rafferty."

My heart skips a beat. When I looked up Asa, I remember seeing the name Cordelia. Resting my elbows on my knees, I angle my body toward her. "You wouldn't happen to be one of Asa Calhoun's daughters, would you?"

She looks momentarily shocked before she nods. "Yes. He was my daddy," she replies in her lilting Charleston accent.

"I was doing some family research. His name came up."

She smiles faintly. "Ah, yes. During his time, he was very active in Charleston."

"Yes, he was," I reply quietly.

Cordelia still hears me though. Her blue eyes carefully assess me. "How did my daddy's name come up in your research?"

I can't blame her for being suspicious. If some stranger came up to me and knew things about one of my family members, I'd want to know how they knew them.

"I have a family member who married into the Lacroix family. In old letters, it was mentioned that Asa Calhoun was a friend of the family." That technically isn't a lie, but it's a stretch to say it's the truth. "Did your father ever mention the Lacroixes?"

A nostalgic smile appears on Cordelia's face as she leans back in her chair. "Yes, he did. Frequently."

My heart races so fast, I can barely think straight. I have to take a deep breath before I keep talking. "Did you ever meet Étienne, Livingston, or Nat?"

Her smile slightly fades. “I was born in 1920, many years after the fire.”

“Oh,” I say, deflated.

“However, I did hear stories about the Lacroix family. And I saw photos of them.” Cordelia stares out into the distance. “And of the girl too.”

“Nathalie?” I ask.

She nods. “My daddy was sweet on her. She was a lovely girl, that one.”

Oh, if Nat could hear this. Her life would’ve been made.

“Why didn’t he tell her how he felt?”

Cordelia veers back over my question, arching a single brow. I’m positive she’s going to tell me that story time is over and to please leave, but she doesn’t.

“My father said one of her brothers put a stop to him tellin’ her how he felt.”

If anyone, it was probably Étienne. Too protective for his own damn good, I want to say. But I can’t. So I settle for a small smile.

“My oldest daughter is named Nathalie,” Cordelia confesses.

“It’s a pretty name,” I say.

Cordelia nods and continues to rock back and forth. “Momma and Daddy married a year after the fire hit Belgrave. He was crushed by their deaths. Suspected foul play.”

At her words, I sit on the edge of my seat. “He did?”

Cordelia stops rocking and gives me a hard stare. “Because of where they discovered the bodies. Nathalie was in her room. Étienne was in his office. The front and back doors were locked.”

“And Ben would’ve been by the front door,” I say before I stop myself.

Cordelia arches a brow.

“Through letters, I know Ben was a servant for the Lacroixs,” I quickly explain.

She nods. “The official cause was an electric fire, but Daddy was never convinced. He bought Belgrave, ya know. After that last boy died in the war. Oh, what’s his name? Langston? Landon?”

“Livingston,” I supply.

She points at me. “Livingston. Yes, that’s it. After he passed, Daddy purchased the home.”

“I read that somewhere. What made him do that?”

She shrugs a bony shoulder. “Didn’t want Belgrave fallin’ into the wrong hands. Planned on fixin’ it up. He always said that by the time I married, he would give Belgrave to me as a weddin’ present. Even though he sold Belgrave a few years before the Great Depression he had investments that had gone bad, leavin’ him no choice but to sell. He was mighty upset about losing the plantation.”

I nod, but I’m stuck on something she mentioned earlier. “You said that your dad suspected foul play? Did he think the Lacroix family had enemies?”

She’s quiet for so long, I begin to think she didn’t hear me. Or maybe she fell asleep? Finally, she replies. “Of course they had enemies. Especially Livingston.”

“Really?”

“No. Not him,” she replies. “The other one.”

“Étienne,” I say breathlessly.

“That one,” Cordelia confirms. “He had a lot of enemies. That’s what happens when you have money. Everyone wants a piece of it.”

I sit back in my chair, my mind reeling. For so long, I’ve assumed Asa was the one to look out for, and now I have no idea who to focus on. Suddenly, I sit upright. “Did your dad ever mention Johnathan Whalen?”

Cordelia snorts. “You mean the black sheep of the Whalen family? Child, everyone from around here knows about him. He tucked tail and ran to some

town in Virginia after he was caught embezzlin' money from his daddy." She gives me a knowing smirk I could see Asa doing many times. "It caused quite the scandal, but Daddy was relieved to see him go."

"What made him go to Virginia?"

"Who knows? It's hard to remember all the details. I think you're forgettin' you're speakin' with a ninety-seven-year-old," she teases gently. "But I think he had a friend who lived there."

"Who?" I've asked a lot of questions, but I can't help it. I've had so many questions and I never received answers. But here is Cordelia, giving me small tidbits that I'm dying to hear.

"I don't know," she answers slowly and narrows her eyes. "Who are you related to on the Lacroix side again?"

"Uhh..." I try to think if Étienne ever mentioned his father's relatives. Then I remember our conversation in the woods. Adrien had a sister! "I'm related to Christine Lacroix. She was Adrien's sister and lived in New York." Cordelia doesn't reply as I abruptly stand. "I should be going. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me."

"My pleasure, child. But be careful the next time you trespass on private property. There might not be an old, lonely lady waitin' to greet you," she says.

I smile. "I'll keep that mind."

I'll keep it mind... when I break into Belgrave tonight.



GROWING UP WITH brothers has many pitfalls.

But it also has its perks. Because of them, I had no limits. I could climb

trees and fight with the best of them. There was never time to stop and consider my fears because I was always trying to keep up with them.

That very same fearlessness is all around me even though I know that if I get caught, the repercussions won't be good. But I can feel time moving forward, and it's telling me I have no choice but to do this.

The clock on the dashboard flashes one in the morning. I take a deep breath, drop my keys into my pocket, double-check to make sure my phone is in my other coat pocket, that the skeleton key from Étienne's time is in my back pocket, and step out of the car. At this time of night, the plantation is eerily quiet. It's just Belgrave and me. I make sure to park a reasonable distance away from the property—who knows if there's security that tours the ground? Probably not, but it's better to be prepared. The souvenir shop is locked up with a "Sorry! We're closed" sign hanging in the middle of the door.

A pole light shines on the small building and across the parking lot. I make a mental note to steer clear of that entire area.

The temperature has cooled off considerably since this afternoon. I wrap my dark blue pea coat tightly around myself and trek toward Belgrave. The iron gates loom in front of me, taunting me to climb over them, but I bypass the front gates. One: It'd be too easy for someone to spot me there. Two: Those gates needed a key.

No, I go toward the second entrance I noticed earlier today. It's hidden by a cluster of trees and bushes, but I saw a staff member enter through that entrance without anyone noticing.

Twigs snap beneath my feet as I rush toward the gate. I keep my head down, focusing on my footsteps. Darkness has never scared me, but the cacophony of sounds make goose bumps break out across my arms. There's a stiff breeze that makes the skinny branches clash. The sound of twigs

snapping comes from a thicket of trees on my far left. As I fumble to turn on my flashlight, I tell myself it's just an animal.

Up ahead is the gate. I pick up my pace. When I reach it, I see that the gate is much older than I had anticipated. With the flashlight, I peer closer. It's more rust than wrought iron and looks like it's barely standing. Anyone else would tear it down, but the employees didn't because this could be an original piece of Belgrave. I close my eyes, trying to remember if I ever walked through these gates, but I can't recall.

Suddenly, I remember the skeleton key burning a hole in my back pocket. It's a master key, giving me access to any part of Belgrave. If this gate has stood the test of time and is an original part of Belgrave, then this key will work.

I reach into my pocket. My hand shakes as I slide the key into the lock. The lock mechanism creaks as I slowly turn it to the right. Holding my breath, I wait, and then I hear the sound of the lock unclicking. Breathing a sigh of relief, I tuck the key back into my pocket, walk through the gate and shut it behind me. There's no time to celebrate that I got through the gate; I'm out in the open for anyone to see. I run toward the front driveway, making sure to watch my step along the way.

The walk up the driveway takes longer than I expect, but that could be because I'm paranoid someone's going to catch me. After fifteen minutes of walking, the trees thin out and the circular drive appears. When I walk past where the fountain was, I swear I hear the faint sound of water drops sprouting in the air before they softly land in the fountain.

I shake my head. It's just my mind playing tricks on me.

Stopping in front of the steps, I tilt my head back and stare at the massive structure. The confidence I had wavers. What am I getting myself into?

I turn my flashlight back on, but that only reveals the sad state of

Belgrave. I won't let what it looks like in the present effect what I need to do though. Which is get back to Étienne. There might be some link in Belgrave that will bring me back to him.

Slowly, I walk up the steps. In the stillness of the night, my footsteps sound like gunshots. Aiming the flashlight at my feet to make sure I don't step on a dead animal or fall through a hole, I inch toward the front door. All the windows have been broken out. It would be pointless for the front door to be locked. My hand curls around the knob.

It creaks open. I shine my light into the foyer, and my heart drops to my stomach. The grandeur it once held is gone. Plaster dust coats where the marble floors once were. Now it's uneven wooden floors. Paint is chipping and peeling everywhere. I stop in the middle of the foyer, debating on where to go next.

The piano that was once in the front room is shoved up against the staircase. The keys are now yellow. Most of them are chipped off. One leg of the piano is broken, causing it to lean uncharacteristically to the left. In my mind, I can see Livingston playing. He looks over his shoulder and winks at me.

In a blink of an eye, the image dissolves.

I jerk the flashlight toward the reception area. This is the room where I finally convinced Étienne that I'd time traveled. I remember how beautiful the place once was. How light poured in through the windows, making the fireplace mantel practically sparkle. Now the hardwood floors are covered in so much grime they resemble a slate gray. Sections of the floor have caved in, making it impossible to enter. I shine the light on the fireplace. Pieces of marble are chipped off. Cobwebs are attached to every free area. I wouldn't be surprised if that's the only thing keeping the walls upright.

The chandelier that used to sparkle is gone. Wires now snake out of the

ceiling. Fissures run across the ceiling like veins, transporting the decay throughout the house. A huge hole is in the left-hand corner of the ceiling.

I step back and venture toward the once grand staircase. One side of the iron railing is gone, and the other is barely hanging on. The marble steps that once shined brightly are gone. In fact, only small pieces of the marble remain, leaving only plywood layered with dust and mouse droppings.

I have a better chance of falling through the steps than making it up to the second floor. Any sane person would turn around and not risk the chance. But I'm not sane.

I'm crazy. And I've been that way since the second I fell out of time and into my own life. I don't know if I can ever go back to being the Serene Parow I was.

Hesitantly, I curl my hand around the rickety railing and walk up the stairs. I ignore the layers of dust on the banister and dodge the steps that have fallen apart. I tell myself the crunching noises beneath my feet are only broken pieces of plaster and not the stairs disintegrating. My heart beats wildly, and when I finally make it up the stairs, my legs are shaking.

The historical society may have gotten its hands on Belgrave before it fell into complete collapse, but there's been so much water damage that when I glance at the ceiling, in some areas I can see up into the attic.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

Watching where I step, I make my way toward my room. The wall sconces have vanished. I'm willing to bet they were stolen by vandals. The pictures of Lacroix ancestors are long gone, replaced with graffiti. Most of the doors are open. I stop in a few doorways and peer inside. Of course there's no furniture left. The windows in nearly all the rooms are boarded up.

As I continue down the hall, I pass what I'm pretty sure are animal bones. I take one look and haul ass. When I turn the corner and reach the hallway

where my bedroom is, I breathe a sigh of relief. I know my room won't be the same—far from it—but I have to see it. Being in Belgrave isn't enough. I need to be in a space where I once rested my head.

The door to my room is half shut, and my nerves are practically shot as I open the door all the way. Like the front door, it creaks ominously. For the umpteenth time, I remind myself I'm the only person in this house right now and that ghosts do not exist.

But as I drag my flashlight across the room, I swear I feel eyes on me.

For a second, I see my room as I did for the first time: beautiful bed, gleaming wood floors, marble fireplace, and the vanity with rows of French perfume. I picture the windows open with a small breeze coming through.

In the present, tatters of old wallpaper barely hang onto the walls. I stand in the doorway and pick off a piece of wallpaper, surprised it doesn't disintegrate in my hands. The floors are in awful shape, with numerous holes. I know for a fact that if I step in there, I'll fall through. I stay in the doorway even though I'm dying to step inside. Layers of dust cover the fireplace mantel. The mirror that used to be above the fireplace is gone. The windows are boarded up. Crown molding has been stripped away. I lean heavily against the doorframe.

A part of me wants to scream that I lived here. In this room. In this home. And it doesn't matter how long I resided in 1912; all that matters is this place was and still is my home.

I rest my palms against the wall and lay my cheek against the filthy surface.

My heart aches to see Belgrave in such a sad state. I know Étienne's family would never let it come to this. They would've fought to make sure it stayed in the family, and if that weren't possible, they would've made sure to place it in good hands. They worked too hard ever to let this happen.

But then again, so many other Southern plantations have seen the same fate. No matter how derelict Belgrave is, there's an energy behind these walls. Something trapped and unseen refuses to let this place crumble.

I walk downstairs and head toward the east wing, where the fire started. The walls are charred reminders of that fire, and although it happened over one hundred years ago, I swear I can smell smoke. I turn the corner toward Étienne's office and stop short. Further down, the hall just disappears. A blue tarp covers the gaping hole. The wind picks up outside, making the tarp gape open and reveal the moon that's partially hidden by clouds.

I inch toward Étienne's office, hyperaware that only a few steps away, the floor gives away to a six-foot drop to the ground. The door to his office is long gone. Standing in the doorway, I peer inside with my flashlight. Like the rest of the house, his office is in terrible shape. The ceiling is sagging, close to caving in. The walls are charred black from the fire.

I should probably leave. I could search the rest of the house until sunrise, but I'm only going to come upon more and more destroyed rooms. The thought is depressing.

But I can't seem to make myself move. Closing my eyes, I pretend the room is how I once remembered it. That Étienne's behind his desk, going through paperwork. Depending on the season, the fireplace might have wood crackling and flames burning bright. Or maybe it's warm, and the windows are open, letting in a breeze.

He'll barely notice because his attention is focused on work. Everything is in its correct place. The ceiling isn't falling through. Broken pieces of plaster don't litter the floor.

When I open my eyes, the image is gone.

A small part of me had hoped coming here would... I don't know, open up a portal to the past, like a lock sliding into place. Click, I'd be back in

Étienne's arms. I know it's a ridiculous idea. But my thoughts and hopes are all I have left.

My flashlight flickers, as if it's fighting to stay on. I step back; there's no way I can search this house without a flashlight. The wind blows in through the broken windows, making the leaves littering the floor skip down the hall. The sound is eerie. I know I'm alone, but my fear goes up a notch. I don't care how brave you are, that's enough to send any person straight to the exit. Including me.

I hurry down the hall, and the flashlight wobbles in my grasp. When I reach the foyer, some of my fear has faded; the front door is a few steps away. I sweep the flashlight across the open space one more time.

The energy behind the walls? I swear it's stronger, practically pulsating. And I swear something's reaching out to me. It's the closest I've ever felt to Étienne and his world.

Maybe it's all in my head though.

Maybe my mind is trying to appease me and my obsessive desire to go back.

Before I leave, I look over my shoulder at the ravaged foyer. "I'm trying, Étienne," I whisper. "I really am."

And then I open the front door. Slamming it shut behind me, I run down the front steps, back toward the safety of my car.



THE SOUND OF the door slamming makes me sit up straight in my chair.

It's only eight at night, but it's relatively quiet in the house. Nat is out with a friend, Livingston is somewhere around here, and very soon, the person who betrayed me is coming over so we can talk.

Slowly, I make my way to the office door and turn the knob. When I look into the hallway, there's no one there.

"Hello?" I ask.

No one answers. The house is completely silent, yet I'm sure I heard a door slamming, and I swear it came from the direction of the front door. As I make my way toward the foyer, the scent of wild honeysuckle drifts toward me, stopping me in my tracks. It's a punch to my gut and instantly draws up the image of Serene's face.

She hasn't returned. However, that doesn't mean I've given up hope. It's fool's hope, but I'll never let go of my faith.

She will come back to me. I know it.

My steps increase until I'm nearly jogging. When I reach the front door, it's ajar, as though the person who left was in too much of a rush to shut it. I jerk it wide open and walk onto the porch. All is silent except for a chorus of frogs and the slender limbs of the trees blowing gently in the wind.

Of course, there's no one outside, but for a second—for the smallest of seconds—I'd thought Serene would be there.

"Étienne?"

Livingston's voice jerks me out of my thoughts. Pivoting, I see him standing in the doorway, wearing an expression of concern.

"What are you doing out here?" he asks.

"I heard a door slam."

"And that led you outside?"

I walk down the front steps. "Yes. The noise was loud."

Livingston shrugs. "Perhaps you heard me. I was in the kitchen."

I stare toward the driveway. "No. It didn't come from the direction of the kitchen, and when I entered the foyer, the front door was open."

Pushing away from the doorjamb, Livingston sighs and tucks his hands into his pockets then leans against one of the pillars. "And let me guess—you thought it was her?"

"No," I lie, and Livingston knows it.

He walks down the steps and stands beside me. His face is grave. "What is it going to take to make you forget Serene?"

"Nothing," I say before he can finish his sentence.

If Livingston expects that to be what helps me move on, he's wrong. She's the most beguiling woman I've ever met. Even when I despised her, a part of me was begging to understand her.

I more than loved her. She's a religion, and I'm a believer. For the rest of

my life, I'll worship every single part of her.

I can't stop wondering whether she has moved forward with her plans to marry Will. I shouldn't obsess, yet my mind is fixed on the idea. Is he holding her right now? Kissing her? Touching her?

The idea makes me clench my fists.

How much time has passed for her?

Hours?

Days?

Weeks?

Will she give up on coming back to me and marry Will as the second-best option? God, I hope not. There's a strong possibility she could time travel again. Although she was only here for two months, she's had a lasting effect on my life. Hell, on my entire family.

"Come on." Livingston pats my shoulder. "Let's go inside."

I don't put up a fight and quietly follow him back inside.

"We'll speak later. All right?" Livingston says.

I can read between the lines—the conversation about Serene is not over.

"For the time being, you need to try to take your mind off of her. You have more pressing matters to focus on."

Finally, something we can agree on. I head back toward my office. "Are you stayin' while I speak with him?"

"Of course. I want to hear his excuse."

Just thinking about the betrayal has my anger boiling. "Me too, me too." I call, "Ben!"

Within seconds, he's in front of me. "Yes, Mr. Lacroix?"

"I have a colleague arriving shortly. Please direct him to my office."

"Yes, sir."

My footsteps echo throughout the foyer as I walk toward my office. The

silence in the house never used to bother me. In fact, I enjoyed it. That was before Serene. She added color to my black-and-white life. She was a storm during a long drought. I know without a doubt that if she were still with me, right now she would be having a lively conversation with Nat. Every few minutes, their laughter would reverberate through whatever room they were in and travel throughout the halls.

I enter my office and look at the ledger one more time. I've lost count of the number of times I poured through it. Days ago, Livingston admitted to me that he'd caught Serene sneaking out of Asa's office the night of the dinner party. She was carrying the ledger. All this time she had her suspicions, and I never gave them a passing thought. I should've though because my company is suffering. Thousands of dollars of company funds have disappeared into the hands of an employee I trusted.

Lacing my fingers behind my head, I mull over Asa's behavior recently. He's been distant at work and easily distracted. There have been quite a few times he's been late to work, and when I ask where he's been, he always gives a weak excuse.

I've waited days to speak with him, but I can wait no longer. Time to sort this out. If I can make it to the end of this meeting without causing the man bodily harm, all the better.

Manners are embedded in me, but I stay seated as he walks into my office. He shakes my hand and smiles. "Étienne, this is an unexpected time to have a meeting."

"Indeed it is. But the matter is urgent." I gesture to one of the seats across from my desk. "Please have a seat."

"Is something wrong?" he asks, concern coating his words.

There's no easy way to approach this subject. Might as well get straight to the point. I open up the two ledgers in front of me before I turn my

attention to him.

“I’ve been pouring over the books, and I’ve noticed some inconsistencies.”

He arches a brow. “Inconsistencies on my part?”

“It appears that way.”

He leans forward and tries to peer at the ledgers on my desk. “That’s impossible. I go over the numbers multiple times before I write them down.”

“I do not disagree with you on that.”

The weight of my words and their meaning sinks in for him. Arching a single brow, he sits up straight in his chair. He knows he’s been caught.

I open the drawer to my left and pull out another ledger. My ledger. “I may not have the skill with numbers that you have, but I also didn’t get this far in life by being an imbecile. I have my own record book so that I can cross-reference all the numbers with my own. These errors, for lack of a better word, on your part would’ve been discovered sooner rather than later.”

I slide all the ledgers across the desk. His eyes volley back and forth between the three books.

After a few seconds, he lifts his eyes to meet mine. “I apologize. I’d never knowingly let something like this happen.”

Liar.

He’s a fucking liar. I want to tell him just that, but I hold back. My father taught me many things, and one of them was never to let my displeasure show while stakes are high. Right now, I need to appear calm and in control.

“What did you plan to achieve by doing this?” I ask.

He leans back in his chair and rests a foot on his knee. He appears calm and in control, but his body language screams, uneasy and fidgety.

“I know what you’re accusing me of, but you’re going to have to try a lot harder to intimidate me.”

“Intimidate you?” I frown. “I would never do that. However, when someone mishandles funds in my company, I’m going to become concerned. So enlighten me. Tell me what happened.”

“Nothing happened. I’ve simply made some minor errors.”

“Minor errors over the past few weeks?” I challenge.

“As I said, I pride myself on double-checking my numbers. It’s clear that at one point I didn’t, and that one time has made the numbers wrong.”

His answer makes sense, but my gut is telling me he’s not telling the whole truth. Deception can be simple to spot. Body language says it all, and right now, he’s fidgeting. His left leg is bouncing, and he keeps lacing and unlacing his fingers.

“This is more than that,” I say. “Bank deposits are taking longer than usual, and there have been duplicate payments listed. Having an error or two is understandable. This is not.”

I wait to hear what his excuse will be, but he says nothing. He’s run out of charm and justifications, and now I’m seeing the real him. He remains quiet for a few seconds before he clears his throat. “I don’t know what to tell you, Étienne.”

“That’s fine because I know what to tell you. I’m gonna have to let you go.”

His eyes widen in shock. His leg slips from his knee and drops to the floor. “Because of one simple mistake?”

“Honestly? No. One mistake is logging the incorrect amount. What you’ve done is more than a mistake.”

His cheeks turn a fiery red. The color spreads across his face and down his neck. It’s hard to say whether he’s embarrassed or enraged. “I’ve been with this company for the past six years.”

“I know, and that’s what makes this even harder.”

“Étienne,” he says slowly, “in my opinion, this one mistake is hardly—”

“I’m not paying you for your opinion,” I cut in quietly. “I’m paying you to do a job and do it thoroughly.” I tap the paperwork. “You’ve proven that you’re not capable of that job.”

I stare him down, waiting for his next move. Is he going to apologize? Or perhaps he’ll suddenly become remorseful and claim to never repeat this mistake?

He does neither of those things. His eyes bore into me with a fierceness that can only come from hate. All this time I’ve thought he was my friend, and I’m seeing now that it was all a ruse.

“It’s time for you to leave,” I say, trying to keep my anger constrained. I want nothing more than to reach across my desk and wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze with all my might.

With a heavy sigh, he curls his hands around the armrests as he hefts himself up. His body language is blasé as he makes his way toward the office door. You’d think we’d just played a round of pool rather than me firing him. Before he leaves, he stops and turns, giving me a chilling smirk that doesn’t reach his eyes and then walks out the door.

Closing my eyes, I hang my head and breathe deeply through my nose. I stand and stop in the middle of my office. Before I met with him, I was considering whether I should gather all the evidence against him and hand it over to the police. Now I know, without a doubt, that that’s precisely what I’ll be doing.

I glance at the calendar on the wall next to my desk. June 13th. First thing tomorrow, I’ll go to the police.

If only Serene were here. I’m a prideful man, but I would gladly admit to her that she was right. Someone in my inner circle was out to get me. Knowing her, she’d probably celebrate being right and that the entire ordeal

is over. But it's not over, because she's not here.

I inch toward one of the windows that overlooks Belgrave property.

Time is what brought us together, and it will break us apart. I'm far from patient, but for Serene, I'll wait for the rest of my life if I have to.

She will come back to me.



thirty-one

WHEN I ARRIVE back at the hotel, it's close to four in the morning. I'm dirty, exhausted, and deflated.

The employees behind the front desk aren't as perky and welcoming as Karen and give me wary glances as I walk past them.

In my hotel room, I immediately take off my clothes and get into the shower. I set the water to scalding hot and stay in there until my skin is red and my fingers resemble prunes. Once I get out, I change into pajamas, grab my laptop, and get into bed.

My body is dead tired. My limbs feel like lead and my eyes burn, but I have one last thing to do before I get some sleep.

I need to look at Johnathan Whalen one more time.

I pull up Ancestry.com and type Johnathan's name in the search bar. What Cordelia told me yesterday about him has been weighing heavily on my mind, leaving me anxious and unsettled. The first time I investigated

Johnathan, I was so focused on researching my family and Étienne's that I gave his information a passing glance. This time, I delve deeper. My hunt for details on his life is incredibly underwhelming. Like before, I only uncover that he never married or had children and spent the rest of his adult life in Falls Church.

My dad told me that when researching ancestry, if you can't find someone on the first try, you need to get creative. Documents can be misspelled. Often there are clerical errors. Over a hundred years ago, censuses were done by hand. The handwriting can be almost impossible to read, and names were inadvertently changed.

I try searching for John Whalen. Then Johnny Whalen.

When I come up empty-handed, I focus my attention on his last name. I type in Johnathan Whallen.

Still nothing.

The blinker flashes, taunting me to think fast. I try John Whelan and finally get a hit.

To my shock, it's a photo of Johnathan at Ravenwood. He's leaning against the fence with horses behind him, giving the camera his megawatt smile. There's no one else in the photo. When I look at the details of the picture, it only has Johnathan's name misspelled and the year—1916, two years after he relocated to Falls Church.

That small error opens the gate to a slew of newspaper clippings on Johnathan. I notice that the articles don't misspell his name, but the person who posted them on Ancestry made the error. One article is of him at Ravenwood, another at the Kentucky Derby.

I click on the first article. *A win for Ravenwood!* the headlines say.

“Real estate developer and investor, Johnathan Whalen, can celebrate

once again another win with Ravenwood owner, Teddy Parow. This is the third consecutive win at the Kentucky Derby. Ravenwood, which was founded a mere six years ago, has swiftly become a household name for their Thoroughbreds. Most recognizable is Bravoure, who set a record mile trot at 1:51.

Johnathan Whalen is now reaping the benefits of being one of the few investors in Ravenwood.

Ravenwood is set to be a thriving operation that produces record-breaking Thoroughbreds and brings home championships.”

I check the newspaper clipping and notice the year is 1918.

The next article is similar to the first. Although by this time, Ravenwood was established as a top horse farm. The date is 1920. Two years before Johnathan died.

I don't know what I was expecting. Maybe an article that would reveal some hidden secret or a picture of Teddy that would finally show me who my great-great-great grandfather is. Although Teddy's family background is cloaked in mystery, I know in my gut that he's linked to Charleston.

My eyes flutter open and shut. I've pushed myself to my limits. Closing my laptop, I put it on the end table, then I set my alarm and fall into a deep sleep.



MY ALARM GOES off at three in the afternoon. Even though I'm incredibly tired, I get up. My flight leaves tomorrow morning, and I don't want to spend my remaining hours in Charleston sleeping.

Peering out the window, I stare down at Church Street. The temperature has dropped drastically since yesterday. Clouds roll in, and I make a mental note to bring my umbrella with me to Belgrave tonight. I watch people filter into an Irish pub on the corner. Another group of people hurries across the road, laughing and blissfully unaware of the cold.

I'm free to come and go as I please, but somehow I feel locked up, watching everything around me with new eyes. This isn't the Charleston I remember. Buildings I remember are now historical landmarks, but everything else has been updated, making me feel confused and lost.

As the sun becomes covered with clouds, the sky unleashes the rain. It starts slow, then picks up speed until the droplets are falling so fast, they look like pinpricks stabbing the ground. I don't know how long this weather will last, but it won't stop me from going back to Belgrave.

Tonight, I make sure to be extra prepared. I put new batteries in my flashlight and take backup batteries. I tuck my pant legs into my brown boots and put on a sweater. I grab my jacket and blue beanie, making sure I have my phone before I head out the door.



I ARRIVE AT Belgrave around eight, and this time, I spot a white vehicle with Security emblazoned on the side. Anxiety and fear mingle inside me, telling me the car is a sign I should go back to the hotel. They tell me that I should give up.

My heart says something entirely different. With every steady beat, it tells me to be fearless. It tells me that the reward of seeing Étienne is more significant than all the risks standing in my way.

The heart is a funny thing. It pumps blood through your body, but it does so much more than that. Hearts can lie, can pull the wool over your eyes. But I know I'm doing the right thing by listening to mine.

It does make me wonder though—will my heart and mind ever be in sync?

The chances of getting the answers I've been so desperate for are dwindling away. I'm hitting dead end after dead end. At some point, I might have to accept that there are no leads left for me to follow. I might have to admit defeat.

My heart lurches at the thought. I've never been good at giving up or letting something go. Étienne came into my life like a thief and stole my heart. It makes perfect sense to me that I find a way back to him so I can capture his soul.

This is my last shot to do just that.

Softly, I close the car door. The rain has let up; now it's just a soft patter. For the past fifteen minutes, I've watched the security guard making a giant loop around Belgrave property. Right now, he's clear on the other side of the property, so I hurry toward the same gate I used last night.

There's something ominous about tonight. Last night, I heard the sounds of animals moving around in the woods. In the distance, I could hear dogs barking or a car alarm going off. But there's no noise tonight, other than the rain. It's almost as though the world is holding its breath, waiting to see what tonight will bring me.

I button up my pea coat and put on my beanie. My hands are shaking as I punch in the security code. Once again, it works, and I open the gate. The hinges screech in protest.

"Hello?" someone shouts.

I whip around in time to see the security guard in the car, shining a

flashlight in my direction. Quickly, I pass through the gate, and instead of hiding like a rational human being, I run directly toward Belgrave.

“Hey! Get back here!” the guard yells.

“Shit,” I hiss.

I hear him getting out of his car and entering through the gate. He shouts something else at me, but I can't hear him over the pounding of my heart. He's expecting me to enter Belgrave, so I do the opposite and veer toward the driveway. The trees will be the perfect place to hide. I run as fast as my feet will take me. My lungs burn, and my heart furiously beats against my rib cage. I want to stop running to take a deep breath but I can't because if I do, there's a good chance I'll be caught by the security guard. And I didn't make it this far to get caught.

I'm reminded of my dream of running down one of the long corridors in Belgrave. The same fear is there. My heart beats the exact rapid tune.

Just when I think I've lost the security guard, I see him in front of me, shining his flashlight down the driveway. Without thinking twice, I duck into the trees. The ground is wet and muddy. My feet slide, and I lose my balance and fall. Broken twigs dig into my palms, making me wince, but I don't utter a word.

Deep breath in.

Deep breath out.

I wait for the security guard to leave. I don't know how much time passes until I see the faint glimmer of his flashlight skim the tree I'm leaning against. I close my eyes and pray he doesn't see me. The flashlight pauses, then he walks by me, saying on a walkie-talkie that he can't find the intruder.

I open my eyes, staring at the tangle of skinny, dark limbs above me, and smile. So close.

I'm so nervous that the security guard is waiting me out that I sit there

until my butt is numb and the wet ground soaks my pants. I finally gather the courage to stand. Once again, my feet slide in the mud. This time, I instinctively grab onto the tree. The jagged edges dig into my skin, and it takes me a moment to gather my equilibrium. A memory of Étienne and me standing in these woods flashes through my mind. It's there and gone before I can fully grasp it, but it prompts me to grab my flashlight and scan the tree. My breath becomes caught in my throat when I see the engraving:

SERENE WAS HERE

Choked laughter slips past my lips. Dropping my flashlight, I blindly trace the words. It's still here. My eyes close and I rest my forehead against the bark. If this isn't a sign, then I don't know what is.

Over and over, I trace the words with my fingertips. "You have to help me out here, Étienne. I need something more than this."

What do I expect? For him to come out of the woods and say, "Here I am"?

God, I wish it was that simple. Lifting my head, I stare at the sky.

"Give me something!" I yell, disregarding the fact that there's a good chance the security guard will hear me.

Let him.

I don't care anymore.

"Anything!" In frustration, I throw my hands in the air before they land on the tree. "Because I'm close to giving up!"

"We should probably go back. Dinner will begin soon," I hear behind me.

With a gasp, I whip around. There's nothing behind me, but the words continue to echo in my ear. Vividly, I can imagine the night Étienne said that to me. The darkness of the night. The sound of the frogs in the distance and

the smell of the fresh air. I picture the tree Étienne leaned against as he delivered those words. Gently, I place my hands back on the engraved words and close my eyes.

Seconds go by, yet nothing happens. I feel ridiculous, but I still don't move. The decaying house, the trees surrounding the property, and the soil Belgrave stand on are the only things I have left, and it's not good enough. I drop to my knees.

Like a car that's run out of gas, I slowly drop my hands to my sides.

I give up. There's nothing left in me.

Water seeps through my jeans, soaking my knees. But I don't notice because a violent pain rips through my head. It feels as if my brain is being cut in half. Clutching the sides of my head, I close my eyes and try to breathe through the pain.

Gravity becomes my enemy, pressing me forward until my forehead is almost touching the muddy ground. The blinding pressure in my head trickles down my body until it feels as though I'm going to blackout. My limbs become numb as I feel as if I'm sinking into the ground. My hands fall from my temples and land on the dirt in front of me. I dig my fingers in and remind myself to breathe; the pain can't last forever. Can it?

Miraculously, the suffering recedes with every breath I take until I have enough strength to open my eyes and lift my head from the ground.

And when I do, I see the transformation happening around me. The pitch-black sky blends into a kaleidoscope of colors: dark gray, navy blue, blue-gray, then a pale purple before it settles on a bright sky blue. The raindrops pause all around me and reverse back into the clouds. One by one, the clouds draw back like curtains. The wet ground becomes dry. When I lift my head, I watch the tree limbs become coated in a healthy green. The dead grass that's matted to the ground slowly rises. The wind stops, and the cold air becomes

heavy with humidity. Suddenly, my coat and jeans are no longer necessary. The noise from the security guard has vanished.

I take a deep breath. Carefully, I stand, and as quickly as the pain arrived in my head, it vanishes. My trek back toward the driveway is wrought with anxiety. I want to believe that I did it, that I'm back in his time, but I don't want to get my hopes up.

Cautiously, I move forward, telling myself this all might be a trick of the imagination. I step onto the driveway, and the packed dirt is covered in fresh gravel that's recently been raked. The live oaks and Spanish moss serve as a canopy from the sun. The sparse grass circling the trees is trimmed, revealing that this property is lived in.

I look toward Belgrave and stop short. No longer does the beautiful mansion stand in disrepair. The vines are gone. The stucco's a fresh white. The windows aren't broken in. The roof isn't caving in. All four pillars stand proudly in the sunlight. It's back to the grand home I best remember it.

"Please don't let this be a dream," I whisper. "Please don't let this be a dream."

I walk toward Belgrave, deliberately slow. It's almost as though I'm creeping up on a feral animal and I don't want to scare it away. I'm afraid to blink. Afraid that this beautiful image will dissipate into the sky.

But the seconds tick by and the image remains. Confidence grows inside me, and I pick up my pace. Sweat trickles down my neck, so I take off my coat and blindly toss it to my left. I've run more in the past hour than I have in the past year, and my legs ache. Nevertheless, I find myself sprinting toward Belgrave.

There's a faint breeze behind me, and I swear it's slowly pushing forward because time is also behind me. Its talons are reaching out, trying to sink into me and drag me to the present day. I resist with everything I have.

I feel the moment it gives up. I hear the resounding sound of something that's familiar to a door closing. I feel more stable, my footing more grounded.

I've officially made it.

When I reach the circular driveway, I stop. Panting, I place my hands on my knees and try to catch my breath. Seconds pass, and I lift my head. The circular driveway is well maintained. Water spouts in the fountain and the shrubs surrounding it are trimmed.

And standing next to a Model-T parked in the driveway is Nat. She doesn't see me because she's too busy talking to some unknown girl. Nat's dark hair is the same length, pulled back in a loose bun. A green velvet hat with an ostrich plume on one side is perched on her head. Even in this sweltering heat, she's wearing a deep green sailor dress with three-quarter sleeves. The striped collar is loosely knotted. A striped belt is tied around her midsection, with a row of buttons traveling down the hem of the dress.

Her friend is also primly dressed, only she has a white lace parasol perched on her left shoulder. A glove-clad hand slowly spins the umbrella.

I take a moment to absorb the scene in front of me. I smile, then I laugh because I can't believe I did it.

I can't believe I'm back.

The sound pulls Nat out of her conversation. She turns in my direction, looks me up and down, and goes pale. Her mouth opens and closes at the same time her eyes widen.

"Nat, it's me!" I say excitedly.

As I step forward, she walks back toward the front steps.

"Étienne!" she shouts.

Panic trickles up my spine. Does she not remember me? How much time has passed since I've been gone?

“Étienne, you need to come outside. Now!”

Then I hear him somewhere in the house. “What do you need?”

Étienne! My heart all but sighs his name.

“Come here!” Nat demands, her voice taking on a panicked note.

I step closer. Immediately she steps away as if she sees a ghost.

The front door opens and out walks Étienne. With the sunlight beaming down on me, I can only see his outline. Those broad shoulders and long legs. He’s distracted as he walks onto the porch, staring at a piece of paper in his hands. He’s changed since I’ve seen him last. He has a beard that makes him look more rugged, if that’s even possible. His hair is longer, almost touching his shoulders.

He’s always had this wild energy, but now it seems untamable.

His white dress shirt is unbuttoned at the collar. So is his navy vest. His clothing is the only thing that hints that he’s a man of social standing.

I smile because I see that hasn’t changed.

“Étienne,” I call. I can’t take being this far away from him any longer.

Immediately his head lifts. His eyes connect with mine, and my legs threaten to buckle. The color drains from his face. There’s a desperation and sadness in his eyes I’ve never seen before. I’ve dreamed about him, obsessed over him, ached for him, and now here he is. In flesh and blood. It physically hurts to see him.

My mouth opens and closes, but not a sound escapes.

The paper in his hands floats to the ground as he unhurriedly walks down the steps. His eyes never leave mine. Wordlessly, he brushes past his sister and the girl next to her. His footsteps are heavy. The sound blazes a trail to my heart and reminds me that I’m not dreaming this.

But I won’t be one hundred percent convinced until I’m holding him.

My body has a mind of its own and moves forward. Slowly at first, then

I'm running toward Étienne. We crash into each other. My hands curl around his neck. My legs wrap around his hips. I bury my face into his neck and breathe him in.

I'm back where I belong.



part three

“With each passing moment, I’m becoming part of the past. There is no future for me, just the past steadily accumulating.”

—Haruki Murakami, *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*



thirty-two

“SERENE?” HE SAYS, his voice ragged.

He pulls back and cradles my face in his large hand. My hair becomes a curtain around us. His eyes sweep over my features with an intensity that has my stomach in knots.

At first, all I can do is nod. I find my voice, although it comes out hoarse. “It’s me.”

Then he kisses me so hard, so swiftly, I feel the breath knocked out of me. I breathe in through my nose and twine my arms around his neck. Every lost conversation, every touch, every smile that we’ve missed by being apart is wrapped up in this kiss. No goodbye, hello, or I missed you.

This kiss brings me back to life.

I faintly hear a gasp, but I ignore the sound and drag my fingers through Étienne’s hair. This time around, I’m not so naive. I know that time is working to take us away from each other. And I think Étienne knows that too,

because we hold each other desperately, frantically, the way a soldier holds a loved one before he deploys.

He kisses me so deeply, I slowly become convinced that nothing will tear us apart. If that's not the perfect kiss, then I don't know what is.

Moments pass before we break apart. With our foreheads touching, I ask, "How long have I been gone?"

"Almost a month."

My heart sinks. Étienne slowly lowers me to the ground. I ignore the delicious feeling of his body against mine and ask him a question I've been dreading. "What's today's date?"

"June 14th."

One day till the fire that takes the life of him and his sister. I'm confident the horror I feel is written across my face because Étienne watches me with concern.

"Serene, what is it?"

"I need to talk to you about something important."

"Serene, is it really you?" Nat asks as she walks up to us.

Étienne turns, wrapping a strong arm around my shoulder and pressing me close to him.

"When did you get back from Europe and why didn't you tell me you were leavin'?"

As Nat hurls hundreds of questions in my direction, I give Étienne a questioning glance. I've spent so much time trying to figure out how to get back to Étienne, I never stopped to think about what the reaction to my reappearance would be from his family and other people.

"I had to explain your absence," he murmurs in my ear. "You've been on vacation, traveling around Europe."

I nod and reluctantly step away from Étienne to hug Nat. "I've missed

you,” I tell her.

She stiffens for a second, apparently shocked by my honesty. But I formed an unlikely bond with her, and now I think of her as a close friend. I’ve genuinely missed our conversations.

When I pull back, I smile. “I needed to get away. Had to take a breather. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but I’m back now!”

“Indeed you are.” Once again, she looks me up and down. “What are you wearing?”

Nat and her friend are staring at my outfit with shock. Her friend looks close to passing out, but that could be from the layers of clothes she’s wearing.

Glancing at my muddy jeans and sweater caked with dirt, I try to think of a good reason for my appearance. “I... uhh... took a walk. In the woods?”

She frowns. “Why?”

“The questions can wait until later, Nat,” Étienne interrupts. “She’s back, and that’s all that matters.” Étienne laces his fingers through mine and guides me toward the front porch.

Ben opens the door and doesn’t blink twice at my attire. “Mrs. Lacroix, nice to see you again.”

Étienne’s walking so fast that I have to look over my shoulder and give Ben a wave. “Nice to see you too!” Facing forward, I try to keep up and laugh. “Étienne, not so fast.”

His strides are determined as he moves toward his office. He stops long enough to usher me inside, shuts the door, and locks it. When he faces me, he gives me a heart-stopping grin that turns my mind to mush. He cradles my face in his shaking hands and moves in to kiss me.

As much as I would love to do just that, there are more pressing matters. I lean back and wrap my hands around his wrist. “I really need to talk to you.”

He grins. “I was thinkin’ about something else entirely, but we can talk first.” He pulls back. “What is it that’s so important?”

My mind is reeling, and my heart is beating like a drum. How can you gently tell someone you know how they will die, that you don’t know what will happen to the business they’ve worked so hard for, and who is behind the destruction? The answer is simple: you can’t. I just have to say it and get it over with.

“I know what will happen to you,” I rush out.

Étienne cocks his head to the side and stares at me. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“While I was back in my time, I did some research on your family, and I know when you’ll die.”

He crosses his arms and his smile disappears. “And when will that be?”

“Tomorrow.”

Just as I expected, he doesn’t take the news well. Who would? His face goes pale, and his mouth opens and closes over and over, but no sound comes out. He paces his office, his hands on his hips. I watch him, feeling utterly helpless. Abruptly, he pivots and faces me. “How?”

“You died in a fire,” I explain quietly. “So does Nat. Ten servants also passed away.”

Étienne swallows and looks me in the eye. “And Livingston?”

“He’ll die in 1915 during World War I.”

Étienne softly curses and drags his hands through his hair. “What about my company? The shipping company?”

“I-I don’t know. Belgrave went to auction, and Asa bought it for \$30,000. He fell on hard times, so he sold it to an investment company that wanted to turn Belgrave into a luxury resort, but—”

“Enough!” Étienne interrupts.

His lips are pulled into a flat line as he breathes through his nose. I know I've dealt him a crushing blow. The death of his family members and decline of Belgrave is a lot to hear.

I rush forward and block his path before he paces again. "I didn't want to tell you this, believe me, but you need to know. There's still a chance to stop it all from happening!"

Étienne turns and looks at me. He doesn't appear consoled by my words, only further enraged. "The last time we intervened with fate, you were ripped from my arms and taken back to your time!"

"But tomorrow you'll die."

"I don't want to lose you again!"

"So you're willing to let you and your sister die instead?"

Étienne swears softly and walks toward the window. His hands curl around the window frame as his shoulders slump forward.

I walk up behind him, wrap my arms tightly around his waist, and rest my cheek against his back. "I don't want this to be your fate, or Nathalie's either."

He turns in my arms. Leaning against the window, he wraps his arms around me, holding me so tightly I can barely breathe. My body perfectly fits against his.

He rests his chin against the top of my head and sighs. "So what do we do?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. "We do the right thing. We right a wrong and go from there." I tilt my head back and look him in the eye. "Maybe things will be different this time around. Maybe I'll stay."

"We both know that's not true."

I know it's not a matter of if I lose him, but when, and knowing that it's out of my power is agonizing. I have no idea when or how I'll be pulled back

to my time, but I know it's coming. I just don't want to face the truth yet.

“No matter what happens, I am yours,” I whisper fiercely. “And you are always mine. Nothing can change that.”



thirty-three
ÉTIENNE

“SO SHE’S BACK.”

I turn my gaze away from the fire and glance at the doorway. Livingston stands there empty-handed, not a smile in sight.

I down my drink and set the glass on the mantel. “She is.”

Right now isn’t the time for Livingston to remind me she’s been gone for nearly a month and will probably leave again. Which, judging by the way he’s looking at me, is precisely what he’s going to do. I don’t want to hear it; today I was finally able to hold her again. For the first time since she left, I didn’t feel as though I was going crazy.

It doesn’t matter that we’re doomed to never be together. To have a future. Right now, none of that matters.

She’s back.

“If you’re here to tell me there’s a chance she’ll leave, you’re wastin’ your breath.” I level him a look as I walk across the room and sit behind my

desk. “I already know that she might.”

Livingston laughs without happiness. “I figured as much.” With his hands tucked in his pockets, he walks into the room. “Are you going to tell her what’s happened since she’s been gone?”

“I have to. Don’t I?”

Serene deserves to know I discovered the ledger she placed on my desk and that she was right about me being betrayed by someone close to me. She deserves to know I fired him, but her announcement about my impending death trumped everything else.

There’s no way to describe how it feels to have someone look you square in the eye and tell you when you’ll die and that all your hard work to build an empire just goes up in flames. I want to say it’s impossible, but I know Serene is telling the truth, and now I have to come to grips with it all.

I glance at my brother. In three years, he’ll be dead.

Dead.

Our family is not immune to death. I understand that it’s part of life, but that doesn’t make it any easier. I swallow loudly and face my brother. “I know you said that you believed me about Serene, but now that she’s here, do you see I’m tellin’ the truth?”

Livingston sighs heavily, drags his hands through his hair and drops into one of the chairs. “God help me, I do. You realize how impossible this all is?”

“Yes, I do.”

“And yet it’s happening,” he states flatly.

Before I can respond, there’s a knock on the door. Serene peeks her head into the room before she steps in and shuts the door. After our talk, she changed out of her dirt-stained clothes and into a dress of cappuccino satin with turquoise chiffon layering. It loosely billows around her. Interesting how

quickly she can transform into a person of this time. I'd prefer to think it's proof she belongs here, but I have a feeling she rules the room no matter what era she resides in. All she needs is a scepter and throne, and she'd be in her rightful place as queen.

"Nat knows something's up with me," she announces.

"What makes you say that?" Livingston says with a curious detachment.

"Because she keeps asking me all these questions about my 'trip.'" Serene uses air quotes for the last word.

"Can you blame her?" my brother mutters, but Serene hears him.

She walks over to me and perches herself on the armrest of my chair. Livingston continues to inspect her as though she's a bug underneath a microscope. Smiling, I lean back in my chair and lace my fingers behind my head. He's still in shock she's here, and I'm enjoying every second of his confusion. It serves as a minor distraction from the pressing matter at hand.

"Stop looking at me like that, Livingston," Serene says.

"Like how?"

"Like you're doing right now! During dinner, you did the same thing. I'm still the same person."

"No, you aren't," he replies as he walks to the sideboard and pours himself a drink. "Not the Serene I knew, at least. Besides, I was lookin' at you for an entirely different reason."

Serene crosses her arms. "And that reason would be?"

"What I can't wrap my head around is, when you left, why didn't the Serene I knew and grew up with come back?"

"It's because we've changed the course of the future and the present with our actions," I chime in. "Fallin' in love and be—"

Livingston raises a hand. "Wait a minute. You think love has changed the course of the future?" He snorts. "My God, Étienne, when did you become a

walking cliché?”

Serene and I don't reply. Three months ago, my brother and I would've had a good laugh over the idea of love changing the fate of the future. Three months ago, I didn't put much stock in that four-letter word. Now I know it holds so much more power and influence than I ever gave it credit for.

Livingston stares between the two of us. “Will the other Serene ever come back?”

I hesitate before I answer. “I don't know, but I hope not.”

“When I looked Serene up, the year of her birth was still the same, but the date and month were changed to mine. April 6th,” Serene says.

That captures my attention. “Truly?”

She nods. “That's proof that your present day has been altered. I also looked up her parents, Frederick and Delia. There's no trace of them. I don't know how that's possible, but there's no info on them in my time. It's as if they never existed.”

“Fascinating,” Livingston murmurs.

Serene nods then claps her hands together. “There are more important matters to focus on. Has Étienne told you about tomorrow?”

Livingston frowns as Serene stares between Livingston and me.

“No,” he replies. “He didn't. What happens tomorrow?”

Exhaling loudly, I stare at the carpet. “I die. Nat dies. Servants die in a house fire.”

Livingston sprays his drink half across the room as he bursts into laughter. Once he sees we're not laughing, he sobers up. Fast. “You cannot be serious.”

“I'm telling the truth. In my time, I found the articles,” Serene explains.

Livingston gives her an amused glance.

“I know how you die too,” she says.

He grins. "All right. Tell me. When do I die?"

"In May 1915, during World War I."

Livingston's reaction is similar to mine when Serene broke the news to me: disbelief, anger, then panic. Once he's regained his composure, he looks back at Serene. "You're truly serious about tomorrow?"

She nods, her eyes sad.

He shakes his head and leans against the wall. "Who or what starts the fire?"

"That's the thing. It was investigated, and the official cause was ruled an accident because of electrical issues. But I think someone did it. The article even says that people in Charleston were outraged." Serene looks away. "Asa was one of them."

"So you're tellin' me that my two siblings are gonna die tomorrow?"

"Yes, but we're going to stop it. Tomorrow everyone needs to evacuate Belgrave. If there's a fire, whether it be electrical or from a person, no one will be here," Serene says.

She gives me a warning glance not to say anything. We both know that if everything goes her way, I'm cheating death. But there's no winning for me. Because if I live, she'll leave. Possibly forever this time.

"I think first thing tomorrow, Étienne should calmly tell the staff that everyone has the day off, or something to that effect, so no one is alarmed," she suggests.

Livingston nods. "All right. Then what?"

Serene pointedly looks away from me. "Then we wait and..." She shrugs. I can fill in the blanks though. We wait for time to take her back.

"Are you guys going to tell Nat?"

"Absolutely not," I reply.

"Why not?" Serene challenges.

“Because it’s too much for her to handle.”

Serene tilts her head. “Your sister is not a fragile piece of china. She won’t break at the first sign of bad news. She deserves to know the truth.”

“Serene’s right,” Nat announces from the doorway. “I do deserve to know the truth.”

In unison, the three of us stare at each other in shock.

Nat looks at each of us individually before she sighs and closes the door behind her. “Is anyone gonna tell me what’s going on?”

Livingston looks at Serene, and Serene looks at me meaningfully.

I take that as my cue and clear my throat. “You know how we said Serene was on vacation in Europe?”

Nat nods.

“That was a lie. She wasn’t on vacation. She isn’t even the same Serene we’ve known.” I proceed to explain Serene’s time traveling, her leaving and coming back.

Midway through, Nat sits down. Her gaze occasionally shifts to Serene in amazement. The longer I talk, the paler Nat becomes. When I’m finished her eyes are as wide as saucers and her mouth is gaping. Hesitantly, Serene moves away from me. She kneels next to Nat and tries to hold her hand, but Nat pulls back. “I felt horrible lying to you,” Serene confesses. “There were so many times that I wanted to tell you the truth, but Étienne and I thought it was best not to.”

Nat sits up straight. “Why? You think I didn’t notice something was different about you? You think I didn’t notice my brother falling in love with you? I saw all the changes.” Nat leans in. “For what it’s worth, I would’ve believed you.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. But do you believe me now?”

Nat watches her for a few seconds before she nods. “I believe you. You

may look identical to the Serene I grew up with, but you act entirely different.”

Serene beams at her then glances at me. “See, Étienne? I told you she could handle the news.”

“You mean that was the bad news you were tryin’ to hide from me?”

“Not exactly,” Livingston says, his voice trailing off.

Glaring at him, I move closer to Nat. “In her time, Serene found out some shocking information about us.”

Nat stares at all three of us. “What kind of news?”

Serene and I make eye contact. She nods, and I reluctantly continue. “She found an article that says tomorrow, you and I will die in a fire here at Belgrave.”

“What?” Nat whispers.

“We’re not gonna let that happen. Tomorrow, we’ll vacate Belgrave. Us, the servants. Everyone.”

Nat presses the heels of her palms against her eyes. “I can’t believe this. You’re tellin’ me that I’m gonna die tomorrow?” She drops her hands and looks at me with alarm in her eyes. “Is our family in danger? Is someone after us?”

“No,” I answer, because I genuinely believe that’s the truth. I took care of the problem at work, and while Serene believes the fire is intentional, I’m on the fence. But I’m still disturbed by her claim. “And if we were, Livingston and I would protect you. All right?”

She nods and exhales loudly. “So now we just wait?”

“That’s exactly what we do.”



thirty-four

“THAT WAS HARDER than I thought,” I say as I pace in front of the windows.

Étienne shuts his bedroom door and faces me. “What was?”

“Telling your sister and brother about tomorrow.” I whirl on him. “Did you see their faces?”

“Yes. They were shocked. And rightfully so. Most people don’t get the chance to find out the precise day they’ll die.”

“I know.” I groan and rub my hands down my face. “It’s the last thing I wanted to tell you guys, but I want you to be prepared.”

Étienne is silent as he walks over to his dresser and empties out his pockets. He’s quiet, which is never a good thing.

I watch him warily. “What are you thinking?”

“That all my hard work has been for nothin’.”

“It’s not for nothing.”

He turns around and faces me. “Obviously it is!”

I walk toward him and place my hands on his solid shoulders. Physically, Étienne’s a powerful man who could snap me in half with a flick of his wrist, but as I drag my hands down his arms and link our hands together, I can feel that the energy has been sapped out of him.

“Étienne, we’re going to ensure that nothing happens tomorrow, okay? Not to you. Not to Nathalie. Not to Belgrave. Not to your business and everything you’ve worked for. That’s what I came back for.” I lean forward until our bodies touch. “I missed you desperately, but I had to warn you about what I knew.”

Étienne nods. “Is there anything else you found out in your time?”

Stepping back, I allow him to remove his tie. “I spoke to Asa’s daughter, Cordelia. Do you know she’s ninety-seven years old in my time?”

Étienne goes a bit pale. “How many children does Asa have?”

“Two girls: Cordelia and Josephine.”

“Who did he marry?”

“Someone named Eleanor.”

At that, he arches a brow. “Eleanor Bringier?”

“I don’t know. Maybe?”

“More than likely. Asa has mentioned her before.”

“Do you know that his daughter said Asa had feelings for Nathalie?”

Étienne doesn’t reply.

I poke his chest playfully. “You’re the one who put a stop to that, aren’t you?”

He glances at me from the corner of his eyes as he yanks his shirt out of his pants and removes his cufflinks. He tosses them on the dresser and wraps his arms around me. “Of course I did. She’s my sister and too young for him. I know details about Asa’s private life. I’m just protecting Nat.”

In the end, Étienne means well. It just comes off as controlling and a tad harsh. “Cordelia named her first child Nathalie,” I say.

“That’s generous.” Étienne’s hold on me tightens. “Can we change the subject? It’s a bit outlandish for me to be talking about my sister in past tense.”

“Sure.” My fingers glide up and down his back. “The night I came home late from Asa’s party, it was because I broke into his office and stole a ledger. Did you find it?”

“Yes, I did. And you were right; I was being betrayed.”

Abruptly, I back away. “What did you do?”

Étienne drags all ten fingers through his hair and exhales loudly before he looks at the ceiling as though all the answers to his problems are up there waiting for him. “I confronted him, then fired him.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Wow,” I breathe. For a moment, I was beginning to believe Asa wasn’t the culprit. The signs weren’t pointing to him. But now Étienne’s shattered that idea, and I’m back to believing it really was him.

As I play over his words, Étienne is quiet. He unbuttons his shirt, and my mind goes on the fritz before it becomes completely blank. The past few hours have been a whirlwind, and the adrenaline is wearing off. I could fall back on his bed and sleep for the next two days. But staring at his exposed skin as me awake and ready to go. I couldn’t look away even if I tried.

When you think about it, it’s a miracle I haven’t jumped his bones and wrapped myself around him like a coiled snake. All day I’ve reminded myself that there were more pressing matters to focus on, but we’ve talked everything over. And now it’s only the two of us.

The air becomes charged. My chest rises and falls rapidly. From the way

I'm responding, you'd think it had been years since I've been alone with Étienne. Or in his case, weeks.

Étienne calmly stands there. The distance between us almost feels unbearable, but I won't budge. I won't beg. Even though I feel myself inexorably being pulled in his direction. I fight the urge.

Feigning a sigh, I walk toward the door. "You're getting ready for bed and don't seem to be in a very talkative mood, so I'll go to my room. Good night, Étienne."

I brush past him. My hand curls around the doorknob when he grabs my bicep.

He jerks me back toward him. "You're not stayin' anywhere but here."

I arch a brow. "You didn't say anything to me about that."

Étienne leans in until his chest brushes against my arm. "I thought it was automatically presumed. You know I'm not good with words." I watch this big, muscled man squirm and look away like a six-year-old boy being reprimanded. He stares at me from beneath his lashes and says one word that has my legs shaking. "Stay."

I smirk, but I want to jump his bones. "That's all you needed to say."

Étienne and I can never do anything gently. We're fiery people, and it's a miracle the room doesn't spontaneously combust when we're in it. My skin tingles when Étienne wraps his arms around my waist. He picks me up until we're face to face and my legs are dangling in the air. My hands know right where to go and drape themselves possessively over his shoulders.

"I missed you," Étienne whispers. "Do you have any idea how much I missed you? You were on my mind constantly. It was driving me mad." With his free hand, he tilts my head to the side. His fingers trail down my neck as he stares at me, a ferocious expression on his face. "Tell me how to get you out of my system."

I smirk because he's trying to win at a losing game. "Tell me how to get you out of my system," I toss back.

He growls my name and kisses me greedily. I taste his anger, pain, and love and give him my own pent-up emotions until I'm whimpering, tugging at the sleeves of his shirt. His muscles jump beneath my palms. My hands are impatient, exploring every sculpted inch of him.

His tongue continues to move against mine. He holds me so tightly I can barely breathe. As my hands explore his broad shoulders, I pull back and catch his full bottom lip between my teeth, making Étienne groan. He hitches me up higher against him, which rubs his dick to rub against me. I suck in a sharp breath.

"Bed. Now," I demand.

Étienne eats the distance within seconds and drops me on the bed as if I'm a rag doll. I bounce a few times before I land on my knees. Pushing my hair out of my eyes, I watch Étienne. I'm waiting for his next move and he's waiting for mine, and since I'm going to spontaneously combust if I don't get my hands on him, I turn around and gesture to the row of buttons on my dress.

Let the games begin.

"Would you mind?" I ask, my voice innocent.

"Not at all," Étienne murmurs.

I scoot to the edge of the bed and impatiently wait. Hannah always made quick work of helping me undress, but with Étienne, the process is tortuously slow. Each button that's undone sends goose bumps across my skin, and when Étienne's fingers brush against my spine, I have to bite back a moan. By the time he's finished, my dress is gaping and I'm wet between my legs. But the buildup is always the best part.

Quickly, I turn around and face Étienne. My sleeves slide down my arms.

He hungrily follows the action with his eyes and steps forward.

I lift a hand and hold him off. “Not yet.”

Taking my time, I lower the sleeves until they hang from my elbows and I’m only holding the upper portion of my dress. Étienne’s hands flex and release, and I know it’s taking all his willpower not to pounce. I let go of the material, and it drops to my waist. The cold air makes my nipples harden. Étienne takes me in, his eyes imperceptibly widening.

He loved the bra I wore the first time I time traveled. Judging from his expression, he loves my sheer red lace one too.

I scamper backward until I’m in the middle of the bed, then crook my finger at him. That’s all it takes before he catches me around my stomach and pushes me back.

“Only you can get away with playin’ games with me like that,” he half-growls in my ear.

Reaching between us, I drag a finger against the hard length of him. “You didn’t seem to mind my games too much.”

He mutters a curse and grabs my hands, holding them above my head. I let him. My eyes close as I feel his lips connect with my neck and make a hot trail to my breasts. My fingers itch to curl around his neck, then my nails would rake down his back and only the two of us would know those marks were there and that I’d made them. Just like I made the carving on the tree.

I was there.

I was here.

Both belong to me.

In breathless anticipation, I wait for what he’ll do next. I feel him squeeze one breast while exposing the other. The strap breaks. I don’t care. I open my eyes to see a well-defined bicep against my arm as Étienne hovers over me. His head is bent and his lips are warm against the very tip of my nipple.

Teasing him might have backfired on me; every part of my body feels tender to the touch, and we've just begun. I groan as my back arches. His tongue moves against my nipple, then he switches to the other breast. After a while, he lets go of my hands. Immediately they seek his shoulders and travel to the back of his neck, holding him in place.

He lifts his head. My breasts ache and every brush against his chest has me almost crying out.

Étienne gathers the material of my dress and lifts it up and over my head. My bra and underwear follow, and so do his clothes. Before he can place his hands on me, I push him back on the bed and straddle him while I look him over.

God, I missed this man.

Every inch of his big body is defined by muscle. I watch in fascination as his abs contract, forming perfect rigid contours when my fingertips trail over them and drift down to his dick. It's thick and hard and within reach.

Étienne tremble.

My lips curl up into a half-smirk as my hand curls around the length of him. I'm not naive. I know that these are my last intimate moments with Étienne and I want to make them last. I want any other woman who comes after me to never compare.

I will make him feel me. My hands will leave a trail wherever they go, and my kisses will burn like fire. I look at him from beneath my lashes. Yes, he'll remember me.

Scooting between his legs, I lick the length of him before I wrap my mouth around the tip. Étienne sucks in a harsh breath and curls his hands around the sheets.

Every lick and suck on my part is spurred by Étienne's reactions. As the seconds tick by, he grows more restless. His legs scissor-kick the bed, his

back arches, and he growls my name, which only makes me take him deeper. Opening my eyes, I see him. His head is arched back, and his eyes are closed. His neck is taut as he tries to stay in control.

But in pleasure and pain, everyone has their limits.

My tongue twirls around him one last time, and he savagely curses before he hooks his arms under my armpits and pulls me up to him.

“You want me to come right now?” he pants.

Above him, I rub against his straining dick. “Of course not.”

Before he can react, I grab hold of him and guide him into me.

Étienne can have me any way he wants, but first I want him to remember me like this. I want him to remember that I, Serene Parow, brought him to heel. No other woman can or ever will be able to say that.

My rhythm is slow, but that’s not good enough for Étienne. Impatiently, he grabs my hips and furiously pumps into me. I lean forward and grab hold of his shoulders for balance.

The feel of him is amazing. My climax is so close. I can feel myself tightening around him, and I pant his name. He brusquely flips me over onto my stomach. The abrupt change of position leaves me momentarily stunned, but Étienne’s body is soon covering mine. His knee gently pushes my legs apart.

Moving the pillows aside, I rest my head on the mattress as Étienne rubs his dick against me. I arch against him, seeking more. I’m slick and wet, allowing him to slide in. This position makes me see stars. My mouth opens, but no sound comes out.

My arms are spread wide, and as Étienne pumps into me, his arms cover mine and he laces our fingers. He rests his sweat-slicked forehead against my shoulder.

“I love you, Serene,” he pants.

Each thrust allows him to move deeper, if that's even possible. Speaking isn't possible. I absorb his words and hold them close to my heart.

In the end, I think I scream his name as I have one of the best orgasms of my life.

When he's done, he drops to his side, half falling on me, and places a protective arm around me. I don't want to open my eyes, because I know these are our final private moments with each other. I clutch his hand tightly to my heart and clear my throat.

Don't you cry, Serene, my mind demands.

"No matter what happens tomorrow, I love you forever," I say.

Étienne squeezes my hand and kisses the crown of my head. "I know. Nothin' changes between us. You're my surviving trace."



thirty-five

THE NEXT MORNING, when I open my eyes, I'm so exhausted that I'm tempted to roll over and go back to sleep. But it takes mere seconds for the events of the past few days to rush through my mind, then my eyes fly open and I sit up straight. Holding the sheet tightly to my chest, I look to my left and right. Étienne is gone.

I rip off the covers, get out of bed, and hurriedly change back into my dress from last night. As I rush out of the room, I call Étienne's name. The servants I pass in the hall give me looks filled with concern. I don't care. I just need to know Étienne's in the house.

"Étienne?" I say, my voice slightly rising.

I fly down the stairs. Ben raises an inquiring brow as he stands by the door.

I walk right up to him. "Do you know where Étienne is?"

"Mr. Lacroix left for Charleston an hour ago."

“An hour ago...” I mumble as I drag my hands through my hair. That doesn’t make sense. It goes against our plan of leaving together. I drop my hands to my sides. “Did he say where he was going to in Charleston?”

“No. But he was in quite a hurry.”

That information doesn’t help me. It just feeds my suspicion that something terrible has happened. I take a deep breath and try to remain calm. “Did Étienne speak to you before he left?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then I need you to listen to me, all right? Everyone needs to get out of this house.”

“Mrs. L—”

“Ben. This is serious.”

His posture instantly changes. He stands up straighter and is more alert.

“Every servant and worker at Belgrave needs to evacuate immediately.”

“Are we in danger?”

This is the end, so why lie? “Yes. It will take too long to explain, so just make sure that everyone is out of the house. Now.”

Ben is out of my sight before I can finish. I take a deep breath and count to ten. I knew today would happen. It was etched in time and nothing could change that, but I’m still not prepared for it. My legs and arms are shaking as if I just finished running a marathon.

Not knowing where Étienne is scares the shit out of me. Is he okay? Is he getting help? I don’t know. I just need to do what I think is right, and that’s getting everyone out of Belgrave.

Just then, Nat appears at the top of the stairs. All color drains away from her face as she realizes what the date is and what will happen.

“Get your shoes on. We gotta go.”

She walks down a few steps. “But I’m not dressed. I—”

“There’s no time! We need to leave now.” I take the steps two at a time and grab her hand. Immediately, I drag her down the stairs. “We need to leave right this second.” I usher her out of the house and down the steps. “Stay right here.”

With her face pale and her arms wrapped tightly around her chest, she nods. I turn back to the house and run inside. A sense of panic mixes with the commotion inside the house. Servants are worriedly speaking to one another. Down the hall, I see Ben doing a head count as people walk single-file past him, toward the kitchen where the servant’s exit is located.

“Is everyone accounted for?” I shout to him.

He nods. “Almost there.”

Uneasily, I watch the servants. I want to explain to each and every one of them what I know, but they’ll soon find out. Just seeing them alive gives me a small sense of relief.

Ben hurries toward me, his face more stoic than ever. “Mrs. Lacroix, I can take care of everything here. If we are in danger, you and Ms. Nathalie need to leave.”

I nod. “You’re right.” I give his hand a firm squeeze. “Thank you, Ben.”

He nods once and turns his attention back to the servants.

I find Nat right where I left her.

“Serene, where’s Étienne? You told me we were all gonna evacuate together,” she says.

Curling my hand around her elbow, I half drag her toward the car, where Warren is waiting and looking just as apprehensive and confused as everyone else. “We need to go to Livingston’s house. Now.”

He nods and gets into the driver’s seat.

The minute the door slams shut, I slump in my seat. I fight the urge to twist around in my seat and look at all the people I’m leaving behind. I

remind myself that Ben said he had everything taken care of.

Warren glances over his shoulder at me, and as though he can read my mind, he says, “Don’t worry, Mrs. Lacroix. I seen some buggies coming up the drive.”

Sure enough, we pass three buggies.

“Everyone will be okay,” he assures me.

I nod and exhale loudly before I face Nat.

“Where’s Étienne?” she practically screeches.

“He’s in Charleston. Ben said he left early this morning.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” I answer, panic coating my words. “We’ll go to Livingston’s house and figure things out from there. Hopefully Étienne is at work, picking up something and just forgot to tell us.”

“What if something happened to him?” Nat croaks.

“He’s okay,” I say with more conviction than I feel. I can’t tell if it’s for my benefit or Nat’s.

She nods and stares forward, her face pale and body alert. Neither one of us says a word. The tension surrounding us is palpable and so oppressive that even if I wanted to speak, no words would come out. I know Warren’s going as fast as he can, but I fight the urge to scream at him to go faster. My hands curl into tight fists, causing my nails to dig into my palms. Nervously, my legs bounce.

Étienne has to be okay, I tell myself. He’s not in any danger.

The minutes torturously tick by. Then in the far distance ahead of us, I see a car heading straight toward us. I don’t recognize the car.

I nudge Nat. “Who’s that?”

Squinting, she stares at the car. Her eyes light up with understanding. “That’s Asa’s car.”

Warning bells go off in my head. “What is he doing all the way out here?”

“I don’t know.”

When the car approaches, a hand snakes out of the window, motioning for Warren to stop, Warren looks over his shoulder for confirmation of what he should do.

“Stop the car,” I say.

Before the car’s in park, I jump out and head toward Asa’s vehicle. Asa steps out as Étienne gets out on the passenger side. My knees almost buckle in relief.

“Where did you go?” I ask as the three of us stand in the middle of the road.

Étienne appears disheveled: hair every which way, shirt torn at the shoulder, and a fat lip. “What happened?”

“I had a meeting that went awry.”

“What are you not telling me?”

“I’ll explain it later. Is Belgrave evacuated?”

I nod. “Ben is making sure everyone is cleared out.”

Étienne looks at Belgrave in the distance. “I need to go back. I left some important documents in my office.”

All I hear is “go back” and ‘my office.’” Immediately, I shake my head. “You can’t. We don’t know when the fire will start.”

Étienne grips my forearms and stares at me. “Serene, this is important. I’ll be in and out in two seconds. Plus, I need to make sure everyone is out of the house. I wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t check.”

No matter what I say, he’s not going to change his mind.

Nat hangs her head out the window. “Étienne, no! We need to go.”

Étienne ignores his sister and watches me.

I hesitate, then come to a decision. “If you’re going back, I’m coming with you.”

From his scowl, I can tell that’s the last thing he wants, but he nods. “Get in Asa’s car.”

Asa stands back but openly listens. I don’t believe he’s the one after Étienne, but that doesn’t completely rule him out. He may still have a part in harming the Lacroixs.

“Serene, look at me,” Étienne says. “You have to believe me when I say there’s no reason to suspect Asa. He is not the enemy.”

He stares at me earnestly. I love Étienne and trust him with my life. But the articles I found don’t lie. I can’t ignore what I read.

“But you said you found the ledger and fired him.”

He frowns at me as though I lost my mind. “I didn’t fire Asa. I—”

“Can we have this conversation at Livingston’s house?” Nat cuts in.

I turn and stare daggers at Nat for interrupting Étienne.

He sighs and lets go of me, walking backward to Asa’s car. “I’m going back, Serene. There’s not enough time to have this conversation.”

I know the outcome of his life, but I don’t have all the pieces. Étienne says it’s not Asa he fired. So then who?

As I get into Asa’s car, I watch Étienne briefly speak with Nat. There’s some shouting from the two of them and glaring from Nat, but finally, she sits back in her seat and Warren drives away.

Étienne jogs to Asa’s car and slams the door behind him. He turns and faces me. “Warren is taking her to Livingston’s house, and she’ll wait for us there.”

Wordlessly, I nod. Asa presses his foot on the gas and goes as fast as his car will permit him.

“When we get there, please hurry. I don’t want to be inside any longer

than we have to,” I shout above the roar of the wind.

Étienne reaches into the backseat and grips my hand tightly. “I need the ledger as proof. Once I get it and make sure everyone is out of Belgrave, we can leave.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Asa. His jaw is clenched, and his hands are on the steering wheel in a vise-like grip.

Within a few minutes, the long winding driveway of Belgrave comes into view. Dust kicks up behind the back tires as Asa flies up the drive. The trees pass us in a green blur. When he parks in front of Belgrave, I’m partially relieved to see that it’s still intact, but that cranks my nerves up a notch because it’s only a matter of time. Asa leaves the car running as we all hop out. Étienne’s long legs eat up the distance to the front door, and I run to keep up. There’s no Ben to open up the front door. He’s long gone.

“Everyone out?” Étienne asks.

I nod. “The home should be clear.”

Étienne scans the foyer. “Good. Once I get what I came here for, we’re leavin’ too.”

With a pounding heart, I stand in the foyer with Asa and keep a healthy distance between us. His posture is alert and tense as we wait. I cross my arms; it feels like I’m having a heart attack. Its frantically whispering that it’s not safe to be here right now, but I’m not leaving Étienne.

All of a sudden, there’s the sound of glass shattering and a shout. I grab Asa’s arm at the same time he pushes me behind him.

I jump back, my body hitting the door behind me. “What the hell was that?”

“It came from Étienne’s office.” Asa pulls a pistol from his pocket and runs toward the back of the house.

I follow him. We reach the hall that leads to Étienne’s office as he half

falls out of it and slams against the opposite wall. His hand is pressed against his left shoulder. Between his fingers, blood oozes out. Brushing past Asa, I reach Étienne just as he slumps into my arms. I stumble back a few steps and Asa rights me.

“What happened?” I shriek.

“There’s no time for explanations. We need to leave!” Asa yells.

We manage to place Étienne’s right arm around Asa’s shoulders, and I wrap my arm around Étienne’s waist. The three of us make our way to the front door as quickly as possible.

“Did someone shoot from inside the house?” I ask.

“Came from outside,” Étienne says, his voice strained.

Asa and I exchange glances, both of us wearing the same expression of disbelief. We’re close to the main hallway. Just fifteen more steps and we could be out the front door. Then the second shot rings out. This one pings off a wall sconce.

While holding onto Étienne, we try to duck. When no more shots are fired, we slowly stand. My entire body is shaking. I want to collapse and find a safe spot to hide, but I can’t.

“Whoever is out there is waiting for us,” Asa declares.

“So what do we do?” I ask in a panic.

Asa gives me a grim look. “We hide.”

“Basement,” Étienne groans.

Asa pauses long enough to adjust Étienne. We head toward the back of the house, pass through the kitchen, and enter the servants’ quarters. We walk down a narrow corridor that barely fits the three of us. Every few seconds, I look over my shoulder to make sure no one is following us. I feel as though I’m in a haunted house and at any moment, someone is going to jump out of nowhere and shoot us.

Then the front door slams open. Gasping, I turn at the sound of footsteps.

“Étienne! I know you’re here.” The voice is loud and contained and almost a bit humorous, as though this is all a game.

My grip on Étienne’s waist tightens. “Hurry!” I whisper frantically.

Asa turns the knob of the basement door and ushers Étienne and me inside as the shooter speaks again, his voice closer than before. “I know I didn’t kill you. So where are you?”

As quietly yet urgently as possible, Asa closes the door. The basement staircase is dark, making it impossible to tell where I’m going. My left hand touches the cold brick wall next to me as we make our way down the stairs.

“Do you have a key?” Asa asks.

Étienne shakes his head. I can’t see him very well, but he’s leaning more heavily against me. He’s losing too much blood. I squeeze his hip.

“Étienne, do you have a key?” I say.

He jerks once as if I’ve woken him. It takes him a few seconds to reply. “No. Didn’t have enough time.”

My eyes finally adjust to the dark, and we make it down the stairs without either of us falling. Impatiently, I wait for Asa. He looks around the narrow flight of stairs, searching for anything that can serve as a barrier. He grabs a piece of plywood and shoves it beneath the doorknob.

“It’s the best we’ve got,” he says and rushes down the stairs.

When Asa resumes his position on the opposite side of Étienne, we desperately search for a place to hide. This basement is massive, easily spanning the entire square footage of the first floor.

“Have you been down here before?” I ask Asa.

“Once, when we were kids,” he replies as he looks around, searching for a place to hide.

Above us, the heavy sound of footsteps reverberates.

“Let’s keep moving,” I say, my voice taking on a frantic tone. I want to get far away from the door, but at the same time, moving away from the only exit means we’re trapped. All we can do is try to and wait him out.

Asa and I move as fast as possible with Étienne between us. My muscles are beginning to scream in protest, but I need to keep going so we can find a place to hide and help Étienne as best as I can.

We’re surrounded by bricks and mortar. In some areas, the bricks are separating, allowing water to leak in and travel down the length of the wall. The moisture collects in the middle of the floor and only magnifies the dank smell. The basement is a far cry from the opulence of just one floor up. It’s a whole other world down here.

“Few more steps and make a right,” Étienne grunts.

Asa and I follow his lead. Sure enough, there’s an open space to the right. A bulb dangles from the ceiling; the wires look perilously close to either breaking apart or catching on fire from all the water leaking from the walls. Maybe that’s why it keeps flickering on and off.

Wood shelves line the wall, practically reaching the ceiling. Most of the shelves are empty, with the exception of families of spiders and their cobwebs. On a few shelves are dirty mason jars, wooden boxes, glassware, and miscellaneous items. Pressed against the other wall are broken pieces of furniture.

Hiding in such an open area may not be a smart idea, but whoever is upstairs won’t be expecting that. Besides, the stacked boxes and broken furniture almost serve as a makeshift cover. The lower shelves, which are relatively empty, are high up off the ground, allowing us a good place to sit and rest.

Reaching over Étienne, I tap Asa’s shoulder as the noises above our heads grow louder. I point to the spot beneath the shelves. “How about there?”

He nods. "It will do."

We make quick work of moving in that direction. First, we gently place Étienne down. There's no way we can let go of him without causing him pain though. He bites back a curse as I release his arm and allow his head to fall back against the wall. Immediately, I sit next to his right. Asa is to his left.

The minute my back touches the wall, I swear every muscle in my body sighs with relief. I close my eyes and exhale before I turn toward Étienne and try to peer at his wound. Even with the dim lighting, I can see the bullet is deeply embedded.

I've never been in a medical emergency. My knowledge of the inner workings of the human body is slim, but I know enough to realize that I need to compress the wound first and foremost. I reach toward Étienne, and he winces and tries to pull away.

"Étienne, I have to stop the bleeding," I say.

"Don't touch it," he says through gritted teeth. "It feels like fire."

"Let her look so we can help," Asa says.

With Asa's help, we manage to tear off the bloody sleeve, revealing the wound. I peer closer and try not to flinch. Since the bullet hit him on his lower shoulder, near his chest, I can see fatty tissue and some muscle surrounding the bullet.

"Doesn't look like the bullet nicked any arteries," Asa remarks.

I nod, gather up the hem of my dress to my knees, and tear pieces off the dress. My hands go on autopilot, tearing one strip of cloth at a time and handing it to Asa. Over and over I repeat the process until the hem of my dress is in tatters.

Asa uses the rags to apply pressure to the wound. Étienne swears softly and his head lolls forward. Sweat forms around his temple, and within seconds, blood soaks the cloth. Asa tosses the material away and grabs more

pieces of my dress to press against the wound. Étienne doesn't scream or fight even though I'm sure he's dying too.

"We need to figure out how to get out of here. Étienne needs medical attention immediately, or we have to try to get the bullet out ourselves."

The thought of digging into Étienne's shoulder for the bullet makes my stomach churn.

My aversion must show on my face because Asa says firmly, "Serene, we have to. It's the only choice."

Swallowing back my fear and doubt, I sit on my knees and lean in. "What do you need me to do?"

Asa removes the cloth. "See the bullet?"

Before the fresh, warm blood oozes out of the wound, I see it clearly and nod.

"If it were any deeper, it would be best just to leave it in there, but it's so close to the surface. I need you to dig it out."

"Me? Why me?" I all but shriek.

"Because you have the smallest fingers between the both of us."

If this were anyone else, I would haul ass and say no way. Or perhaps I would go vomit in a corner. But this is Étienne. I glance at his face. He's growing paler by the second. As much as I don't want to do this, Asa is right. We need to remove the bullet, or Étienne will bleed out.

Exhaling loudly, I try to calm my nerves. "Okay. Let's do this."

"This is gonna hurt like hell," Asa warns Étienne before he hands him a wad of clean cloth and tells him to bite on it.

What happens after that is all a blur. I remember Étienne screaming and biting on pieces of my dress as Asa instructed me to use one finger to scoop out the bullet. Two fingers could cause further damage to the surrounding tissue. My forefinger sank into the wound, causing blood to gush out. Asa

told me not to be alarmed. My heart raced the whole time, but not once did I think of stopping. I knew I was causing Étienne insurmountable pain, but all I could think about was getting the bullet out. It was right there. I was so nervous that it took me three tries. It didn't help that I could hear the man above us. His voice was faint as he searched the house, but I heard him calling for Étienne.

Finally, after what seems like an hour, I hold the bullet in my bloodied hands. "Got it!"

Étienne promptly drops his head into my lap like a rag doll.

"Shit," Asa hisses. He grabs more clean makeshift rags and applies pressure to the wound.

Protectively, I wrap my hands around Étienne's head and push the hair out of his face, which only smears blood across his face and mattes his hair. It doesn't matter. That's superficial. What matters is Étienne. "Is he okay?"

Asa picks up Étienne's wrist and waits a few seconds before he nods. "He's fine. Pulse is normal and strong. Most likely passed out from the pain." He looks away from the wound and at me. "You did well."

That's the first time Asa Calhoun has ever paid me a compliment. The circumstances aren't exactly ideal, but I'll take it. I give him a nod. "Thank you. You're a good coach."

He shrugs, and we sit there. As the minutes tick by, Étienne goes in and out of consciousness. My worry grows each time. Soon Asa gets the bleeding under control. He has me continue to put pressure on the wound while he takes the remaining stripes of my ripped dress and ties them together. Curiously, I watch him.

Once he's done, he sighs and gestures to Étienne. "I need you to continue to apply pressure to the wound and push him to the upright position on the count of three, okay?"

Before I can ask what he's planning to do, he starts counting. The next thing I know, Asa says three and we push him up. Étienne moans in protest, but I don't think he knows what's happening. That's probably for the best. The less pain he feels, the better.

With lightning speed, Asa uses the rest of the dress as a makeshift sling, creating a figure-eight with one loop around his armpit and the other extending to his opposite shoulder, leaving the perfect amount of pressure on the wound. When Asa's done, he lets go. Étienne drops back into my lap, his eyes fluttering open and closed. My fingernails are caked with dirt, my hands filthy. That doesn't stop me from brushing my fingers across his skin. I'm only spreading dirt across his face, but I can't not touch him. My minutes and seconds with him are down to the wire.

The footsteps become louder and louder. They're so powerful that flecks of dust rain down on our heads. I can't stop the small whimper that escapes my lips. I'm terrified. I don't know if I've ever been this scared before in my life.

We're a reasonable distance from the basement door, but I hear the knob rattle. My breath becomes stuck in my throat. Seconds later, there's a pounding. Then kicking. A massive crash resounds through the room.

Étienne's eyes open. "He's comin."

"It's okay," I say soothingly.

"It's all over from here," Étienne remarks.

Slowly, the man walks down the stairs, almost to torture yet warn us that he's coming closer. "Come out, come out wherever you are."

Asa and I look at each other, and for the first time, I see fear in his eyes. I clutch Étienne a bit tighter. His breathing is becoming slower, more shallow, as if every breath is a chore. I didn't come back through time in vain. I will protect Étienne with everything I have. Whoever is after him will have to go

through Asa and me.

“I know you’re down here,” the voice says, so close I can feel it against my neck.

A long shadow appears on the concrete floor. I brace myself for his appearance. At first, he walks past us, his gun dangling in his right hand. He turns his head to the left and then to the right. To my horror, he sees us.

My mouth drops open at the same time my heart sinks to my stomach.

All this time, I’ve been thinking that Asa Calhoun was laying landmines for Étienne. It’s Edward Hill.



thirty-six

FROM THE MOMENT we take our first breath in this world, we become part of history. Our births are documented and our lives chronicled by a series of pictures, videos, and words, and most importantly by our actions. If you're lucky enough, you grow up with a loving family where you learn right from wrong. But no one's perfect. At some point in our lives, we all lie, we all hurt someone. Whether it's through words or physical wounds, it doesn't matter. We are all guilty. It's what we do after the suffering that matters the most.

Edward never took the time to correct all the mistakes he made, because he felt no guilt. Therefore, they were never eradicated. Instead, his sins drifted down to his children and his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren.

We were the ones to suffer.

I look at my great-great-grandfather Edward Hill—or better known in my

time as Teddy Parow—with fresh eyes. Every time I’ve seen him before, he’s always been quiet and composed. A man of few words. I never once considered him as a suspect. He didn’t seem to have it in him, but as I look at him now, I realize that quiet, kind facade was all a ruse. His eyes are cold and emotionless as he looks between the three of us.

He glances at Asa. “What are you doing here?”

“After you were finished pleading with Étienne for your job back this mornin’, I came with Étienne to pick up the ledger I created to prove that you were embezzling money from the company, but I needed the evidence before I presented it to Étienne.”

So that’s why Étienne was scuffed up when I saw him earlier.

Edward’s eyes narrow at him. “So you brought it to his attention?”

Asa looks at me from the corner of his eye. He knows I stole the ledger. “Yes.”

“How could you do this, Edward?” Étienne whispers with an anguished groan.

Edward shows no remorse. Just smiles. “You mean you never knew it was me?”

“Not until I read the ledger Asa put together.”

Edward’s gaze flicks between Étienne and Asa. His smile never wavers as he kneels. He acts as though he’s ready to tell a vital secret, even though his gun’s still aimed at Étienne. “I’m quiet, but never discredit me. I see and hear everything. I have no guilt usin’ that for my gain.”

The three of us say nothing.

With a heavy sigh, Edward stands and paces slowly. He stares at Étienne with such a level of hatred that it almost takes my breath away. “Do you know what I don’t understand, Étienne? I don’t understand how Adrien could take me under his wing, teach me everythin’ I know, call me son, make me

feel as though I was part of your family. He knew my father was a good for nothin' son of a bitch who ran out when I was a child. He knew my mother was barely makin' ends meet. And then when he passed away, he left me with nothin'!"

"You still had a job," Asa, whose sense of honor is peculiarly stronger than his common sense, chimes in.

I want to tell Asa to shut up. Edward is a man unhinged. One false step, one wrong word, and he could shoot us all.

Edward whirls and points his gun at Asa. "I'm not talkin' to you!"

For a horrible second, I think he's going to pull the trigger. I flinch, but the gun never goes off. Asa stubbornly stares back at him and says nothing else.

Edward lowers the gun with deliberate slowness and keeps his eyes on Asa. "Am I gonna hear another word from you?"

The seconds tick by, then Asa clears his throat. "No."

Edward's lips kick up into a small smirk. "Very good." Abruptly, he swings the gun in my direction. I shrink back as much as I possibly can. "And you? Will I hear a word from you?"

Quickly, I shake my head. I'm so scared, I think I'm going to pee my pants.

He smirks. "Good." Edward focuses on Étienne. "Where were we before Asa rudely interrupted us? Oh yes, your selfish daddy." Edward moves closer until his boots are touching Étienne's thigh. He's way too close for my liking. Once again, he kneels. "Explain to me why your daddy would leave a kid who came from nothin' to fucking rot."

Étienne winces and tries to keep his focus on Edward. "You're not his son. Why would he give you anything?"

"Because I had nothin'!" Edward snaps. He taps Étienne's cheek with the

barrel of his gun, and I suck in a sharp breath and tighten my hold on Étienne. “Open your eyes, Étienne. You’re gonna want to be awake to hear this.”

Étienne’s eyes open into thin slits.

Edward coldly smiles. “That’s better.”

Still kneeling, he rests his elbows on his knees. If it weren’t for the gun dangling between his legs, you’d think he was having a casual conversation with a group of friends.

“One night I was working late. Everyone was out of the office, and I was the only one who’d stayed to finish the books. Not Asa. Me. When I finished, I came across some paperwork. It was your will. Of course, I looked through it.” He tilts his head. “After that, I started taking money from your company that was due to be mine. I was doing what your father should have done. You know that, right?”

Asa and I stare at Edward like you would a crazy person. Because that’s what he is. Crazy. He’s so out of touch with reality, he truly believes what he did was right. Honorable, even.

Then I freeze when I feel something cold tap my lower back. I don’t want to jump or even breathe wrong; I don’t want to pull Edward’s attention to me. With my free hand, I reach behind my back and blindly touch the ground, searching for the culprit. My hand curls around a thin barrel. I glance at Asa, trying to make eye contact to let him know I have his gun, but he solemnly looks at Edward, refusing to glance my way.

Cautiously, I pull the gun behind me until it’s resting against my outer right thigh. Right around then, I realize that the pieces of my dream, the one I had so long ago, are coming together. The fragments are disjointed, but each moment is occurring.

“When I saw your will that stated that upon your death you would split the company between Livingston, Asa, and me, I knew what I had to do.”

“So you kill Étienne, and take what’s rightfully yours.”

Edward keeps his eyes on Étienne. I’m not even sure if he knew I was the one who asked the question. He nods. “That was the plan. Then when I arrived at Belgrave, I had to change tactics.”

“All of this was because of money? I’ve known you for years. You could’ve asked, and I would have given it to you,” Étienne says through his pain.

“No, all of this was because of betrayal. Your daddy betrayed me. He was the only father figure I had.” He leans in, taking the gun with him. “You know how lucky you are? You have everything. Family, love. Most importantly, money.”

Greed can do many things to people. Woven with jealousy, it can drive a sane person mad. At what point did Edward go crazy? When he was a child? Or maybe when he was a teenager and working so hard to earn money for him and his mother while he rubbed shoulders with the elite of Charleston?

Who knows the whens and wheres. All that matters is the man standing in front of us is pointing a gun directly at Étienne and could snap at any given moment. He needs to be treated with kid gloves. We need to keep him talking. In some cases, hurt people want to hurt back. But sometimes they want to speak. They want to rage. They want to expel the pain that’s been building inside of them for so long. All they need is an audience.

Edward has one. The floor is his.

“How can we fix this, Edward?” Étienne asks.

A caustic laugh escapes Edward. It starts out slowly and then grows until it’s echoing all around the room. He shakes his head as though Étienne’s a naïve child. “There’s nothin’ that can be done now. Can’t you see that?”

“I’m sure we can reach an understandin’. Do you want more money? Take it. Take it and leave and I won’t tell a soul.”

Étienne's words earn another laugh from Edward. "Do you honestly expect me to believe you?" Abruptly, he stands. His hand shakes as he points the gun at Étienne. "No one can take back the past, no matter how badly they want to. Can't you see that?"

My heart is pounding so fast; I feel as though it's only a matter of time before it bursts from my chest and sprints away. I look at Étienne, and our eyes connect. In the instant you fall in love with someone, you feel a tremor of fear because you know that this love has the potential to grow into something all-powerful. Something bigger than the both of you. You realize that you'd fight for them. Move the heavens and the earth. You'd even kill.

It's entirely terrifying to give yourself over to that emotion, but once you've had a taste of it, you can't live without it.

My fingers brush Étienne's cheek. "I brought you to this point," I whisper.

Right then, footsteps rush down the basement steps. Edward raises his gun toward Étienne, and I know what I need to do. With shaking hands, I lift the gun near my thigh and press the cold metal against my temple. Tears stream down my cheeks and fall onto Étienne's chest.

My time is running out.

My fingers curl around the trigger, but then I see the truth.

I could end my life. I could save Étienne that way, but Edward would continue his pattern. If he doesn't go after Étienne, his greed and jealousy will target someone else and ruin their life, and on and on it would go. And very slowly, those two destructive emotions would trickle down through the generations. I want to believe that maybe they wouldn't, but I've already begun to see Edward's traits in Bradley.

No, the cycle stops now.

Without a second thought, I lower the gun from my temple and, with both

hands, hold it out in front of me. My hands shake as I aim it directly at Edward. I'm destroying my fate, my family, my future, my life all for the sake of love.

But more than that, I'm killing to right a wrong. That trumps everything else.

My eyes close as I pull the trigger and my shoulders lurch back, more out of shock than from the force of the gun. My eyes flash open as the bullet slams into Edward's chest. He jerks back. His arms fling out, almost as though he's calling a truce. Blood coats his pristine white shirt. As he falls backward, the gun slips from his hands.

He's dead. It's all over. I drop Asa's gun.

And then I'm fading. I'm not falling; I'm slipping away from the room. My body, filled with muscles, blood, and bone, dissolves until I feel weightless. Étienne's eyes shoot open.

Am I fading away from this time? Am I dying because I've severed my family? Have I severed myself? I no longer know.

Étienne reaches for me and I try to hold on to him, but it's useless. His hand slips through me as though I'm a ghost. I want to scream that I love him. I tried to right a wrong. I did this all for him. But I know he won't hear me.

Like the times before, I slip through the floor. Only this time, I don't feel searing pain. My body doesn't feel as though it's being torn apart. Instead, it feels weightless. I hold my hands in front of me, smiling faintly. They look so very pale.

I've felt the cold hands of death twice in my life. As I close my eyes and feel air rush around my body, I know for sure what I did was right.



thirty-seven

“MA’AM? MA’AM? ARE you okay?”

Ever so slowly, my eyes open. As I take in my surroundings, I gradually sit up and realize I’m sitting in the middle of the lobby of my apartment building. A man kneels next to me, his hand on my shoulder. With shaking hands, I tuck my hair behind my ears and stand. What in the hell am I doing here? I’m supposed to be dead.

I can still hear the faint echoes of the gun going off and people shouting. The haunted look in Étienne’s eyes will stay with me forever. Just thinking about it makes my stomach churn. I swallow back the bile building in my throat and try to take a deep breath.

There’s an eerie silence in the lobby. I glance out the front doors. Cars drive by, and people walk down the sidewalk, shopping bags in their hands. All is right in their worlds. Nothing is right in mine.

“Ma’am? Did you hear me? Are you okay?” the man persists.

With my arms protectively wrapped around my stomach, I give the man a feeble smile. “I’m fine. Just not feeling well. I-I think I’ll go up to my apartment and lie down.” I walk backward toward the stairs.

The guy frowns but doesn’t say anything.

The minute I turn the corner, I take the stairs two at a time. I need to talk to Will, Liz, my brothers, parents, anyone. This shouldn’t be happening right now.

Once I reach my floor, I stop in front of the door of my old apartment. I know I can’t pretend everything is okay with Will and me, but this is an emergency. I need to see a familiar face. I have no phone on me, so maybe he’ll let me borrow his for a second so I can call Ian and explain where I am. Then I’ll call Liz and ask if I can stay with her for a few days. I’m sure she’ll say yes, but if she doesn’t, I can always go to the store or maybe back home until I can figure things out.

Before my fingers curl around the knob, I glance at my attire. I’m still wearing my dress from Étienne’s time. My hem is in tatters and it looks like I escaped a murder scene. My heart quickens. Now is not the time to worry about what I’m wearing. I take a deep breath and turn the knob. The door opens only a few inches before it stops. The chain is up, refusing me entry. I frown and shove against the door as if that will make the chain magically break apart.

“Hello?” I hesitantly say.

There’s no reply.

“Will?” I call, ignoring the alarm in my voice.

The TV’s playing way too loudly. I shut the door and pound both fists against the door as hard as I can. I’m bound to attract the attention of the entire floor, but Will still doesn’t react. My fists ache, yet I continue.

Finally, I hear the TV volume lower and someone yells, “I’m coming!”

The second I hear his voice, I stop the obnoxious pounding and sigh with relief because he's here. Will's here.

The chain slides back, and Will opens the door, a furious scowl on his face. He's wearing sweatpants and a gray Henley with the sleeves bunched up around his elbows.

I throw up my hands. "What the hell? Why did you put the chain on?"

He arches a brow and gives me quick once-over. My blood turns to ice. I know that look. Hell, I've given that look multiple times a day on the streets. To strangers who have rudely bumped into me, or an incredibly loud person sitting behind me at a movie theater.

"I'm sorry, you are?"

At first, I think he's joking, so I play along and lean against the doorframe and smile. "Oh, I don't know. We only went to college together and until recently lived together." When he doesn't crack a smile, I stand up straight. "Will, it's me. Serene."

"Who's at the door?" a female voice says behind him.

"I don't know," he says, sounding detached.

Very quickly, I realize Will isn't playing a game, and I feel as if the air is being sucked out of my lungs. This can't be happening.

Then to make the situation more fucked up, Liz appears behind Will, wearing his ratty Penn State sweatshirt as though it's her own. I used to wear that sweatshirt on particularly cold mornings when I cozied up next to him on the couch as we watched TV. In stunned disbelief, I watch as Liz rests her cheek against him and curl an arm around his. The action is possessive and intimate and something I've never seen Liz do with Will.

But it's happening right in front of me in real time.

Their body language makes it clear—they're a couple.

Am I in the fucking twilight zone? Is the world playing a giant prank on

me, or is this all one huge nightmare I can't seem to wake up from?

I try to barge into the apartment with my shoulder but Will stops me. My eyes veer between the two of them. "Are you guys being serious right now? It's me. Serene."

My voice trembles when I say my name. I'm desperate for one of them to crack a smile and burst into laughter before they explain they're just playing around with me.

That never happens.

Liz gives me a look of fear before she disappears from the doorway. Will looks at me with pity in eyes—the look people reserve for someone who is completely fucking crazy.

Slowly, he shuts the door on my face, but not before I hear him say, "Lady, I have no idea who you are."

The door clicks shut. I hear the tell-tale sound of the lock sliding into place.

I don't know what to do, where to go, or how to get in contact with my family. Do they even live in McLean anymore? Do I have brothers or the same set of parents? Is my last name even Parow?

Numbly, I walk back down the stairs and toward the lobby. When I step outside, my gaze goes to where Past Repeat is. But it's not there. The shop I worked so hard to build with my best friend is gone. Poof... just like that.

My legs give out, and I slide down the cold brick wall, resting my back against my former apartment building. Drawing my knees up toward my chest, I close my eyes and try to take a deep breath.

What have I done?

Nearly eight weeks ago, my life was perfect.

I thought everything I could ever want was at my fingertips. Funny how in an instant, everything can change. Now my life is in shambles. I don't

know what's up or down. I suppose I should consider myself lucky to be alive. And I guess I am. It's impossible to think about anything clearly when I'm being tugged from one time to the next.

I want to break down. I want to give up, but if I do, I'm abandoning Étienne. That isn't an option, because we are the past, present, and future.

We are unfinished business. A story that is never-ending.

The world will never stop tearing us apart, but there will always be a surviving trace between us.



epilogue
EMMELINE

“WEAK IS THE man who hurts a woman.”

Those words changed my life. Those words have haunted me since the moment I heard them. They greeted me in the morning. When I lay down each night, they welcomed me with open arms and dared me to question how my life had come to this point. They trailed after me during the day, becoming my shadow.

Those words have supervened my routine, and they wouldn't stop until they had an answer.

The woman I spoke to at the dinner party? I think about her frequently and what she would think of what I'm doing now. She had the kind of confidence that demands to be seen. She said things I wouldn't dare dream, let alone speak. Later on, I found out her name was Serene Lacroix.

Physically, I'm petite. Emotionally, I'm the same. My soul is small, so my thoughts had to be the same. I tended to follow others because the world

scared me; it's such a cruel, cruel place.

But at last I was brave, and I left. People pay me no mind. That's what made going so effortless.

My heart was drumming as I gripped my suitcase early yesterday morning. I had no idea what my next steps would be. I was just relieved to have made it this far. Procuring a ticket was harder than I anticipated. For anyone traveling abroad, Charleston is a small port. Especially compared to New York, Baltimore, and New Orleans. No ocean liners would be sailing out shortly. But with the help of Asa Calhoun, I obtained a ticket for the RMS *Beresford*. It's leaving from New Orleans and arriving in Liverpool.

Acquiring a train ticket to New Orleans was a race against time, but Asa somehow managed. Asa even traveled with me to New Orleans, and he paid for a room for me at the St. Charles Hotel. He doubled-checked that I knew where to go on the boat and how to protect myself if need be. I reassured him I would be okay. But when he handed me a pistol and told me to use it, I hid it in my luggage, scared just looking at it.

Asa is a good man. He conceals that part of his soul beneath layers of confidence and charm. In a perfect world, I would be with someone like him. Someone who would genuinely protect me. But I come from nothing, and he's part of the Charleston elite. We would never do.

He's better than Edward, although I didn't know that at first. If only I could go back in time and warn myself. I would steer clear of Edward's path and never look in his direction. I met him over a year ago at a party at Asa's home. We were placed across from each other during dinner. He appeared shy and reserved, rarely spoke unless spoken to. I saw him sneak glances at me, and I found his reticence endearing, almost alluring. I wanted to find out more about this secretive man.

That night, I never got the chance. The next morning, I received flowers

from him. Thus began our correspondence. We started spending time together during dinner parties, then alone at his house, and soon I found myself moving into his home. I knew my family back in England would be ashamed. I was living in sin.

Sin, sin, sin.

But I loved Edward. I heard whispers that Edward was speaking to some woman from Virginia. Multiple sources told me her name was Clara Beckett. How they met wasn't of importance to me. I reminded myself that I loved Edward so much that sooner than later, he would forget all about this Clara woman and stay with me.

For the first time in a long time, I felt comfortable. And that's when the problems arose. Edward's anger isn't a beast that bursts out in the middle of the night. It doesn't appear during bouts of rage. In fact, I'm not even sure Edward realizes when his wrath takes over his body.

The first time it happened, I told him I wanted to see some friends and I would be back later. He was working on accounting books for Étienne's company and told me no. I asked him to come along. Calmly, he stood and walked toward me.

His eyes were blank, his composure calm. When he reached me, he stared at me for a long second, then he slapped me.

The abuse grew from there. So did the control.

One time he choked me. I was convinced I was going to die, but at the very last second, he released me and stood up. He tucked his shirt back into his pants and told me never to disobey him again.

The night I met Serene, I was crying because Edward was upset that I had danced with Asa. I knew there would be hell to pay, and I was right. That night, he raped me.

That night, I knew I needed to get out and leave Edward, but who would

believe me? I was a mistress. Edward paid for everything I asked for. As far as everyone was concerned, I asked for it. But Serene's words wouldn't stop haunting me. I knew she was right. I knew I had to tell someone about the real Edward, or I would become deranged from the truth.

I told Asa, the most practical, sensible man I knew. And he believed me. That was over a month ago. The steps it took to get here to New Orleans weren't easy. Everything had to be done in secret. So no one would be the wiser, he would sometimes meet with me in the morning, making him run late to work. There were a lot of notes moved back and forth between his servants.

Edward, he never noticed. That tends to happen when you are presumptuous and cavalier. He never realized that everything was falling apart around him.

"Emmeline, you are gonna be safe now, okay?" Asa said as we drove toward the port.

Nervously, I glance at him from the corner of my eye. Asa hasn't made eye contact with me since we got into the car. In fact, he hasn't looked at me since we arrived in New Orleans.

"There's something else you need to know," he says.

Patiently, I wait for him to continue.

His left hand, resting on his knee, curls into a fist. "Edward's dead."

My head whips in his direction. Asa continues to stare out the window. His face is emotionless.

"What did you say?"

His jaw clenches, and he slowly faces me. "The day I was late to picking you up to take you to New Orleans?"

I nod, my heart racing.

Asa stares at his hands. "I was with Étienne and... we were at Belgrave

and had an altercation. He shot Étienne, and I shot Edward in self-defense.”

My mouth hangs open and I stare at Asa in shock. I don’t know whether to feel profound relief or sadness. Edward did have goodness in him; it was just covered by so much darkness. At this point, I think it’d be impossible to find that goodness.

I’m silent for so long, Asa nervously glances at me. “What are you thinkin’?”

I swallow. “Honestly? I don’t know. Should I be happy, sad?”

Twisting in his seat to face me, Asa grabs my hands. “You don’t have to feel anything. You just need to focus on one thing—protecting yourself. Edward may be dead, but Charleston isn’t a safe place for you right now. Okay?”

Anxiously, I nod, and he drops my hands. I almost protest because it felt good to hold on to someone and know they wouldn’t hurt me.

“How is Étienne?” Tilting my head, I try to get a better look at Asa. “How are you?”

“The bullet hit Étienne in the shoulder, but he’s okay. Right now, he’s healing. And I’m fine.”

He doesn’t seem fine. But I suppose that’s to be expected when you steal a man’s life. Even if it’s in self-defense, what he experienced had to be traumatizing. I lace my shaking fingers and try to process everything he’s told me. The traffic is becoming thicker. The sidewalks are busier. I can see the port and the massive ships to my left.

Our conversation is coming to a close. My heart races. “What about Johnathan?”

While Asa helped me obtain a ticket, he divulged he had suspicions that Edward was embezzling money from Étienne’s company and that Edward was getting help from Johnathan Whalen.

Asa snorts. “After what happened to Edward, I don’t think he’ll be stickin’ around Charleston much longer.”

I exhale a shaky breath.

Hesitantly, Asa reaches pats my hands. “It’s okay, Emmeline.”

It’s not okay. Edward may be dead and I may be going home, but will my family welcome me back? Considering how almost two years ago, we had many disputes about me immigrating to America. I told them I wanted a better life and America would give me that. They were convinced it wouldn’t, and they were right.

The buggy comes to a stop. Asa and I look at each other before he hops out and holds the door open for me.

He extends a hand. “Are you ready, Emmeline Grace Hambleton?”

I’m not, but what choice do I have? Pasting on a smile, I take his hand. “I’m ready.”



FIVE DAYS LATER, salt air clinging to me, I’m tired and in dire need of a bath, but I see my homeland in the far distance. I smile. Protectively, I wrap a hand around my stomach and give it a small pat. Very slowly, it’s starting to protrude. Within a month, it will be impossible to hide my pregnancy. It’s impossible to know, but deep in my gut, I know my baby is a boy.

The blaring horn of the boat sounds.

I bend my head. “We’re safe here, Henry. Our adventure starts now.”



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I love you.



about the author

College seemed like too much stress for me. Traveling across the world, getting married, and having four kids seemed much more relaxing.

Yeah, I'm still waiting for the relaxing part to kick in...

I change addresses every other year. It's not by choice but it is my reality.

While the crazies of life kept me busy, the stories in my head decided to bubble to the surface. They were dying to be told and I was dying to tell them.

I hope you'll enjoy escaping to the crazy world of these characters with me!

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