

# THE SERVANT



*Erica Lee Berquist*

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*Edited by Free Spirit Team*



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*For my family*

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“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself  
in the service of others.”

—**Mahatma Gandhi**

# CHAPTER ONE



There is always beauty and balance in the world for those who know where to look for it. It is, of course, a subjective art. One person might point to a patch of wildflowers and declare it beautiful, yet I would not. There is far too much chaos and randomness in the flowers for them to achieve the essence of beauty. Except for sunflowers of course.

I never used to see the appeal of those either, until one day when I was pulling the seeds from the dried husks of sunflower heads, counting them for entertainment, when I saw the pattern: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144... It was a marvel, the spirals in the center of the head all calmly following this sequence, with the mystical orderliness of nature, with two series of curves winding in opposite directions, starting at the center and stretching out to the crisps of the dried petals. I froze in the act of harvesting for a moment, stunned to see this spiral on every sunflower head before me. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

I learned later that there is a name for this pattern, the Fibonacci sequence, and in this I learned that even nature could



be beautiful. Beauty is subjective, as I said, and for me there is aesthetic joy in simple things, the orderly things.

For me, there is nothing more lovely than a finely-set table, or the act of setting one. Forks are placed to the left of the plate, knives and spoons to the right. Glasses are placed above and to the right of the dinner plate, while bread-and-butter plates sit above the forks and to the left of the place setting. Silverware should align with the bottom rim of the charger, a large plate that will be removed after guests pick up their napkins. The water glass stands above the dinner knife, white wine to its right, and red wine top center.

There is a precise calculation behind every placement on a table setting. If one approaches setting a table with care and grace, then it is possible to do so correctly. And if it is done correctly, one might just survive.

I don't live in a world where mistakes are easily forgiven, which is why I value any task that I can approach with logic and measurements. The table before me was set perfectly, of this I was sure, and sure in a world where so many things were uncertain. It was reassuringly beautiful to be so certain, dare I say comforting? I had done my task well and knew I would not be punished.

As I looked at the table through lowered lashes, I watched as the family seated at the table started to take it apart—picking up forks and placing them down in odd angles, shaking out the napkins, and smearing the pure white plates with food. The loveliness, which had gone unnoticed, was now gone. I stood in the corner, waiting to be needed.

“I was talking to Marcia. You remember Marcia?” The young mistress, Dorothea, said around a forkful of salad.



“The little mousy girl with the gap between her teeth?” asked her sister, Althea, using her fork to gesture to her own teeth that weren’t much straighter.

“Don’t be unkind,” their mother chided. “Marcia comes from a nice family.”

“I wasn’t talking about her family or her teeth,” Dorothea said impatiently. “I wanted to tell you what she said.”

“Oh?” Althea encouraged, always eager for gossip. “Do share.”

“Marcia was in the market yesterday. And she saw a *man*.” Dorothea drew out the word dramatically as she leaned across the table. Her sister was completely enthralled. “She told me he had the most beautiful black curly hair, so she couldn’t resist going up to him. They talked for like fifteen minutes.”

Althea’s eyes were as wide as saucers. She was younger than her sister and Marcia and wasn’t yet in the habit of speaking with men. “Oh my. What did they talk about?”

“Just the weather or something,” Dorothea shrugged dismissively. “That’s not what’s important. But listen to this—just as she really was starting to like this guy, she found out he’s one of *them*. His master walked up to them, totally baffled about why someone would be talking to his servant. Can you imagine? She was talking to one of them for fifteen minutes!”

“No!” Althea’s jaw dropped in horror. “How is that possible? They’re not like us.”

“I don’t know.” Dorothea’s eyes flicked to her mother, whose face had pinched as she listened to the story. “Mother, how could that happen, that she mistook a servant for one of us? Did she miss something?”



“Obviously she missed something.” The mistress’s eyes darted around the room, landing briefly on my face before shifting back to her daughters. She said, “They’re not like us.”

Dorothea looked at me too for a long moment, and she smirked as if daring me to shift my expression. As I didn’t, Dorothea appeared to get bored quickly and returned her attention to her mother. “It’s just... it scares me, Mama. That one of *them* could seem so much like us that Marcia was fooled. What if more are out there, trying to pretend to be us and live like free folk in society? How would we ever know if they were living among us.”

“Mother?” Althea urged with wide eyes.

“Girls, you have nothing to worry about,” the mistress said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “Let me repeat, they are nothing like us. Take our Ellie here for example.”

Three sets of eyes shifted to me—the young mistresses eyed me with distrust, while the mother’s eyes glinted with superciliousness. The mistress pointed at me. “You. Girl, what’s your opinion on this?”

I blinked, unaccustomed to being directly addressed. “I don’t understand, Mistress.”

She sighed in impatience but rephrased her question. “The subject we were just discussing. You couldn’t help but hear us, as you stood there. What thoughts came to your mind as you listened?”

“Oh, I did have a thought.” I lifted the water pitcher from the table beside me. “I was wondering, would my mistress or her daughters like more water?”

She dismissed the water pitcher and me with a sharp jerk of her hand, and she turned back to her daughters. “There. Do you



see that? Do you see now what I have been saying? Because if you were standing there, listening to this conversation, would you be thinking about water?”

Dorothea glanced at me, still standing there impotently with the water pitcher in my hands. She said, “You’re right, mother. I never thought of empathizing with them, but I suppose that’s our place. We’re the ones with emotions, not them. And I would be furious if I were them. But they’re not. They’re content to just stand there stupidly, so they’re nothing to be afraid of.” She pointed at me, and the gesture was enough to stiffen my spine in preparation for an order. “You there, get me more soup from the kitchen.”

“Yes, Mistress.” I put the water pitcher down as I walked past the table on my way to the kitchen. I pushed lightly on the swinging kitchen door, just in case someone was on the other side, but the way was clear. Entering the kitchen, I approached the woman at the island counter. Her brown hair was pale in streaks and coiled on the back of her head in a precise bun, exposing the long expanse of her slender, pale neck. The apron around her waist was tied in a tidy knot. She hadn’t turned to face me, but I had no doubt that some instinct, formed through years of ceaseless efficiency, had granted her the knowledge that I was behind her without turning to see me.

Just in case, I said, “Hello, Mother.”

“Ellie,” she greeted me curtly, as the knife in her hands made short work of a celery stick. “How is it going out there? Are they ready for dessert?”

“It’s going alright. Miss Dorothea would like more soup.”

“One moment,” she said to me.



If I had been Dorothea, that would have been ‘right away’, but with only my eyes on her she finished slicing the veggies before tossing them into a pot. Knowing how my mother disliked being interrupted, I waited as I leaned against a counter, resting my stiff back for a moment.

Going to the stove with a bowl, my mother ladled a serving of soup into a bowl. She placed the steaming bowl on a serving plate, which she brought to me. Her cobalt eyes, though beautiful, reflected her heart—cold, severe, and as intense as the depths of the icy arctic waters they resembled in color. It wasn’t her fault she was emotionless though. She extended the soup and said, “Here.”

I accepted it and said, “It smells nice.”

Mother nodded towards the dining room. “Hurry before it gets cold.”

I turned, making my careful way back through the swinging door, and I carried the soup to the table. I announced, “Your soup, Mistress.”

Dorothea sneered at the sight of me, blocking the place at the table with her hand before I could put the soup in front of her. “I don’t want that. Bring me pie.”

“Yes, we’ll all have some dessert,” her mother announced grandly.

Keeping my face carefully composed, I inclined my head to my mistress before returning to the kitchen. My mother was of course not surprised to see me return too quickly, and already had the dessert in her hands. She asked, “Pie?”

\*



The attic of the old house had only been partially converted, and yet it was home. The beams were exposed, unseen animals skittered in the eaves, the only sunlight was the few rays that filtered through a vent, it was freezing in the winter and sweltering in the summer—and yet I didn't mind. This was the only place in the house where I could rest, be myself, and not guard my expression. I worked hard all day, just to lay my head on my pillow at the end of the day. The nights were my own. So long as my mistress didn't call for me.

My mother, who shared the other cot in this attic, sat brushing her hair. This was the only time I ever saw her with her hair down, the streaks of silver in her dark brown hair shining brightly in the lamp beside her, as she ran a brush through the waves. I've often wondered if she similarly finds refuge in the attic, unwinding perhaps from tension as she literally unwinds the coil of her hair. If she thinks this though, she has never said. "I'm going to turn in now," she said, putting down her brush and slipping her long pale legs under the blanket. "I want to get an early start on kitchen prep."

As she flipped off her lamp, casting half the attic into shadows, I asked her, "Will my light bother you? I was going to read a little more."

"No, it's fine. Goodnight."

"Sleep well," I said. The attic fell into a loud sort of silence, where little sounds that would have normally gotten lost during the noise of the day suddenly held so much more acoustic weight. The whisper of a draft. The scratch of a branch on the roof. The turn of the page beneath my hands. I tried to lose myself in the life of Jo March, heroine of the story *Little Women*, but I was dis-



tracted. Jo and Marmee had a relationship that was unattainable for me, and little things like saying ‘I love you’ before bed would be impossible for us. I could try it, but I would be impassively reminded by my mother that the servant class is incapable of love. I would never hear my mother tell me that she loved me. That emotion was for free people like Dorothea and her mother, and this book served merely as a window into the lives of people like them.

Sighing, I couldn’t force myself to read another word. Instead, I held the book before my nose and breathed deeply. It was likely only my imagination, but I told myself that his scent was there, mingled with the musky scent of an old book. I lost myself in a memory.

*As I emerged from the barn, I squinted into the sun and shielded my eyes from the glare. The sky was a brilliant shade of blue with only the faintest wisps of clouds. I watched for a moment as the wind slowly and gently shifted them across the sky.*

*“It’s some type of jet, maybe a bizliner.”*

*I turned in the direction of the voice, caught off guard to see Miss Dorothea and Miss Althea’s tutor, Mr. Cooper, sitting on the half-empty hay wagon. I carefully composed my face though, telling myself I wasn’t feeling surprised. He had just startled me.*

*“Maybe a bizliner,” he repeated. He pointed at the sky, indicating a streak moving quickly across the sky made of white puffs. “See the contrail? It’s definitely a jet, I’m just not positive which type...”*

*“Ah,” I said agreeably. It was a small sound, but even as I made it, I was struck by the weight of it—I had never spoken to a free person before outside of receiving orders. This seemed almost normal, like a friendly conversation between equals. Perhaps this was some sort of*



*trick though, and I would be punished if I spoke out of turn. I eyed the young tutor suspiciously.*

*As he looked up at the sky, his dark brown hair had fallen across his forehead rakishly. Mr. Cooper wasn't much older than me, probably twenty-four or twenty-five based on what I'd heard about him, and something about his face still shone with a boyish charm that most had lost by that age—he looked like someone who had yet to be jaded by the harsh reality of the world. My own face had lost that particular shine by the time I could walk. His eyes were distant as he stared at the sky, as if he wanted to be up there in that jet that was speeding away from us. He said, "I'm probably wrong about it being a bizliner. But teachers aren't supposed to admit things like that. We're supposed to claim an innate understanding of all aspects of the world. Or else our students will stop having faith in us." His gaze returned to me as he held up a finger to his lips. "So, don't tell my students please. My reputation will never recover."*

*The feeling that I was being tested or at the very least messed with grew, and I had to work harder to keep my face an impassive mask. I couldn't understand why this man was talking to me. I asked, "Would you like a refreshment, sir?"*

*He blinked, now looking as confused as I was by this conversation. "A... refreshment? We're outside. What are you offering me? Milk from the cow?"*

*My eyes darted to the nearby barn, where the cow I milked at dawn lived. I said, "If you like. Or I could bring you something from the house if you prefer, sir. I am your servant."*

*"Thank you kindly, but you're not my servant. You're the servant of the family I work for. In a way, I'm their servant the same as you, so you don't need to bring me anything and you don't need to address me so formally."*



*“The fact remains that you are free and I am not.” I bit my lip before I could say more. I was coming dangerously close to being impudent, which was the worst thing a servant could be.*

*Mr. Cooper sighed as he rose from the hay cart to stand before me. He said, “I can see that I have made you uncomfortable. That wasn’t my intent. I know we only just met. I know you’re a servant, and it’s your duty to see to it that the free people around you are content. So, thank you for offering to get me a drink, but I’m not thirsty. It would make me much happier to just have someone to talk with.”*

*I tilted my head as I thought about that—as a servant, I had brought food and drink to sate hunger and thirst, made clothes to warm bodies, and tucked in bedsheets to bring comfort. But if this man craved company, wasn’t that another duty I was obligated by my role to fulfill? I glanced at the sky, where only the faintest puff of smoke remained as evidence of the long-gone jet. “A contrail you say? I’ve never heard that word before. That’s interesting, sir.”*

*“You can call me Raymond,” he said with a smile. Just as I opened my mouth to tell him my name if he didn’t know it, his eyes fixed on my cheek. “Oh, you’ve got a smudge...”*

*I froze as he licked his thumb and rubbed it across my cheek. The gesture was one I’d only read about. My own mother had never cleaned my face in such a way, so it seemed almost like a moment that only existed in fairy tales yet had suddenly become real.*

*“Almost got it.” He licked his thumb again before rubbing it across my cheek again. “There! Not sure what you got on you, but you look perfect now.”*

*“It was likely shit, sir. I just came from mucking out the horse stalls.”*



*His eyes widened and I held my breath for a moment, sure he was about to get angry I hadn't stopped him. Instead, Raymond burst out laughing. He paused to wipe his hand on his pants and spit, but he picked up laughing again a second later.*

*Not thinking about it, my own soft laugh echoed his; it was a sound I'd never heard before so I didn't recognize it as my own for a moment. I lost myself in the moment, feeling giddy as I replayed the surprise on his face, and the way his cheeks reddened as mirth took him.*

*As his laughter wound down, he took notice of the soft giggles escaping me, and his eyes widened. "Oh wow, I didn't know servants could laugh."*

*The sound died as abruptly as it started, and I cleared my throat. I said, "It's just a reactionary thing. I didn't mean to. It didn't come from any emotion. Servants sometimes imitate the actions of free folk. I'm not sure why, but my mother said that it's out of curiosity. Like we're hoping that if we parrot the actions we see, we might feel the same thing as free people."*

*"That makes sense," he said with a nod, and the stiffness in my shoulders eased. "You have a pretty laugh. I hope I get to hear it again."*

*In a daring moment, I said, "Well then, we'll just have to be especially funny and see what happens."*

*Raymond gave me a brilliant smile. My heart started to race in my chest, although I had no explanation for it.*

I inhaled the pages of the book again. Once again, my nose detected nothing but the musty dust of an old library. But because he had given me the book, I imagined there was a hint of hay, the ink of ballpoint pens, and the aftershave that Raymond



favored. I hadn't yet turned off the lamp beside me, I suddenly found myself surrounded by insurmountably heavy things—the weight of the book on my face, my own hands, and my eyelids... I was powerless to shift any of them. I fell asleep with my nose in the book.

# CHAPTER TWO



I was dusting the tops of the display crockery in the corner cupboards of the dining room when a commotion distracted me away from my task. Like a bee drawn to a bud by the scent of nectar, I approached the door of the study and pressed my ear against it.

“I don’t want to do it!” a voice, which I recognized as Dorothea, shrilled.

“I’ve given you an assignment. That’s final.” The second voice was Raymond Cooper.

“I’m not doing it. I have a date tonight!” Dorothea’s voice got impossibly louder.

“Then I suggest you start on your homework now,” Raymond said.

“I will not!” Dorothea raged. “I have to start getting ready now. Listen, you work for me. You don’t tell me what to do.”

“I work for your mother,” Raymond said, matching the girl’s fury with calmness. “And your mother has hired me to teach you. Don’t forget I report to her. If this assignment isn’t done, then she’ll hear about it.”



“Is that blackmail? How dare you threaten me!”

Raymond sighed. “That’s a dramatic choice of words, but I don’t care what you call it so long as you do the assignment I gave you.”

“I hate you!” Dorothea shrieked.

There was a *clomp* of footsteps, and I scuttled away from the door. I still had my feather duster and raised it to look busy. No sooner had I lifted it, than the twin doors of the study banged open. I didn’t react to the sound or turn around to stare. I waited until I heard her walk past me to glance over my shoulder.

Dorothea’s eyes were still on me when I looked back, and she sneered at me as she stormed up the stairs. Her heels clacked loudly on each step, broadcasting her fury to the entire house, daring someone else to cross her path and face her wrath. No one did. The house was otherwise as silent as a forest stumbled through by an inept explorer.

When her bedroom door slammed shut, I dared to breathe again. I lowered the feather duster, only realizing after the fact that I had been dusting a shiny houseplant. I turned, intending to return the crockery in the dining room, but I froze when I saw Raymond.

He was reaching for the twin doors to close them, but appeared equally startled to see me. “Ellie! How are you?”

“I’m well, sir. Thank you, sir,” I made a slight incline of my head, bending first to the traditional training of my role. But then I escaped this pattern, emboldened by the familiarity I had built with the young tutor. I asked in a whisper, “But how are you? That was...”



He laughed, “Dramatic? That’s something I’ve come to expect in my dealings with my student. She’s a passionate girl. I know that if I just find a book that strikes a chord in her, she will write me an amazing paper one day.”

“I admire your outlook,” I said honestly. I didn’t have a high opinion of Dorothea, but Raymond was undoubtedly good at his job. If anyone could get that girl to learn, I knew it would be a teacher like him.

“And how are you liking your book?” he asked, changing the subject. “*Little Women*?”

I had been expecting him to ask about the book he lent me, and I said, “I literally couldn’t close it last night, had my nose in it all night. Thank you again for letting me borrow it.” Raymond beamed at me. “Anytime, Ellie. My library is open to you.”

My lips twitched with a desire to return the smile. But I knew this was just a natural urge to imitate his expression, which was part of being human. My emotions might have been stripped away, but my instincts hadn’t. I said, “I just wish I could repay you for your kindness. Reading the books you’ve let me borrow is the nicest part of my day.”

He waved his hands dismissively. “There’s nothing to repay. It’s my job to share books with people who want them.”

Gesturing with my feather duster, I was about to say something about my job too, but one of the mistresses of the house beat me to it. There was a mechanical bell system—a servant call box with rooms labeled beside indicator lights—in the foyer where I was standing. The box buzzed demandingly, and the sound was enough to stiffen my spine. I glanced at the box, see-



ing the gleam of red light beside ‘Bedroom Two.’ I gestured to the box and said, “I’ve got to...”

“Yeah, talk to you later,” Raymond replied, taking a step back into the study.

I hurried up the same staircase Dorothea had gone up earlier. I was in fact following her steps, as the bell to the second bedroom had summoned me to her room. As my training had ingrained in me, I knocked twice on her door before entering, saying, “You called me, mistress?”

Dorothea was standing before a floor-length mirror, holding a knee-high black lace dress before her body. At my words, she looked over her shoulder to glare at me and said, “It’s about time. What took you so long?”

I didn’t see how I could have walked up the stairs faster, so I just asked, “How can I help you, mistress?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Dorothea waved at the side of the black dress, where a seam was split. “I can’t wear this tonight. It needs to be fixed.” She threw the dress onto the bed beside a sewing kit and collapsed onto the chair in front of her dressing table with a huff. “I don’t have time to deal with this. Everything is going wrong today.”

Taking the placement of the dress and sewing kit as an invitation to sit on the end of her bed, I settled down to examine the damage on the dress. Luckily the tear was on the fabric sheath of the dress, not the lace which would be much harder to repair. I said, “This won’t take but fifteen minutes to fix.”

“Then do it,” Dorothea snapped. But I heard her heave a sigh and I knew my words had eased her mind. She picked up the silver hairbrush from her desk and started running it through her



wavy black hair, bringing the tangles down to the ends to handle them with deft flicks of the brush. The act of brushing her hair seemed to relax her further, and she started to talk. “Tonight is really important to me. I’ve been seeing someone. He’s named Harrison, and today it will have been three months.”

I had threaded the needle and was three stitches in, so I just glanced up occasionally as she talked. I didn’t think I needed to say a word during this interaction to please Dorothea—this was no different than if she was having a conversation with her Papillon dog, Sandy, who was sleeping on a pillow in the corner of the room.

Dorothea continued, “We’re seeing a movie tonight. I’m not sure what and I don’t really care. I’m thinking he might propose to me soon.” When I looked up, she was staring at me and grinned at my reaction. “I know what you’re thinking. I’m eighteen years old, and Harrison Smyth is twenty. Why would he propose to me? Well, what you might not know is that Harrison’s family is a little desperate. His parents make a comfortable living right now, but they don’t make enough to sustain their lifestyle. You know who has money though? Harrison’s grandmother, but the problem is that she hates Harrison’s dad, is convinced that his son is just like him, and currently plans to leave them nothing. Harrison’s dad thinks that if he marries someone from a nice family, she’ll change her mind about him. Hence me.”

I looked up from the dress again, seeing her gesturing to her chest on the last word. My face was an expressionless mask, but she seemed to take something from it.

She said, “I know what you’re thinking. I’d be taking quite a gamble if I agree to this. There’s no guarantee that he will inherit



anything. So why risk it? Well, Harrison is a good-looking guy, I wouldn't mind getting out of this house to live with him, and even if the money doesn't come his way, I know Mom will take care of us. I'm her favorite. And I have a feeling I can win over his grandmother too, if given the chance. People generally like me."

I didn't disagree with that, since she charmed me once too, many years ago. Sensing that it was my turn to say something again, I said, "I'm sure that Mr. Smyth's grandmother will like you just fine, mistress."

"Yes, of course she will. What's not to like?" She sounded distant, so I glanced up from my work to see her staring in the mirror of the vanity before her. She looked unhappy as she reached for a brush to adjust her makeup. "I'm just so tired of people telling me what to do. And I know that's hypocritical of me to say to you, but I really don't care. You're the only person who I get to boss around and I'm taking full advantage of that. I get enough from my mom telling me how to be a lady and how to plan for my future. And my little sister thinks she can get away with everything because no one ever calls her out. And that blasted tutor giving me enough homework to keep me occupied until my thirties."

At her words, I gave an involuntary twitch. The blasted tutor... then when she glanced back, I was afraid she'd seen it and I became very still.

My fears abated as she said, "Oh, and you'll have to finish that assignment he gave me. I won't have time to do it tonight. Is that dress finished yet?"

I was just tying off the last knot, as she rose from her chair to extend a demanding hand for her dress. Snapping off the thread



trailing the needle, I handed it to her and asked, “What is your assignment?”

Dorothea glanced over my work before once again standing before the mirror, holding the black lace cocktail dress before her body—she was going to be very overdressed to see a movie, but for her this was the norm. Gesturing absently over her shoulder, she said, “The book is on the bed. Assignment is on the paper tucked into it. Get started on it, I need to do my hair.”

As she left me alone in the room with just a book for company, I reached for it, relieved that when I turned it over I saw a familiar title. *Pride and Prejudice*. Pleased that I had already read it, I took a peek at Dorothea’s homework, which was an essay. This would be easy for me to write, but the trickier part would be making it look like her work. I closed the book as I thought for a moment but found myself distracted by memories.

While Dorothea was a thoroughly unpleasant person now, there was a period in our childhoods where I believed she viewed me as a friend. I did one of the worst things a servant could do—I lowered my guard around a free person. If I had a heart, her actions would have broken it when she started to treat me like a servant, and I knew our tentative friendship had been nothing but a game to her. Still, I regretted nothing about those parts of my childhood, as when I was with her, I felt loved for the first time in my life.

I picked up a pencil to start working on Dorothea’s homework.

Once more, I was in my sanctuary at my favorite time of day, and yet the peace that normally filled me at this hour evaded me. I was wearing my nightgown and my dark brown hair was tied in



a braid for the night, and yet I couldn't walk over to my bed to lie down. I was fixed to a spot on the floor, before the slatted vent that acted as the window to the attic, letting slices of moonlight through to paint the dark corners of the room. Peering through the vent, I was able to see a little bit of the front yard and driveway below. A dark Cadillac was parked in front of the house.

"No reading tonight?" My mother asked. The brush worked quickly through her hair. *Swick, swick, swick.*

"Maybe in a bit," I answered. "I wanted to see something." I continued to stare out the vent, though there was no movement in the night but the shifting of a tree in the breeze and a bird flitting to a branch.

My mother gave a hollow sort of laugh which servants sometimes make—a reflexive sound, much like a hiccup. She said, "You're reminding me right now of an orange cat I once had. He would sit at the window all day, staring at nothing. But it seemed to make him content."

I narrowed my eyes, though I didn't turn away from the vent. I asked, "You had a cat? When did you have a cat?"

"A long time ago."

I opened my mouth to press her, but then closed it as I finally saw what I'd been waiting for—Dorothea and her date exited the house. She was wearing the black cocktail dress I mended earlier, and her silver earrings glinted in the limited light. Her date was harder to make out in the shadows, but I could tell that he was brunette and was wearing a dark coat that came down to his calves. He opened the passenger door for Dorothea before walking around the car to slide in behind the wheel. The taillights flashed on, and then they were rolling down the driveway. As I



stared at the red lights progressing down the path, they reminded me inexplicably for a moment of contrails. Then I remembered the jets I watched with Raymond on the day we met.

I pressed a fist into my chest as I watched the taillights wink out in the distance as the car rounded a corner. Dorothea was doing something I could never do—leaving the property. A servant wasn't allowed to leave the residence without permission, and I was never going to get it. I was destined to live and die here.

No.

Swallowing heavily, I continued to stare into the night outside the window and into the tree line which was shrouded in secrets as it was from the dark. I pressed a fist into my sternum, and for some reason that made it easier to breathe. I found my resolve. Somehow and someday, I would walk beyond those trees and explore the mysteries beyond them.

“Are you okay?” my mom asked, making me jump a little. “Your breathing... It sounded odd for a moment.”

I crossed my arms to hide the fist that I'd held against my sternum, as if ashamed of it, and turned to face her. “Yes. Yeah, I'm okay. I actually just decided something. I might have been born in this house, but I don't intend to spend the rest of my life here.”

I had expected her to chastise me with the reality that as a servant, I had no say in where I lived. Instead, she snorted and said, “You weren't born here.”

For a moment, I just blinked at her. “What?”

My mother got very still for a moment, a movement I recognized from seeing her being chastised by our mistress—her expression never changed, so that never gave away her discontent, but her body wasn't so carefully schooled. From that momentary



stillness, I knew she had just put her guard up before me. I'd never seen her do that before when we were alone.

If I could feel fear, I knew I'd be feeling it now. I asked, "Mom?"

She ignored me as she put her brush on the nightstand and slid into her bed, tucking her feet under the covers. She avoided eye contact as she said, "I'm going to sleep."

"But where was I born?"

My mother turned off the light and rolled away from me.

For several heartbeats, I stood there. I wanted answers but heard nothing but the pulse pounding in my ears. Accepting that she wasn't going to talk, I eventually walked over to my own bed and lay down. I wouldn't be able to focus on reading, so I turned off the light, but rolled to face my mother, seeing the curve of her shoulder in the shadows. I stared at her just like I had at impenetrable line of dark trees a few moments earlier—I hadn't imagined that the woman I lived with was similarly full of secrets to explore.

She was entitled to her secrets. Being a servant, our lives had limited privacy, so I wasn't going to deny her the place within herself she'd found to stow a mystery. But this was my history she was hiding from me, and I couldn't fathom why. I glared at her back, willing her to speak, but of course she didn't.

Why wouldn't she tell me where I was born? I couldn't think of a reason.

# CHAPTER THREE



My mind was blank. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling for a minute, watching the rising sun light up the dust motes drifting by the rafters. Then I remembered last night—before last night, I'd thought this ceiling was the roof that had been over my head from the first day of my life, but I now knew otherwise. I rolled onto my side, facing my mother's bed. But she was gone.

I narrowed my eyes, as if I could make my displeasure known to her empty bedsheets. My mother always woke after me, due to our different duties on the farm. Every morning, I would rise first to milk the cows, let the horses into the pasture to graze, and check the chicken coop for eggs for breakfast. By the time I brought those eggs inside, my mother would have just made her way to the kitchen to start on preparations for the family's morning meal.

My mother, much like myself, was a creature of habit. We both found solace in habits, order, and patterns—by breaking this routine, she had told me just as clearly as if she had spoken



that she wasn't talking to me. Or more accurately, that there was something she refused to say.

And I needed to hear whatever it was.

Since I knew where I would find her, I rose quickly from bed. Brushing my hair at the same time as I shrugged on my clothes, I made it downstairs in record time. My heart was racing, either from taking the stairs two at a time or from anticipation, as I rounded the corner from the dining room to the kitchen.

As soon as I saw her, I knew she would remain silent. She was at the kitchen island, chopping fruit for a salad, her brown ponytail jerking with the motions. Something about the set of her square shoulders told me that here and now was not the place. My questions would go unanswered in this kitchen. Which was precisely why she had come downstairs early today.

Without turning to face me, my mother said, "I need you to get me some eggs."

I stared at her back for a few more heartbeats before remembering who and what I was again—a servant, and servant's problems have no place in the workday. If my back were sore, I would have to grit my teeth and work through the pain for the day. Only once I was upstairs in my bed after the long workday could I nurse my wounds and try to recover. This was something I learned back when I was a child, carrying drinks on a tray which tipped over, and I cut my hand picking up the glass.

Servants feel no pain, neither physical, emotional, or psychological. Any tears we shed are a reflex, and so we bandage our cuts and keep moving—it was only now that I realized how this applied to my own situation. I needed to know now, like yesterday, what my mom was talking about last night. But I wouldn't be finding out until later tonight, when my time was my own again.



Shoving my curiosity down for now, I went out in search of eggs.

Normally, I could lose myself in the tasks of the day, letting my eyes glaze over as I ran a brush through a horse's mane, or as the chickens rapidly made the grain I threw them vanish. Today though, as I was actively trying to zone out to make the day pass faster, my brain resisted my efforts and stayed annoyingly sharp. I almost felt aware of each second as it ticked past. As I carried a pail of milk outside from the milking barn, it sloshed slightly, spilling a few drops. Then more than a few drops spilled when I put the pail down—it rocked, tipped over, and the entire bucket of milk poured out.

I shrieked, seeing the dry earth drink up the milk I had just collected, and I kicked the bucket in frustration. It rolled across the yard lopsidedly with a dent in the side. A dent I knew I would have to smooth out later, but I didn't care about that right now. My toe smarted in my worn shoes, but I still felt like kicking something else. I looked around the yard for something else to hit, but instead I saw Rufus watching me.

My cheeks flamed at being caught behaving like a petulant child, and then even redder as my face betrayed emotions that I knew I couldn't be feeling. Anger, shame, and now the fear of disappointing a man I saw as a father figure... But Rufus was a servant like me—the only male servant on the estate—and he wouldn't be feeling disappointment in me. Maybe curiosity at the most, and this seemed to fit the watchful way his eyes fixed to me.

I exhaled and felt the tension in my shoulders ease, the way being around Rufus only could. Since I was a child, I had this



idea that so long as Rufus was around, nothing bad could happen to me. As nonsensical as this belief was, I knew exactly where it came from. Fixed in my memory was a day when I was a small child, probably six years old, back before my duties on the estate were much more than polishing small glasses that my little hand fit all the way inside. This allowed me more time to roam the property. Everything about this particular moment was fixed in my mind, and I can still see the hem of my gray skirt billowing as I kicked my knobby knees while skipping along the driveway, and the tasseled stalks of grass that grew along the edge of the drive, heavy with seeds as they blew in the breeze, which were so soft when I cupped them in my little hands.

As the grass stalks held my attention, I didn't see the rider on horseback racing down the path. But Rufus saw him, and scooped me up at the last second, just before the horse trampled me. The rider, whoever it was, didn't stop to see if I was okay, but Rufus was there. He cupped the back of my head and whispered soothing nonsense into my ear to calm me as he carried me in strong arms to the house, little things like 'you're alright' and I knew it was true while he was holding me. It was tenderness I wasn't accustomed to receiving, which I'd never expected to get especially from another servant.

When he put me down and I ran into the kitchen to tell my mother what had happened, I couldn't help crying. She put her hand firmly on my shoulder, telling me that I was only crying out of a reflex, and not because I was actually upset. Even as a child, I found it strange that Rufus had been so much more comforting to me than my own mother, but I was starting to notice things at that age, like how there was a slight alarm in her eyes. Almost as if my tears were scaring her, and she wanted them to stop. So, I



stopped crying, for her. I was okay, I reassured myself. I was okay because of Rufus.

Ever since that day, I'd associated the sight of him with safety, and today was no different.

Looking between me and the kicked bucket, Rufus raised an eyebrow. He's a dark-skinned man with strong, sharp cheekbones and broad shoulders despite his age. In the time that I'd known him, his short-cropped curly hair had gone almost entirely silver. He was wearing his usual tattered gray work shirt and suspenders. He joked, "Bucket do something bad to you, miss?"

My lips twitched with a smile that wanted to come out. I said, "Yes, it tipped over and created more work for me."

"Ah, and that's something neither of us could use." He walked over to a nearby stack of chopped firewood and sat down on it; the muscles in his arms flexed as he stretched, muscled he'd formed chopping every block of wood in that stack. Rufus beckoned for me to sit beside him. "Come, come. Don't let the milk bucket win. Rest for a moment with me."

It was rare to see Rufus rest, and I knew that if I refused to sit, he'd get up to find another task on the little farm. So, I joined him on the wood pile, though my nerves were screaming at me to go back to the cow to see if she had any more milk to give.

"It seems like you have something more on your mind than milk. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were angry." Rufus asked. "Anything I can help with?"

I shrugged. But this was Rufus. I trusted him more than anyone in the world, and I found the tension in my pursed lips loosening. I said, "I've just been thinking about something... and I don't know why it didn't occur to me sooner, but I guess I just sort of accepted the world as it was presented to me. Now



though, I'd just really like to know where I came from. How I came to be here."

"And you asked your mother that?" Rufus asked. It didn't surprise me that he was mindful of that. If anyone in the world could be counted as my mother's friend, Rufus was that person.

I nodded and said, "I tried to ask her. But she didn't answer me. And now she's avoiding me! I don't know what to do... when my mother makes up her mind about something like this, she never budes."

Rufus made an appreciative noise. "You're right about that. Your mother is a decisive woman." He leaned back on the woodpile for a moment in a contemplative silence. When he sat up again, he said, "Okay, so you wanted to know how you came to be? Maybe I can answer that question."

"Oh?" I turned to him. It made sense that he might know. I heard once that Rufus had been on the estate almost as long as my mother. I said, "Yes, please tell me everything you know."

"I feel a little bad telling you something that your mother should have told you..." he started hesitantly. "But you're old enough that you should know about this. She should have told you a long time ago how we came to be. Every servant should know this story."

I tilted my head, unsure where he was going with this, but I didn't interrupt.

Rufus continued, "I don't mean to imply anything against your mother. I'm sure she has her reasons for keeping this from you. It's a subject that none of us know the events of for certain, since it happened so long ago."

I blinked, as my birth had happened just twenty years earlier. Was that really so far in the past, that all the details had been lost



to time? I was starting to suspect that Rufus was talking about something else.

“What I’m saying is, maybe she didn’t tell you this, since what I’m about to share is just hearsay.” He took a deep breath. “But if you’d still like to hear it, this is the story. This began a long time ago. Back in the fifth or sixth century AD. While the exact year isn’t known, it’s said that a king rose to power in the Britons. His name was Arthur, and he went on a quest to bring back an ancient relic, the Grail, which would bring prosperity to his people. Arthur was gone for so many years that his people believed he had perished on the quest. Unexpectedly though, he returned one day, With the Grail. And then everything changed.”

Obviously, this story had nothing to do with the information I’d wanted, but I found myself drawn in by the story delivered in his distinctive baritone. I asked, “And you’re saying that something that happened so long ago could have an impact on our lives today? How?”

“Yes, what happened the day that King Arthur carried the Grail home to Camelot has directly impacted our lives today, and the entire course of history. The securing of this relic for the kingdom of Britain resulted in England’s meteoric rise to power much in the way of the ancient city of Rome that once conquered the world. And unlike Rome, England has never fallen, thanks to the Grail.” Seeing the uncertainty in my eyes, Rufus started holding up his fingers as he listed points. “The Grail is not just an ancient artifact. It represents so much more for the person, the family, the kingdom, and the country that holds it. Those who control it are the head of 1.) the Church, 2.) the ruler of Great Britain, and 3.) the commander of the most powerful army in the world. While all of these things might not immediately seem related to



each other or the Grail, it becomes clear once you understand the power of it.”

“Power?” I asked.

“Yes, it isn’t just some museum piece. As those who have been unfortunate enough to see it in person could tell you, the Grail has the ability to take a human’s soul. This started as more of a ceremonial idea and the cup wasn’t originally used except in times of great need, but the Church conceded that so long as the royal family of Great Britain controlled the Grail with this power over souls, then the king would be the head of the Church as well.”

“This object...” I waved my hands in the air in a shape that vaguely resembled a cup. “It really did this? It takes souls?”

“I can see you don’t believe it, but like I said, those of us who have seen it in person could tell you. Yes, the Grail is very real.” Rufus paused for a second, allowing those words to hang in the air. I didn’t doubt it. He had seen it. Rufus continued, “For centuries, the Grail was the power behind just those two institutions, the throne and the Church. But then events led to it contributing to the rise of the British military as well, and the world that we live in today. It started around the 1400s. I’m not sure which Plantagenet king was the first to use the cup for this purpose, but legend has it that there was a rise in poverty in the realm. The king ordered that a man be brought to him from the poorhouse. Do you know what those are?”

I shook my head, having never heard the word.

“I’m not surprised.” Rufus said. “They don’t exist anymore, but a long time ago if a man or woman ran up a debt they couldn’t pay off, a judge could send that person to the poorhouse. Not



just the person either, but their entire family, as some debts took multiple generations of work to pay off. If the parent failed, then their child would be burdened with responsibility for the debt and continue the work until it was paid.”

“That sounds so harsh,” I said, unable to think of anything else to say. “I can’t imagine being a child or parent in that position.”

Rufus held up a finger. “You actually have more in common with them than you might think. That is, if the legend is true. It’s said that about 500 years ago, there was a man whose debts were so severe that instead of being sent to the poorhouse, he was asked to present directly to the king. The king told him how his debt would likely take four generations to pay off—he had doomed not just his own son, but his son’s son, and so on. Or... the king presented him with another option. Previous kings had not yet used the Grail in this way, only ensuring those who donated their wealth that the Grail would ensure that they had purchased their place in paradise. Yet now a new option would be offered—the exchange of a soul to clear a person’s debt.”

“Why would the king offer this?” I asked.

Rufus shrugged. “I’ve wondered that myself. And my best guess is that this was done to set an example. Previous examples set, the poorhouse and generational debt, hadn’t been horrific enough to prevent the poor from spending beyond their means. So, a new example had to be set, with this man who would now walk the earth without his soul. Who would want to be him? Other than the most desperate to save their children from the consequences of their bad choices.”

Finally starting to get it, I said, “So, that’s what you meant? That’s where we come from. The origin of us.”



“For the most part, yes,” he said with a nod. “There’s a couple more details. The first thing we should be asking is, how true is any of this legend? Should we believe any part of it?”

I blinked. I’d taken all of this at face value because Rufus had told me this story and he wouldn’t lie to me. But now I realized, he was just telling me a tale as it had been told to him. I said, “I see. What if this legend is just a story told to provide an explanation rather than the truth?”

“Exactly. It just seems too much like a fable to me, a cautionary tale about losing your soul if you spend irresponsibly, a convenient way to demonize both the poor and the soulless with a single stroke of a pen on the page.” He shook his head as he stared into the distance. “No, I’m not buying this neat explanation that has been provided to us.”

“What’s your theory?” I asked, as my brain was already buzzing to come up with explanations of my own.

“The Grail is a real object,” Rufus started slowly. “But I’m not confident it is a religious artifact like we’ve been told. My theory is that it is a scientific innovation that the royal family controls. We were told it is the Grail so we don’t question it, but for centuries it has been used to create two classes in society with our king at the head. Not just at the head of society, but also at the head of the army. And not just any army, but an army of servant soldiers as well, who are obedient, immune to pain, and have aided the Commonwealth in becoming the leading global power through centuries of conquest.”

I sat in stunned silence, absorbing this for a moment. I swallowed before saying, “That seems like a more plausible story.”

“Less mystical though, isn’t it?” Rufus looked at me with a glint in his eye, seeming to gauge how I was processing this.



“Just a bit,” I said simply. I’d have to think more about this before it all sunk in. I asked, “Was there something else? You said a couple more details.”

“Yes, there was one more part to the legend actually,” Rufus said, scratching the stubble on his chin. “The original legend, not my speculation. The legend goes on to say that more people opted for the king’s new punishment, rather than going to the poorhouse and ultimately passing on their debts to their children. Things went as expected for the men, as they became the first soulless servants. But as women also became servants, an unexpected consequence arose. It wasn’t immediately obvious to the king or anyone what had happened... not until the women had children and the children were... well, people could tell something was wrong with them. But it took time until it was confirmed. But eventually, people realized that if a soulless woman gives birth, her child will also be a servant. It’s said in the final line of the legend that this gave rise to a new saying, ‘There’s no escaping the debt.’ As the women who had hoped to save their children from their monetary debt had passed on a different kind of debt. And so, the servant class in society was born.”

I shivered. I had hoped to hear from Rufus where I came from. In his own way, Rufus had answered exactly that question.

# CHAPTER FOUR



I pretended to dust the spotless clock in the parlor on the mantelpiece, when really I was watching the seconds tick by, waiting for the moment when it was unlikely I'd be called to run a late bath, fetch someone a last cup of tea for the evening, or some such evening duty. Once the family I served had turned in for bed, then I could do the same. My mother would already be upstairs before me. Which meant that as soon as I arrived in the attic tonight, I'd be able to interrogate her some more... or sit in the dark as she pretended to be asleep again.

As the hour hand finally ticked to nine and the clock began to chime, I sighed in relief as I lowered the feather duster, the tension in my arm muscles easing slightly. I turned, already envisioning the pathway up the stairs that would lead to my room. Instead, I saw Raymond and jumped in surprise. And then immediately felt guilty for not regarding him impassively. Raymond had a talent for making my mask slip, and this wasn't a good thing. I lowered my gaze to the bowtie at his throat and asked, "Would you be needing something, Mr. Raymond? Could I make you a hot drink? Coffee, tea?"



“No, Ellie. To the drink. But yes, I need something.” He nodded to the doorway behind him, indicating I should follow him.

Pausing only to put down the feather duster, I trailed behind him. I wasn’t surprised when we ended up in his office.

Raymond nudged the office door to give us a bit of privacy but didn’t shut it all the way so I wouldn’t feel trapped in the room with him and feel uncomfortable. This was never something I had to ask him to do; he just knew. When he settled behind his desk, I noticed the paper on his desk and swallowed heavily. Dorothea’s homework... of course. Raymond gestured to the chair across the desk from him. He said, “You can sit down if you like.”

I didn’t move, other than fidgeting my gray skirt between my fingers. For a reason I couldn’t comprehend, I’d wanted Raymond to think highly of me. And now it seemed like Dorothea had spoiled that, and I was frozen, trying to find the words that would fix this situation.

“Or... this is fine too. This works.” Raymond rose from his chair and walked around his desk, so that it wasn’t between us. He leaned against it so that the backs of his thighs were pressed against the edge of the desk. “This is better. More casual. Because all I’d wanted was a casual conversation. I hope I didn’t alarm you.”

I blinked at that. Servants don’t get alarmed. I raised my gaze from his bowtie to his chin, as I asked, “And what would you like to discuss, Mr. Raymond?”

Raymond reached for the paper and held it before himself so he could scan it with his glasses perched low on his nose. He said, “I’d like to discuss Jane Austen with the person who wrote this paper, and I think we both know that the author isn’t Dorothea.”



The glasses made it a little easier to glance up occasionally at his eyes, as if the thin lens was blocking a forbidden direct gaze. I said, “It’s her name on the paper. What reason do you have to doubt its validity?”

“For one, I’ve noticed that her bookmark in the copy I gave her of *Pride and Prejudice* hasn’t moved past chapter one. But more importantly, I know you, I know how you talk. This is you speaking on the page.” He sighed and rubbed his eye past the glasses, as he said, “Listen, Ellie, I’m not upset. I know you have to do what she says. And I’m not going to say anything to Doro. If she wants to skip reading one of the great classics, that’s her choice, and I can’t force her. The only reason I’m saying anything now—when I know this isn’t the first time she’s done this—is because I wanted to talk about the book with you. Would that be acceptable?”

“Oh.” My shoulders relaxed as I finally understood. This wouldn’t be unlike conversations we’d had ever since Raymond handed me my first book, unaware I only had the most basic of reading skills at the time, and I’d have to struggle to catch up with a dictionary beside the book to have a discussion on the same level as him. “Yes, that would be alright.”

Raymond glanced at the essay in his hand once more before he said, “I am just trying to understand this point about practicality that you are making here, about practicality driving the choices of characters in the book. I can see practicality being the driving force in Charlotte’s choice to marry Mr. Collins of course. She summed that up in her conversation with Lizzie after her engagement. But Lydia’s elopement with Wickham?”



“From the viewpoint of her family, of course Lydia’s choice is foolish,” I said. “But that isn’t what I meant by practical. I meant she made a calculated choice to accomplish her goal, which was to leave home and start a more mature phase of her life with a well-to-do man as her husband. See? Practical.”

“Hmm...” he considered this as he leaned back harder against his desk. “And here I always viewed her as motivated entirely by love and passion. Okay, I can see that. What about Lizzie though. How can you say she is driven by anything but pure love for Mr. Darcy?”

I wrinkled my nose. Perhaps I was bringing my bias here, but I didn’t enjoy reading stories centered around an emotion that I would never experience. I said, “If she is driven solely by love, then how do you explain the fact that she didn’t accept Mr. Darcy’s proposal until the second time he made it, after she had visited his house and seen how many servants he had, and she could finally actually visualize herself living in such a fantastic place?”

“So, her acceptance of the proposal has nothing to do with the list of grievances she aired during the first proposal, which he then rectified?” he asked, lips quirking at the corner of his mouth. “It’s all to do with the house?”

I shrugged, as I couldn’t dispute that. And I certainly didn’t have an argument that Mr. Darcy was driven by a material purpose if he asked that next. I admitted, “It could be. Maybe a bit of both.”

“Both! Exactly. Love and practicality. The two aren’t mutually exclusive states. They can both exist at the same time, driving our choices. This is what I believe Austen is trying to show us, with these very different relationships in her novel.”



I opened my mouth, hesitant for a moment, but I then said, “I’m not sure I agree. It’s just that... the two seem so paradoxical to me. The concept of being in love and being practical. I don’t see how they can coexist at the same time and influence a person to make a choice. Like for Lizzie to marry Darcy.”

“I think I understand what you mean,” he said softly. He paused to put the papers down on the desk before continuing. “It isn’t practical that I want to kiss you right now.”

“You can’t be serious,” I whispered. I dropped my gaze to his tie again, but that only made me notice the way the Adam’s apple in his throat moved when he swallowed.

“I’ve been wondering... do you feel the same?” he asked. “Do you want to kiss me, even if it isn’t practical?”

“It’s forbidden for me to want that,” I said simply. This should be all the answer he needed.

“Practically, yes. But only due to the outside world.” He gestured to the window, as if the world was a thing very far away from us. “If none of that existed. If it was just you and me in this world, with nothing outside this room. Just us, what would you want to do?”

“But that’s an irrational question!” I insisted, even as the rules started to slip away as I looked up to meet his direct gaze. “We aren’t the only two people in the world.”

Stepping closer, he said, “Be a little impractical, just for a moment. If we didn’t have to worry about any of that. If we could just have each other... would you want me?”

Without thinking. While just feeling... a cardinal sin for a servant, I answered, “Of course I’d want you. Of course I do. Yes.”



He kissed me then, gently, slowly, allowing me to pull away if I wanted to... but I didn't. As his lips moved against mine, I felt it—I understood how the world could fall away so that two people caught in a moment could be the only two who exist in the world. There was no society, no rules, just this, and I allowed myself to have him. I allowed myself to exist in the fantasy he had painted.

I was very aware of his hands when he placed them on the small of my back, holding me close. I wanted to touch him too, so I trailed my fingers along his arms, feeling the warmth of him through the tweed jacket, and across his broad shoulders before finally settling in his hair. I deepened the kiss.

Raymond pulled away from me breathlessly after a few moments. He looked at me and smiled, kissed my lips softly once more—just enough to leave my skin tingling without rejoining our connection. He whispered, “I really like you, Ellie.”

That was it. That was enough. I dropped my hands to my sides and took a step back from him. I asked, “What is it you are doing here?”

He stared at me for a second before saying, “Exactly what I said. I'm not thinking about society or anyone outside this room because I don't care what they think. Nothing else exists for me, just you, and I like you.”

“You like me...” I repeated as I shook my head.

“You don't believe me?” he asked. “Ever since I met you, you're the only girl I can think about. I've never met anyone else like you. Your strength, your beauty, your mind... I fell in love with you the first time we discussed sonnets, and my feelings have just grown deeper every day.”



I took another step back. I said, “You can’t say that. You can’t feel that way about me.”

“I don’t care if it’s forbidden. We’ll run away or—”

“That’s not what I mean!” I interrupted. “You can’t say you like or love me when I can’t say it back. When I will never be able to say it back. I don’t want that for you. You deserve better. For your feelings to be returned because I want nothing more than to return them, but I will never be able to. I am incapable of feeling those things.”

There was a moment of silence in the room as we both processed that exchange. Finally, Raymond responded, “If you don’t care about me, then why are you crying?”

“I can’t do this,” I said softly, swiping at my cheeks. As I turned to leave the room and head up the stairs, I realized how foolish we had both been to think that by being two people alone in a room, we could banish society and its rules. So long as one servant exists in a room with a free person, then the class system exists. I will always be a servant and no amount of pretense will free me from this.

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The lights were off as I made my way up the stairs, and I didn’t bother to turn them on as I navigated the grand staircase, then the hallway, and finally the twisting spiral staircase that led to the attic. I knew my way by the feel of the walls, the creak of the boards beneath my feet, having memorized this path long ago. I didn’t need the lights, and tonight I didn’t want them as the tears rolled silently down my cheeks. As I struggled to stifle the sniffing that accompanied the tears, I could at least take comfort in



the fact that no one would be able to see me crying in the dark. I wouldn't have to explain to them that I wasn't crying because I was upset, servants don't get upset. What I was feeling wasn't my heart tearing apart in my chest, and I didn't want to run back down the stairs to tell Raymond that I'd been wrong, I did feel something for him. Because that was impossible.

I didn't love him, and I wasn't crying because my heart was breaking.

Leaning my back against the wall beside the attic door, I took a deep breath. In and out, in and out. My breathing got easier, and I rubbed my cheeks to dry them. More tears fell just as quickly to wet them, but I had gotten control of myself. If I quickly went to my bed with my face turned away, my mother might not notice. Though I wished she would... My mind flashed again to Jo and her mother Marmee Marsh from *Little Women*. If Jo came running to Marmee because Laurie had made her cry, or she cried because she had rejected Laurie, then Marmee would have wrapped her arms around Jo as she told her all about it.

It was getting harder to breathe again. What hurt the most wasn't that I wanted those arms wrapped around me, or that I hated that I wanted those arms around me, or that I'd only ever read about arms like those. What hurt was that maternal hugs like that didn't only exist in works of fiction. If Dorothea cried, then her mother Mistress Doolittle would hug her. Mothers in the real world loved their daughters. It's just that my mother, through no fault of her own, was incapable of loving me. No amount of crying would change that, or allow her to be able to comfort me now.



Breathe, in, and out. In and out... Control. I found my control. After making one more futile attempt to dry my cheeks, I turned the doorknob and stepped into the attic. I blinked as I stepped from darkness into more darkness. While my routine sometimes had me walking upstairs in complete darkness, it was also routine to step into the light of the attic. Tonight, the only light was coming in the small window in the center of the wall across from the doorway I stood in. Pausing in the threshold, I listened as my eyes started to make out shapes in the dark. There was the even sound of breathing coming softly from the mound of covers in my mother's bed. She was there, pretending to be asleep.

The minimal amount of affection I had come to expect from my mother was that she would wait for me at the end of every night, if only for a few minutes, if only to sit in her bed across from me brushing her hair while I read before saying goodnight. Tonight, even that was gone.

My control didn't slip, as my breathing remained even long enough for me to brush my teeth by moonlight, change into my nightgown, and slip into bed. I had no desire to read tonight, even if the book hadn't been *Little Women* and if Raymond hadn't been the one to give it to me. As I stared up at the slanted eaves of the ceiling, I resolved to do something about this. What I had from her wasn't much, but she was my family, my only family, and I wanted her back. Tomorrow night will be different. At some point, maybe after the dinner shift, I would tell her that I didn't need to know. Her past was her own, and I didn't need to hear her secrets.

It wasn't worth losing her to hear the truth about my past.

# CHAPTER FIVE



“Pick one!” Dorothea demanded, holding up two dresses before her body. One was black with sequins that tapered to the thighs in a flower petal design. The other was red and low cut with shimmering beads stitched to the bodice. She waved them at me impatiently.

“They both look fine,” I said blandly. This felt like a trap, like if I said something bad about one of them I would be accused of insulting her style. And really, I don’t know what she wanted from me, I had no feelings about what she wore.

Dorothea sighed in exasperation. “You have no idea how important tonight is for me. I might be getting engaged. For the rest of my life, I’ll remember the dress I was wearing when Harrison proposed to me, and you don’t care what dress I’m going to wear. I can’t believe you don’t care.”

I blinked. “But Mistress, I’m not able to care about anything.”

“Okay...” Dorothea said, as she seemed to accept that. She lowered the dresses as she thought. “Well, can’t you give me an



objective opinion? Like, which looks the nicest? Which I might look prettier in?”

I tilted my head as I thought. “Well... red and black traditionally have different meanings assigned to them. Red is linked in symbiotics to passion and even promiscuity. Black is traditionally for mourning.”

Dorothea’s cheeks flushed. “I didn’t ask you for a lesson in symia... in symmetry! I asked you for your opinion on a dress. Are you so stupid that you can’t even do that?”

It was my opinion that she should ask her sister for her opinion on a dress, but I said, “The black will probably look good with your skin, you should wear that one.”

She sighed and tossed the red dress away on her bed. “Finally. It’s about time. You really have a problem with being indecisive. A servant should be quicker to make up her mind. You’re lucky my family is so charitable to take someone like you in.”

My mind flashed in inspiration. “Mistress, may I ask you a question?”

Having turned to admire herself in the mirror with the dress pressed against her body, Dorothea glared at me over her shoulder. “What? Make it quick. I have to get ready, he’ll be here any minute.”

I knew she really wanted to make him wait and would find another reason to dawdle even if I wasn’t here, but I wasn’t going to point that out. “Do you remember when I came here?”

“How the hell would I know that? I would have been a baby, if I had even been born then.”

“I know, Mistress,” I said, but I pressed on, desperate for answers. “I was hoping that perhaps your mother would have men-



tioned something about that. Like, did she ever talk about me being born here?”

Dorothea snorted. “My mother has better things to do than talk about how she got her servants. And so do I.” The sneer froze on her face though, and then she said, “Actually, she did say something once. She didn’t buy your mom. She was bragging, when her friend talked about how much she’d just paid for her new cook. Mom said that one night, her cook showed up in the middle of the night with a baby in her arms. and begged to come in from the cold before her child froze. And bam, she got two servants just like that. She jokes sometimes that your mom is the best stray cat she ever took in, and she didn’t even have to put out a saucer of milk.”

My reflection in the mirror was slack jawed, and as soon as I noticed I composed my face. Luckily, Dorothea had been lost in her story and hadn’t noticed how it affected me. I wanted to know more, like if she knew where I’d come from before, but I could sense that her patience was wearing thin with me. So, I just said, “Thank you for telling me, Mistress.”

Dorothea regarded my face in the mirror, and there was a slant to her eyes that told me she was suspicious of me. “Why did you need to ask me about this? You could have just asked your mom about this.”

I opened my mouth, unsure what to say, but luckily I didn’t have to answer.

Althea burst through the door, her eyes wide as she took in Dorothea still in her casual day clothes, a white blouse over cream khakis. She hissed in a whisper, “What are you doing, Doro? Why aren’t you ready? Harrison got here five minutes ago.”



She turned to the window in a swirl of black skirt, still clutching the black dress to her chest, and gasped in horror as she saw the black Cadillac parked in the rounded driveway before the house beside the water fountain. “Oh my gosh, what am I going to do?” Dorothea glared at me. “This is all her fault for distracting me!”

“It will be okay!” her sister assured her, also shooting a glare at me for good measure. “Do you need help with anything? Can I do anything?”

She waved away Althea. “No, no. My hair and makeup are done. I just have to put on the dress.” Another glare was aimed at me. “And *she* can handle that. If she doesn’t start running her mouth again. Althea, could you go downstairs and entertain Harrison until I’m ready?”

“Of course. But hurry.” Althea whispered again, as she stepped back into the hall and pulled the door shut behind her.

I continued to face the wrath that was Dorothea’s best glare. Little did she know that I became immune to that expression years ago. She said, “Well, are you going to help me with this?”

“Of course, Mistress.” I took the dress from her and held it for her to free her hands.

Dorothea kicked off her shoes and started to lift her shirt over her head, but froze when there was a light tap at the door. She sighed. “Althea, I said I don’t need any help.”

“Not Althea.” A male voice said, as he pushed the door in slightly to peek inside. “May I come in?”

“Harrison!” She let go of her top, which once more fell to conceal her stomach. “What are you doing here? My sister is supposed to be talking to you downstairs. I’m not ready.”



“I can see that,” he said, as he entered the room without invitation and closed the door. “I gave Althea the slip. I wanted to see for myself if you were still getting ready. I heard a rumor once that some women are totally dressed when their dates arrive, but lie that they’re still getting ready to make the men wait.”

“Well, I would never do that,” she said, as she blinked much more than was necessary, making her false eyelashes dance like butterflies. “But I can see the appeal. Don’t you think some women are worth a little bit of waiting?”

“It wasn’t the wait that bothered me, just the game.” Harrison held up a hand to halt her words. “And before you ask, I don’t mind playing games. Games can be fun. I just prefer to be the one running the games, rather than being the one toyed with.”

“I’m up for any game you can think of,” Dorothea said with a sly smile. But then she appeared to remember me and her eyes narrowed. With a nod at me, she asked, “Should I get her to leave? So we can have some privacy.”

“I wouldn’t want to be accused of doing anything your parents would disapprove of.”

“Well, what they don’t know—”

A scream cut off Dorothea’s words, and we all looked at the bedroom floor. Everything was silent for a moment, and my mind was racing for an explanation. Did someone drop something? No, there wasn’t a crash. Did someone see a mouse? Maybe.

Dorothea and Harrison looked at each other, and then back to the floor as raised male voices came through the ceiling below. He asked, “Who is that?”

“I don’t know, we only have one male servant, and he never shouts.” She then gasped in horror as she looked out the window.



The sun was starting to set, but there was enough light to see two men with guns standing by the front door. There was still shouting below, so there had to be even more people with guns inside. Dorothea said, “Oh my gosh, I think we’re being robbed.”

Harrison pulled his phone out of his pocket and furiously tapped it. “Something is blocking the signal. I can’t call 911.”

Since I was standing closest to the landline, I picked up the receiver but shook my head when there was no dial tone. The line had been cut. We couldn’t call for help.

“What are we going to do?” Dorothea asked.

“It’s okay, it’ll be okay,” he said softly, as he put a comforting hand on her shoulders, also making her take a step back from the window in case the men with guns looked up.

“How the hell is it supposed to be okay?” She shoved his hands off her and swirled around to glare at him. In a whisper, she pointed to the floor. “My family is down there. There are armed men in my house. What are we going to do?”

“Hide?” He suggested.

I liked the sound of that, as I was already eyeing the wardrobe.

“And when they find us? What if this is a kidnapping attempt? My grandfather is wealthy, what if they mean to ransom us?”

“I actually had another idea,” Harrison said, as his eyes shifted to me. “Do you and your servant wear the same size clothes?”

# CHAPTER SIX



“This isn’t going to work,” Dorothea grumbled, as she slipped into the stiffly starched maid’s uniform I had just removed. I was already shimmying into the black dress that Dorothea had been planning to wear tonight—Harrison had said that the expensive dress would clearly mark me as a target, in comparison to the casual clothes his girlfriend had been wearing. She shot me a glare and said, “No one is going to think she is me, this is ridiculous.”

“We’ve just got to sell it, and it will work,” he said, offering her a towel. “How about we get that makeup off your face?”

She swatted the towel away. “Are you kidding? Do you know how long it took to put this on?”

“If I may,” I said slowly. “The makeup isn’t what will make my mistress fail inspection. It’s her expression. She doesn’t look like a servant.”

Harrison’s eyes widened, finally seeing it, but Dorothea composed her face with a neutral expression. In my uniform and with that face, she could have been me—if I could only smile, then we really would have switched places in life. Harrison opened his mouth to say something, but just then the door opened, and we all flinched.

I smelled the man before I saw him. Cigarette smoke, body odor, and liquor. He pushed his way past the door, shorter and stringier than I would have imagined, but his gun made up for the intimidation his stature lacked. He regarded us with bulging eyes that peeked through greasy black hair, and grinned when he saw us sufficiently cowed. “Well, isn’t this nice,” he purred. “Tony, look, I think these are the stragglers to the party we were missing.”

Another guy, presumably Tony, entered the room. He was bald with a stoic enough expression that he could be a servant. In a low booming voice, he said, “Cooperate, and no one will get hurt. Follow us downstairs. And don’t get any ideas. If you have any weapons, I suggest you put them down now.”

Dorothea, who had apparently been hiding a stiletto heel behind her back, put it down on a table as Harrison shot her a look. She was still composing her face carefully and looked sufficiently cowed, more so than I ever expected to see my snobbish and willful mistress.

The first man with a gun wagged a finger at her. “Sneaky monkey. You go first, I want to keep my eye on you.”

He gestured with his gun, and the three of us filed out of the room with the gunmen looming behind us. Dorothea trembled as she put her hand on the railing. I saw Harrison extend his hand, wanting to comfort her, but a second later he seemed to remember who was walking behind us, and he grabbed my hand instead. I stared at him. Even though I could logically understand he’d grabbed my hand to cover for his mishap, I still thought he’d gone nuts. Why would he want to touch me? His palm was dry as it rubbed against mine while we walked down the stairs side



by side, and I wanted the contact to stop. At the same time, I was acutely aware of the eyes on us, and the hairs raised on the back of my neck. If I were in the attic right now, I'd be safe. I could crawl under the blankets in my bed and go to sleep, and none of this would be happening.

As we entered the foyer of the house, I took a deep breath. I reminded myself that I couldn't possibly be feeling discomfort or fear right now. I was a servant, and those emotions had been purged from me. And just like Harrison had told Dorothea, it would all be okay.

"In there," the guy with the greasy stringy hair said, once more gesturing with his gun as he directed us to the living room. I wish he would realize it wasn't a pointer.

We obeyed and entered the packed living room. Everyone was here—the mistress of the house was hugging Althea, whose face was tear-stained. Raymond was sitting across from them on the sofa. My mom and Rufus were standing by the bookcases. And three more men with guns were hulking in the room, secure in their powers of intimidation as they bent us to their will. One of them said, "Is that the last of them, boss?"

The guy with the stringy hair was apparently the boss, and he nodded as we stood in the center of the room. The boss said, "Looks like it."

There was a second as everyone we knew in the room seemed to register our change in wardrobe, as I stood in Dorothea's nice dress, while she tried to look meek in my maid's uniform. No one said anything though luckily, and my mother tipped over a photo on the bookcase of Dorothea, hopefully before any of the armed men noticed it.



“Well, well, well,” the leader of the group said, seeming to enjoy his position of power over us. “So, what do we have here? Some rich folks and their servants.”

“I’ll give you anything you want,” the mistress of the house said. “Just please don’t hurt my daughters.”

“Is that so,” he said dismissively, sounding unconvinced. Then he started gesturing with his gun again, pointing at me and Harrison first. “You two can sit down with the others. And the servant can stand by the wall with the rest.”

As Dorothea seemed to struggle for a second to obey the order that delegated her to stand by the wall with my mother, I sat on the sofa beside Althea. Harrison took the remaining chair in the room next to Raymond, who was staring at me. Maybe he was trying to figure out why we swapped places—I wished I could explain it to him. I returned his stare, for once not self-conscious that my position demanded I drop my gaze.

“So, you’ll give me anything?” the boss asked Dorothea’s mother as he stood before her. “And just what is it that you think I want?”

“Money?” the mistress guessed.

He scoffed, looking around the house. “Money is nice, but I don’t think you have the amount I’m looking for.”

“I’m a Smyth,” Harrison pleaded. “Just don’t hurt me or my girlfriend’s family, and my father will make it worth your while.”

Dorothea made a little sound in the back of her throat, and several eyes shifted to her for a few seconds. Then the armed men exchanged a look.

The leader whispered to his men, close enough for me to hear, “What do you think? Is he bluffing?”



The man who had introduced himself as Tony shrugged. “Can’t hurt to bring him with us too.”

“Well,” the boss said, turning back to those of us gathered on the sofa and chairs. “That’s good to know. But we’re looking for a sum bigger than even a Smyth could offer. Something more like a bounty worthy of a king. And I’d wager there is someone in this room who knows what I am talking about. Eh, Priscilla?”

Everyone blinked and looked around at the faces gathered in the room. Of the five women here, none of us went by that name. There was myself, Ellie. Mistress Theodora and her daughters Althea and Dorothea. And of course, my mother Cecelia. I was starting to think that there was a misunderstanding going on here. Maybe that meant they would leave soon, once they realized that?

The leader withdrew a photo from the pocket of his jacket, which he put on the coffee table before the sofa. It was a headshot of a woman with dark hair in a glamorous blue gown. Her eyes looked wise with one eyebrow arched slightly, like she was aware of some inside joke the viewer of the picture wasn’t, and she was practically dripping in shimmering sapphires.

It took me two whole minutes to recognize my own mother, and luckily I had a lifetime of practice composing my face. None of the others sitting beside me seemed to have had the same flash of recognition yet.

The boss of this gang wasn’t similarly hindered though, and he was currently enjoying this moment of suspense. I could tell he was a man who enjoyed evoking fear in others. He wasn’t going to get any of that out of my mother though. My palms were sweating, and I had no idea why. I tried to dry them on the black



skirt of the dress I'd borrowed, but the fabric wasn't porous. All I could do was not stare at my mother in case there was a chance she could get away.

Tapping a finger on the photograph, the leader said, "Look familiar to anyone? Even if you don't recognize her as someone you know personally, maybe she seems like someone you have seen in the news. Maybe from a decade or two ago?"

"Well, obviously," Raymond said, and I swallowed heavily. Why did it have to be him? Why was he the one whose words doomed my mother? He continued, "That's Priscilla, the Princess of Wales. She died almost twenty years ago, not long after the crown prince was murdered. Everyone knows that."

"Died, did she?" The boss leaned closer to Raymond. "Or did she disappear? No one has ever seen her body, all she has is her name carved in a wall beside where her husband is interred."

Raymond scoffed. "Nonsense. Don't tell me you believe that conspiracy theory. It's no different than people speculating about the fate of the Romanov family. It's all conjecture."

"I like a man who speaks his mind," he said, before slapping Raymond on the back of his head, making him wince and nearly knocking the glasses off his face. "But you're wrong. My benefactor had information that she wasn't killed at the same time as her husband. Someone showed her mercy... well, mercy depending on your definition of it. And she was smuggled to safety, somewhere around here. My benefactor has been looking for her for a long time, and someone matching her description was spotted at the market."

"Are you mad?" the mistress roared, looking between the photo and my mother's face. She'd finally put it together, and she was



furious. “You fools think my servant is the late daughter-in-law of our King? I think I would know if my own servant was royalty.”

“And just what do you hope to get out of her, if she is the princess?” Harrison asked, looking between the picture and my mother for a resemblance. “If this servant, Cecelia, were the princess living in secret, how do you expect to profit from that?”

The leader of the group picked up the picture and returned it to his pocket. He said, “Well, that’s the thing. The wife of the late prince on her own isn’t worth much. She was only royalty by marriage after all, and no one would pay much to get her back. Or pay to make sure she never comes back at all, rather. But the true missing jewel here is her daughter, the only living heir of her grandfather, the King. And there are quite a few people who want her back, and even more who want to know without a doubt that she’s really dead.”

While everyone who knew me in this room tried very hard not to look at me, all of the armed men turned to look at Dorothea, who was standing beside my mother. She looked baffled by the sudden interest in her, so perhaps she hadn’t been paying close enough attention to the conversation. She squirmed in my shoes as the leader walked over to her and lifted her face with his weapon, getting a better look at her.

“Get off of me!” Dorothea could not hide her rage at being touched by a man like him, and batted his hand away.

“This your daughter, *Princess?*” he asked my mother, making it clear the title was used to mock her. I was still waiting for someone to realize this was all a joke or misunderstanding, and I could hardly stand seeing him so close to my mother.



My mother nodded and put a hand on Dorothea's shoulder. She whispered, "Yes, this is her."

"You don't touch me either!" Dorothea spat, slapping my mother's hand off her shoulder. "No one touch me. I am no servant. Everyone get off of me."

"That's my daughter," the mistress said, now that it was clear the ruse was endangering Dorothea. "She's not my servant Cecilia's daughter."

The boss looked between the two mothers, thoroughly perplexed. "You ladies trying to pull one over on me? It's not going to work. I'll take all of you with me if it comes down to that."

"You're not taking me anywhere," Dorothea said with a stamp of her foot. She picked up the photo that my mother had overturned and held it up for him to see. "Look! This is me. I'm a daughter of this house, not a servant."

The leader of the gang looked at the photo, but didn't seem entirely convinced. He pointed his gun at my mother, almost casual in his violence. "Where's your daughter then?"

My mother met his eyes, unblinking in the courage of a servant who feared neither pain nor death. She said, "She died. I came here alone. The granddaughter of the king was buried long ago."

"Well then," he said, raising the gun to her temple. "You're useless to me if you can't tell me where she is."

"That's right," my mother said.

My head was spinning. I had no idea why she didn't just deny all of this. All I knew was that I was about to see my mom die, and I couldn't stand it. I stood up and shouted, "It's me! You're looking for me."

# CHAPTER SEVEN



As my mother closed her eyes and swallowed heavily at my announcement, the leader of the group turned around with a grin. He said, “Oh? And who do we have here?”

I dropped my eyes submissively and said, “Your servant, sir.” I said it, even as I hated myself for saying it. Yet I had to follow the rules. “I’m Ellie. I’m her daughter. Cecelia’s daughter.” I refused to refer to her as Priscilla. As the absurdity of the situation made my hands balled into fists, I found my voice again. “We’re not who you think we are though. My mother is no princess, and neither am I. We’re servants. Even if this story were true and my mom was once this Priscilla—which she wasn’t—then we’re still not of any use to you. A person without a soul is not fit to sit on the throne. So, we’re neither of use nor a threat to your benefactor.”

He walked over to me, while I kept my eyes downcast, so I didn’t see that his grin had further widened until he lifted my chin in the same way he had Dorothea’s. The boss seemed pleased when I didn’t flinch or slap him away, and he said, “You have a



point, but that's not for me to say. I'm just here for a job. Although... if you are a soulless servant, why speak up at all? Why not just let me shoot your mom, while you stayed safe? Makes me think there's more to you than you're letting on."

I scoffed, entirely baffled. "Just because I'm a servant, you think that means I wouldn't care if my mom died?"

There was a second when everyone in the room just stared at me, as if the answer were obvious, and I was disgusted by all of them. And then I was disgusted with myself for feeling disgust. What was wrong with me?

The leader of the gang seemed to have lost interest in me or my feelings, as his eyes got distant, and he didn't bother to answer my question. "Well, we got what we came for." His eyes flicked to Harrison and he said, "And maybe a bonus prize as well."

"We haven't even taken a look yet," his lackey Tony said, eyeing drawers on the furniture, as if guessing which might contain the family silverware.

His boss shrugged. "Have at it. I'll get our little treasures here loaded in the car." He started gesturing with his gun again. You three. Mom, daughter, and pretty boy who says he's worth a pretty penny. Follow me."

Harrison rose beside me shakily. He was probably kicking himself for not shutting up earlier, but I was barely aware of him.

My mother took a step forward, but Rufus blocked her with an arm from going further. She looked like she was completely unfazed by his actions, almost like she had been expecting them, but I stared at him with wide eyes. He was unarmed. What was he thinking?



Rufus boomed in his deep baritone, “I can’t let you take the ladies?”

“And who are you to say where I take them?” The leader snorted while his men stood to attention around him—a half dozen armed men had their fingers idly resting on their trigger fingers, while staring at a man who was like a father to me. Bile rose in the back of my throat.

“I’ll tell you who I am.” Rufus took a protective step forward, putting half his body between the men and my mother. “I am a member of the royal guard. My family has served the York family for generations. And you are taking my Lady and her daughter out of this house over my dead body.”

“Okay then,” the leader responded.

It took me a few seconds to realize what happened. There was a loud noise that made me flinch and my ears started ringing. When I looked around the room to figure out what happened, I saw Rufus fall to his knees, then saw a spray of red on the wall behind him. Rufus leaned forward, clutching his shoulder, and his breathing seemed labored.

I screamed in horror, unsure what I was even doing or thinking, but I felt a desperate need to go to him. I didn’t care if I got shot next, I just wanted my friend to live. Arms encircled me before I’d made it more than two steps, and I thought Raymond had grabbed me protectively. I struggled against him, but I couldn’t get his hands off my waist, and he ignored it when I stomped on his feet.

“Settle down, you can’t help him now. You’ll only get hurt too. And I don’t want to see that,” the person behind me whispered in my ear, and I realized it was Harrison holding me, not Raymond.



I froze and stopped struggling against him, more out of surprise than anything else. Once again, I couldn't believe he was touching me so casually. But Harrison really was the least of my concerns, and I shoved him out of my mind as I returned my attention to Rufus.

He was alive at least and was managing to stay upright on his knees, despite the gunshot injury. There was a trickle of blood running down the front of his light-gray shirt, still stained with grime from his work that day. And I had to wonder, if once the armed men left and if Rufus was still alive, would Mistress Theodora call a doctor? Or would she weigh the cost of his medical care against his age and perceived worth, and decide he was better suited to a hole in the ground she would order his replacement to dig?

Something warm and wet wound its way down my cheek.

"Are you coming?" the man who shot Rufus asked my mother. "Or do I have to put another hole in him."

"Coming," my mother said. She took a step forward, but Rufus grabbed a handful of her skirt to stop her. All my mother had to do was put a hand on his wrist, and he released her. She kissed the top of his silver head as she walked past him and said, "Rest easy, my soldier. You have done well, and there is no shame in surrendering to impossible odds. You have done your duty, and now I must do mine."

As my mother crossed the room with her head held high, I saw her for the first time as something else—her shoulders weren't bent as she worked on a task in the kitchen and her eyes weren't downcast submissively. For once, she met the eyes of everyone in



the room and carried herself with grace like she had been born to it. She was letting herself be what she always had been, royalty.

At last, I believed it. Everything they'd said was true. I stared at my mother with my mouth slightly parted, but I couldn't make myself ask her anything now, not in front of everyone. She looked at me, and I knew there were things she wanted to say too.

The boss gestured with his gun in the direction of the hallway that led to the front door. "This way, *princess*." His tone made it clear that he'd used the title only mockingly. "My benefactor can't wait to see you again, after all this time."

"Who hired you?" the lady of the house demanded from the sofa, halting the progression to the hall. "If you're getting paid for bringing her to this benefactor, shouldn't there be something in it for the family who looked after her for all this time?"

"Oh, there's something in it for you," he said with a grin. He said to his man, "Hey Tony, make sure that this family gets what they deserve."

I was looking ahead to the doorway to the hall, so I didn't see Lady Theodora's reaction to that or if she even read into his tone. But a cold chill ran down my spine. Suddenly, I felt grateful to be walking out the door.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



“Keep walking.” The boss poked me in the back with his gun to get me to walk faster out the front door.

“What’s your name?” I asked, as I stepped onto the front porch, thoroughly fed up with the fact that he was so casually handling the object he’d just used to injure and possibly kill Rufus.

“Why do you want to know?” he asked, pausing on the front porch to glare at me out of the corner of his eye.

I shrugged, knowing he wouldn’t tell me anything. There was a small part of my brain that was fantasizing right now, feeding off the hope that if I could just get away and get the police, I could tell them who to arrest if I knew his name.

The man didn’t introduce himself and dismissed me. He lost interest when I didn’t respond and scanned the night until he saw the car in the driveway beside the fountain. “I thought I saw a Cadillac on the way in.” He fished the keys out of his pocket, which he had apparently grabbed from the coffee table beside the phone and wallet when he had the people in the living room



empty their pockets. “Looks like we’ll be riding out of here in style.”

Harrison couldn’t hide his annoyance. “You came here in a car too. Why take mine?”

“Because it’s a nicer car.” He grinned, his teeth flashing white in the night. “And because if I’m going to sell you back to your family, that sporty car makes a nice down payment on my investment. So, I might as well cash in now. Let’s go take a ride in my new car.”

The pair of armed men that I first saw from Dorothea’s bedroom window were still standing on the porch, and with a nod the boss signaled them to follow us. As the three of us—my mother, Harrison and I—trailed behind the leader of the gang, the looming figures from the porch followed us like shadows in the night.

I noticed my mother was walking stiffly, so I looked at her. She was staring at Harrison, and when I turned, I saw he was staring at her too. They were communicating wordlessly, glancing at the men and nodding slightly. A chill ran down my spine, knowing that something was about to happen. Were they insane? These men had guns. Would it be so bad to let them take us somewhere?

But then, my mother seemed to have some idea who these people might work for, and it didn’t sound like we needed to be brought there alive necessarily. These men had nothing to lose by bringing us there with all the force they wanted. I still thought it would be better to wait until a time presented itself for us to run, but my mother and Harrison were going to fight back at any second.



The boss pressed a button on the key fob, unlocking the doors of the car, and I saw my mom and Harrison both stiffen out of the corner of my eye. This was happening. Any second. I looked down at my feet to the gravel driveway. There was only one thing I could think of to help. I buried the toe of my right foot in the gravel and leaned forward, pitching forward with an exaggerated yelp. Hoping to tip my mother off to what I was doing, I clutched my right ankle and whined, “Ow, ow, ow!” My mother would know that as a servant of dulled senses, I couldn’t possibly be in that much pain. Even though my palms did sting from where they landed on the gravel. I continued to whine, hoping to draw the eyes of all the armed men, “I think I sprained my ankle. It really hurts.”

It was working. They were looking at me, seeming unsure if their role as my kidnapper included chivalrously helping me to my feet when I fell. The two who had been standing on the front porch glanced between each other, and the one who was closest to me holstered his weapon before bending to offer me a hand. I really didn’t need it, but I took his arm and acted like I was struggling to find my footing. I could hear a scuffle starting behind him—Harrison was doing something to the other man from the front porch—and as the man helping me tried to turn to see what was going on, I pretended to lose my balance again, this time holding firm to his arm to bring him down with me.

“Sorry! Oh, I’m sorry!” I said quickly, trying to keep up the ruse a little longer so he didn’t think I was attacking him. I knew he could reach for his gun again at any second. And I knew I should be reaching for his gun too, while he was lying on top of me, but that might tip him off even further. But I really didn’t



want to touch it... So, I just kept saying, "I'm really sorry about that. I'm such a klutz."

"What?" he tried looking over his shoulder. He wasn't paying attention to me, and I couldn't drown out all the noise that was going on behind him, as Harrison and the gunman grunted and swore at each other, possibly while struggling over control of the weapon. "What's going on?"

"I hope I didn't hurt you." I put my hand on his cheek, trying to stop him from turning around. I had never done anything like this before, I had no idea what I was doing. And yet, I was a reader. I could channel the great literary characters who would know what to do in this situation, like the great seductress, Moll Flanders. I could be her right now. This was going to be hard to sell, but it was the only thing I could think to say to distract him. "You're so... handsome."

He stared into my eyes for about two seconds. I saw the moment he refused to buy it and started to push himself to his feet to get up. A blow to the back of his head put a stop to that, and he collapsed onto me, knocking the breath out of me with an *oof*. Before he was rolled off me, I knew that either Harrison or my mom had come to my aid by knocking him out. I looked up, hoping to see my mom. It was Harrison, and the other man from the porch was already knocked out behind him.

Turning my head, I looked in the direction where I last saw my mother standing beside the car by the boss. She was still there, locked in a struggle for the gun. It looked for a second like things were okay, as she drove his wrist into the hood of the car. He let go of the gun and it skittered across the gravel, out of reach under the car.



It was going to be okay. I swallowed my heart, which had been lodged in my throat, and allowed Harrison to help me up. As I was getting up though, I saw the boss reaching for his belt. I screamed, “Mom! Look out!”

A knife flashed out and my mother grunted, the air around her seemed to crackle with tension as she struggled to take control of it. She had grabbed the blade with her palm and a trickle of red ran down her wrist. I couldn’t see much in the dark, but I saw the leader’s eyes—they were wide and the whites were bulging. There was madness in those eyes, and he would kill my mom the first chance he got.

My breath came in heaving gasps. I picked up a rock from the driveway and lobbed it at his head. It bounced impotently off the hood of the car. He ignored me.

Without looking back, my mother said, “Get in the car, Ellie. Now.”

Out of a lifetime of listening to my mom, I took one step towards the car with the intent of getting in. But I couldn’t leave her. I took a shuddering breath and stopped. There had to be something I could do to help.

“Hey! Over here.”

I looked over my shoulder. Harrison had picked up one of the guns dropped by the goons we’d knocked out. It felt like the tides had finally turned in our favor. We weren’t helpless anymore. We could fight back. I felt a wave of hysterical laughter coming on.

Harrison pointed the gun at the leader, and it occurred to me that he might not be a good shot, not in the dark, if he knew how to shoot at all. Also, if the men currently looting the house looked out the window, then it would be over for us. Hopefully



the boss didn't think of any of this. Harrison said, "Let the woman go. Or I'll shoot."

My mother, who hadn't realized what was going on, got distracted in her struggle with the knife to look over her shoulder—maybe she was worried that I was the one in trouble and she couldn't help checking. With a snarl on his face, the boss took advantage of the lapse in her concentration to regain control of the knife, which he held to her throat. He spun her around to face us, showcasing the threat. "I don't think I need to tell you what I'll do. How about you put down the gun?"

Harrison met the man's fierce expression with one of his own. "Why should I do that? She's not anyone to me. I have nothing to gain by putting down the gun, and everything to lose. You were kidnapping me for ransom a moment ago, and if I shoot you, I get to walk away from here. So, I have nothing to lose by pulling this trigger."

As someone who spent my life carefully schooling my features, it felt like I should be better at reading faces to tell when someone was bluffing. But I had no idea if he meant it. I was tempted to grab the gun just in case. But the boss already knew that I was motivated to keep my mother alive, and his threats to harm her would disarm me.

"Alright..." he said, seeming to buy that Harrison meant it. "How do you want to play this, kid?"

"You're going to give us the woman, we're going to get in that car and drive away, and then you get to live. How does that sound?" He said all this without blinking, never taking his eyes off the pair locked at knifepoint.



The boss was starting to look less convinced, and I could tell he was the type of man that didn't like being under anyone else's control, he was a snarling, rabid dog that would jump the leash at the first chance he got. "Alright kid. How about I walk over there, so you can get in the car? How does that sound? And I'll just hold onto this little lady while you walk over here, real slow."

"Yeah, come over here," Harrison said, not sensing trouble as he and the man walked in measured paces, with my poor mother being dragged along with him. The gun made Harrison feel like he was in control, but he wasn't.

The boss grinned as he got closer to the gun, almost near enough to reach it. He could even shove my mother at him, knock Harrison off balance, and then dive for the gun. He thought he had won.

"That's close enough," I said. Hoping I was holding it correctly, I had the gun from the holster on the man I'd knocked down earlier. "Let her go, and you can go back inside. How does that sound?"

The leader scowled at me, but he stopped moving in closer to Harrison's gun. He said, "How do I know you're not going to shoot me the second I let go of your mother?"

"You could always throw that knife at me if you think I'm going to try it. Now," I said slowly. "Let. My mother. Go."

"Okay, okay." He backed a couple more paces to the door, while he had a chance, but started to loosen his grip on my mother. "We'll do a countdown, just to make sure no one gets trigger-happy."



I nodded in agreement, while Harrison took advantage of this moment to open the car doors, so we had somewhere to run. I said, “Countdown from three, and let her go.”

He scowled a little more, clearly having planned to count from something like ten, which would’ve had him on the front porch, so he could potentially drag my mother inside with him. The boss relented and started to count, “Three. Two... One!”

My mom stumbled forward with the shove, but kept her footing and broke into a sprint towards the car. I tried to hug her, but she shoved me into the car before following me inside. She slammed the door shut and shouted, “Go, go!”

Harrison leapt into the driver’s seat, wasting no time in case the guy really did think throwing the knife was a good idea. I had a split second of panic that the only set of keys were in the pocket of the boss, but when Harrison flipped down the visor another set fell into his lap. He stabbed them into the ignition, and the car roared to life.

I turned to see the man hollering into the house for his crew, but it was too late for them. We had escaped.

# CHAPTER NINE



As the house vanished out the back window of the car, I tried to settle down. But my nerves that I'd put a clamp on all night were frayed. My hands shook and the gun fell from them, clattering onto the floor of the car. In the face of everything else we'd endured tonight, it shouldn't matter that I was further away from home than I could ever remember being, but somehow it did—after years of looking out the window of my attic room, imagining what it would be like to finally leave, why'd it have to happen like this?

I never owned much in my life, but the few things I did consider mine, like my books, my clothes, the interesting pebbles I'd picked up from the garden, a leaf I'd pressed between two stones, all my little treasures were now gone. My identity too... who was I now? My whole world was gone in an instant. Everyone I'd ever known other than my mother was gone. They could be dead right now: Dorothea, Raymond, Rufus. Suddenly, I felt selfish for mourning my meager belongings in the attic.



Breaking the silence that we had all fallen into while we caught our breaths and put some distance between us and the house, I asked, “Are we going to a police station? Are we getting help for the others?”

“Sounds good to me,” Harrison said as he drove. “If I still had my phone, I’d have already called 911.”

“No!” my mother said, leaning forward to clutch desperately at the front seat. “We can’t afford to stop at a police station. We don’t have time for that. Neither of you understand what’s going on here. You have to keep driving.”

“The only reason I don’t know what’s going on is because you won’t tell me,” I snapped. If she had just answered some of my questions, maybe this could have been avoided... I was startled by the way my chest felt tight and my cheeks flushed, and I took a deep breath to shove down whatever it was that had made me raise my voice. I continued, a tad more calmly, “Why shouldn’t we stop at a police station?”

My mother was carefully watching the road, as if she could drive Harrison away from any unwanted stops. “First of all, you don’t know how long we would get held up there. We could lose precious time, and they might catch up with us or send someone else after us, while we’re busy answering questions from the cops. Second, you don’t know who might show up at the police station, looking all professional with badges and demanding we come with them. But it would just be another killer, and we’d never get further along our journey than a ditch in the road.”

“So,” Harrison asked after that sank in. “As the one driving, could I know where we’re going?”



My mother paused for a moment, but I didn't think she had any doubt where we were going. More likely, she was questioning if she should include Harrison in this conversation, but eventually something seemed to convince her, and she said, "I've kept my daughter safe on my own for as long as I could. She needs the rest of her family now; they're the only ones who can help. We need to get to her grandfather."

"The King?" Harrison asked. "So, we're going to the Capitol. Good thing he's in the Americas right now... I'm not sure how we'd get to Great Britain otherwise..."

Despite the questions that should be spilling from me right now, I sat in stunned silence. I just couldn't accept any of this. I'd wanted to hear from my mother's mouth who my father was, and where we'd come from, but now that this conversation was happening, I couldn't accept any of it. I wanted to turn back the day and start again, to do it right again. I pressed my forehead into the back of the driver's seat and closed my eyes for a moment, just feeling the car rock beneath me. If I kept them closed long enough, maybe this would have all been a bad dream.

\*

I blinked and my eyes were scratchy. I had the feeling that I'd fallen asleep, but I wasn't sure how much time had passed. My neck and back ached from having been slumped against the front seat for a while. I peered out the windshield. It was still night, and it was too dark to see anything but the trees bordering the road. I wanted to know how long I had been asleep, but instead I asked, "Where are we?"



Harrison answered, “Honestly, I’m not sure. I was trying to stay off the main roads since I thought those were more likely to be watched. We’re headed south... which should be the right direction. And I think we’re currently near some nature reserve. The spots to park on the sides of the road are hiking trails. Luckily, it looks like no one is here at this time of night.”

I nodded, though he couldn’t see me, since I realized that even if he had told me the city, street, or GPS coordinates of our current location, I’d have had no better sense about where we currently were in the world relative to where we were traveling. The world was an enormous place, and for the first time in my life that I could remember, I was out in it... it gave me a sort of claustrophobic feeling, as I pictured myself as this small thing walking through a massive hedge maze, and the walls were too high for me to see the tops.

The fact that we were driving through a winding forest right now probably was contributing to this visual. If I were alone in the unknown, I probably wouldn’t be able to breathe. I realized then that this was my chance. There were so many questions I had, and my mom couldn’t avoid me while we were stuck in this car together. Like, how did we end up in that house as servants, and what happened to my father. I turned to her and said, “Mom, can I ask you something? ...Mom?”

She was slumped in a corner of the car, and all I could see in the darkness was the pale curve of her cheek. She didn’t answer me. Was she asleep?

“Mom?” I slid closer to her. As I did, my fingers touched something wet, sticky, and hot on the leather seats. I held up my hand to get a bit of light from the moon on my hand. It looked



black in this dim lighting, but the smell was unmistakable, bringing me back to the kitchen with my mom when I'd helped her to prepare a freshly butchered chicken for dinner. It was blood of course. "Mom!"

She sighed as I pawed at her to try to figure out where she was injured, and opened her eyes. My mother put her hand around my wrist to try to stop my searching; my palms were now wet with blood, but I hadn't figured out where it was coming from yet. She squeezed my wrist to stop my efforts and said, "It's okay. Stop. It will be okay."

"How is it going to be okay?" I thrashed in her grasp to escape but stopped when I felt how weak she was—it scared me. And feeling scared made me terrified. My voice broke as I asked, "How... how is any of this going to be okay? You're bleeding. Mom, you're bleeding a lot."

"It's going to be okay because I've done my part. I raised you. And you're going to be alright without me. I've set you on your path, and I can see how it will turn out just fine. So, it's okay."

"No. No!" I struggled again, not caring this time about how frail she felt as I got away. I smacked the back of Harrison's seat, as if his attention wasn't already on the commotion in the back-seat, and demanded, "Find a hospital. Now."

"How?" he asked. "I told you, I don't know where we are. Where do you expect me to go?"

"I expect you to go to the hospital. My mom is hurt. Get her to someone who can help," I said coldly. I'd never spoken like this to a free person before, giving them the orders I was more accustomed to receiving. I didn't recognize the sound of my own voice right now, but I didn't care. Being a servant devoid of emo-



tion had its perks sometimes, and I leaned into that to find the unrelenting stony face I needed right now. There was going to be no negotiation. My mother was going to the hospital.

“Ellie, we don’t have time for this,” my mother said, putting a hand on my forearm. She didn’t try to hold me in place this time, and instead she was reaching out. “I have to tell you...”

“Stop it,” I snapped. “You’re going to get help, and it will be okay.”

“I don’t know where I’m going,” Harrison said softly, almost apologetically. “But there’s a first aid kit in the trunk. Maybe there’s something in it that will help, or even buy us some time so I can figure out where we are. Would you like me to get it?”

I thought about it for a second before nodding. “Yes, please get the first aid kit.”

Harrison pulled into one of the parking areas on the side of the road for hikers. He switched on the overhead light before exiting the car to retrieve the kit. Cowardly, I couldn’t make myself look over to assess the damage in the light, and I just listened to my mom’s labored breathing and felt the warmth of her hand resting on my arm. For as long as I didn’t look over and see how bad it really was, I could live in the belief that I wasn’t losing her.

I asked, “When did you get hurt?”

“When he pulled the knife, he cut me on the side of my ribs,” she said, almost dismissively. “There are things I have to tell you. Important things.”

“*You* are important,” I insisted, rubbing my eyes before tears could leak out—I was under enough pressure now, without my body also betraying me with emotions I wasn’t prepared to accept were my own. But my internal turmoil felt insignificant in the



face of this crisis. My mom was gravely injured, and worst of all her very soullessness did not allow her to be bothered about her own existence. I repeated my words, hoping they would sink in this time, “Mom *you* matter. Your health is important, much more than any secret you might have been protecting. How could you not tell me you’d been hurt?”

“You would’ve tried to get me to go to the hospital, the same as that detour to the police station you’d proposed. And we can’t afford to lose time on something like that. You have to get to safety, that’s all that matters.”

“Lose time?” I scoffed, and my cheeks flared with heat as I scowled. “It’s you I can’t afford to lose. I don’t know how you can’t see that.”

The door beside my mom opened, and I turned to see Harrison holding a first aid kit he’d retrieved—the size of the white box with a red cross on it didn’t reassure me at all, it didn’t look big enough to contain a solution to this problem. And it took one look at Harrison’s face, as he assessed the damage, to know that he felt similar. He collected himself, tried to smile reassuringly, and sat beside my mom in the backseat as he got to work on the cut on her side.

The meager contents of the first aid kit—rolls of cotton gauze and antibiotic cream, quickly vanished from the box, like a stick of chewing gum being slapped on a crumbling dam.

I finally forced myself to look directly at my mom lit by the car’s overhead light, and there was blood. I’d already known that as it was all I could smell since I noticed it, and the blood was soaking into the right side of my dress, causing the fabric to stick to my thigh. Yet it was another thing to see it staining my



mom's belly on her once tidy, starched gray maid's uniform. Her dark hair had escaped her neat bun, and strands were straggling around her face, sticking to the sweat on her forehead. She was staring at me, and all I could do was swallow heavily. I didn't know how to process this. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to help her. And it finally struck me how selfish I was being, chastising her for not telling me things. She was trying to talk to me now, and I might not get another chance to hear her. I could despise her later if I was so inclined, but right now I shouldn't push her away.

My mom reached out to touch my arm again, and her fingers trembled this time—I could tell the effort it cost her to move just this little bit. She said, “I can tell that you're upset. You've been angry with me.”

I shook my head in an automatic denial of the feelings. I was a servant. We were soulless and therefore neutral subservient beings and were beyond the sway of emotions. It was simply impossible to feel.

My mother said, “You were angry with me a moment ago for dismissing the value of my own life, when I couldn't care either way about my existence. You care if I live or die, when I don't. Doesn't that tell you something, my dear?”

I shook my head again, this time from confusion rather than denial.

“They took my soul, but not yours. I became a servant, and only me.”

I heard her words, but they refused to sink into my brain, like water pouring into soil which is so dry and cracked that it strug-



gles to drink. Looking for something I could hold onto in what she'd said, I asked, "Who is 'they'? Who took your soul?"

"There's not enough time to say everything that needs to be said." My mother glanced at Harrison, who had given up on stopping her bleeding with the gauze and was now pressing his suit jacket against her side. This would at most buy her a few more minutes. She looked at me again and withdrew something from the front of her shirt, a leather pouch secured around her neck with a string. She tried to lift the bag over her head but couldn't raise her arm high enough and she had to give up with a huff. Gesturing for me to take the bag, she said, "Here. It's all in this pouch. Everything you need to know, where you need to go. I've written it down. Take it."

Reluctantly, I lifted the bag over her head, but I didn't want it. I told her, "I wanted to hear this from you, not read it. We should still be taking you to the hospital. Then you can explain all of this to me yourself."

She gave me a ghastly smile, and it was clear the expression was one that was triggered by muscle memory, rather than emotion. "If this is going to be our last conversation, my daughter, then let it finally be about the truth rather than lies. You know I won't make it to the hospital, and I lied to you about who you were. You said you wanted to hear it from me, so okay." Her speech was starting to slur, as she tried to get out the words past exhaustion. "I need to tell you who you are before it's too late."

It was bothering me how untidy her hair was, so I brushed the strands back from her forehead with my fingers and tucked what I could behind her ears. "Okay, who am I?"



“You were born Eleanor of York, and you were born free. You are still free. Your father was the only child of our King. You are his heir, fit to inherit the throne since you have your soul.”

My head was spinning. This wasn't what I wanted to hear. I didn't want an inheritance, I wanted answers. I wanted a mother. I shook my head. My voice quavered, as tears rolled down my cheeks, betraying my insistence that I wasn't feeling any of this. “Why are you doing this, Mom?”

She lifted her other hand from the jacket, no longer caring to hold pressure on the wound I knew must be fatal. Instead, she took my hand and put the leather pouch into it. “I'm doing this...” she faltered in her speech as her words got fainter. She took a deep breath and tried again. “I'm doing all of this... protecting you, all these years. I had to protect you, even when I lost my soul, because I'm your mother. I remember how it felt... to love you.”

I clutched the bag in my hands tightly. It hurt to look at her, and I couldn't deny my pain. I rested my head on her shoulder, the way I would have if I were still a child.

She kissed my hair and said, “That's something they never tell you... when they take your soul. Even if they take your heart, they can't take the memories. I remember loving you, and I could never forget.”

# CHAPTER TEN



My mind was numb for a while, I'm not sure how long. Time didn't mean much to me now. All I was aware of was that one second, I was pressed against my mom's side, listening to her labored breathing, and then she didn't take another breath. I shifted my head, searching for her heartbeat, but found none. And I became unmoored from the world. I clutched tightly to the woman who had been my anchor in life. She was gone now, but I clung to her body anyway, memorizing the feel of her hair under my hands and the scent of her—she smelled like sweat and herbs from her time cooking in the kitchen.

I lost myself in this task of remembering everything I could of my mother, holding onto every detail of her and storing it in my mind, because the alternative was focusing on the reality of what had just happened. And I wasn't prepared to face the bleakness of reality right now and all the emotions that came with that. What she had told me about myself still hadn't become an accepted part of my reality, so I just wouldn't think about it.



Suddenly, I heard something that made me stiffen as I became aware of it, and I clutched my mother's body like I could protect her from it. Something was scraping against metal, and then there was a woosh and a clatter of rocks. I shivered and my teeth clattered. It struck me how vulnerable I had allowed myself to be, when the people who had killed my mother might still be looking for me. She had wanted me to live, so I must live, and I had to be more cautious than this. Looking around the car, which was still bright from the overhead light, I saw a pair of scissors in the first aid kit, and I felt better with something sharp in my hands. The gun that had fallen to the floor of the car was another possibility... but I didn't want to touch it.

I looked at my mother and instantly regretted it. Her jaw was hanging slightly agape, and her eyes were staring at nothing. She really was gone, and I felt foolish for clinging to her when she wasn't there. Out of respect, I shut her eyes and then clambered as quickly and quietly as I could out of the car. The black dress stuck to my thigh with drying blood, which I tried to ignore as I looked around for the source of the sound. I couldn't see anything, yet it seemed to be coming from up the trail. For a second, I thought about running down the road away from it, but I didn't know where I would be walking, and I was reluctant to leave my mother's body there in the car alone—it was one thing to accept she was gone, but yet another thing to discard her like trash.

Instead, I crept carefully up the path through the trees, and peeked around one, with the scissors held high to defend myself. I had only gone a few paces before I noticed Harrison's jacket lying on a bush, illuminated by moonlight. I couldn't make out much of him or what he was doing in the dark, but I relaxed and



lowered the scissors—in the stress of the moment, I’d completely forgotten that he was here with me. The thought itself was disappointing, as I compared a mental image of Raymond here with me instead, holding me and comforting me in my loss, rather than making odd sounds off the hiking trail.

Something about the dark felt like it was pressing on me with a weight, almost like it had a physical presence that would be better if I went unnoticed by it, so I whispered, “Harrison? Harrison, over here.”

My eyes were starting to adjust a little to the dark, so I saw as he looked around for me, using his shirt sleeve to brush his brown bangs out of his eyes and dry his forehead. He was having trouble finding me in the dark and stepped into the moonlight as he searched in the clearing, eventually spotting me by the trail. “Oh, there you are,” he said. I noticed what he was holding, as he dug the tip of the shovel into the ground and leaned on it. Harrison asked, “How are you doing?”

The question made me flinch a little because I didn’t want to think about the answer. I was fine. I was absolutely fine. Ignoring what he had asked, I responded with a question of my own, “What are you doing up here?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Digging a grave. Luckily, I had this in my trunk.” Harrison read into my silence, and continued, “I mean, your mom had seemed pretty adamant that she didn’t want us going to a hospital or police station, so I figured that this would be what she wanted. Not that I knew your mother, but this seemed like the most respectful thing to do. Bury here. If only for now. Like, once things settle down and you’re safe again, could you have her dug up and reinterred somewhere more permanent?”



I was tempted to point out to him that we had no idea where we were right now, so how was I supposed to have my mother's body moved later, but instead I nodded. He was right, this was what my mother would have wanted. Even though it was never what I'd wanted for her. I asked him, "Do you need help digging?"

He shook his head. "It should be deep enough. I mean, I wasn't able to go down six feet, but it should get the job done. We could be out here digging all night and probably not get much deeper, there's a lot of rocks in the soil that are in the way. We can cover the grave with some of the rocks or pull shrubs over it, to stop animals from getting at the body." Harrison hesitated and looked at me. "Sorry... that's your mom, not a body. I probably sound very insensitive right now."

"Not at all," I said, surprised by the fact that he thought I was offended. "You sound very practical to me. Should we get the body? You probably can't move her on your own."

He gave me a look, but said, "Um, yeah, sure. You can hold her feet, I'll do the rest."

I nodded and led the way back down the trail. It was easier than I thought it would be. Even with the mental image of my mother's gaping mouth and dead stare still fresh in my mind, I had found my nerves. Like a mantra, I reminded myself of what I was over and over. I was a servant. I was free of my emotions. There was no reason for this to hurt me. And it worked.

Harrison walked past me to reach the car first. He took a deep breath before reaching into the car to pull out my mother's corpse. His arms were under her armpits, her head lolled against his chest, and he looked like he wanted to be doing anything else



as he heaved her body until her feet thudded into the gravel of the parking area.

I stepped in to do my part, picking up her feet by the ankles. Ignoring how cold the skin was and who the legs belonged to, I lifted her feet and did my best to keep up with Harrison as he walked backwards up the trail, looking over his shoulder as best he could to not trip. We were both huffing by the time we made it to the clearing off the trail where he'd dug a grave.

With a respect that surprised me, Harrison lowered her as gently as he could before letting her drop into the grave, rather than tossing her in, which would have been easier. He looked at me and asked, "Is there anything you want to say? I mean, before we fill it in."

I shook my head and said, "Something to say? No. Something to ask? Yes. But she isn't here to answer if I ask, so I don't see the point." My thoughts returned to the leather pouch my mother had handed me, which was now back in the car since it had completely slipped my mind. The thought of an animal or a person taking the bag when they came across the car sent a chill down my spine, and I couldn't believe I'd been so careless with my mother's last gift to me. Wanting to get back to the car, I said, "Let's fill it in."

Harrison picked up the shovel to start shifting dirt onto my mother's body. I couldn't just stand there and watch, so I got down on my knees beside the grave and started pushing clumps of dirt into the grave. It was hard to look into the grave, watching her being covered, but it felt like the last thing I could do for her, and it felt like this should be done by someone who mattered to her, not a stranger like Harrison. Towards the end, he took a



step back, seeming to know that I needed to do this as I took the last two handfuls of loose dirt and patted them onto the mound of earth. I was covered with filth up to my elbows, but the task wasn't done. I looked around and asked, "What about the rocks and shrubbery you mentioned?"

He gestured to where he had piled the rocks with his shovel. "You can move those onto the grave while I pull up some shrubs. I'll bring them over to pile on top in a second."

The rocks were smaller than I would like, on average the size of a fist, and I hoped they would be enough to deter any wild animals from disturbing the grave. Just in case, I piled most of them over her head, as that felt like the most important thing to protect. As promised, Harrison returned in a few minutes with several small bushes which he'd upturned with his shovel or snapped off particularly stubborn bushes. Together, we dragged and arranged the bushes across the grave, trying to make it look as natural as possible for the prying eyes of hikers.

Long after Harrison had stepped back from the grave, I was still standing there, shifting various plants into place like I was arranging flowers in a vase. This burial had been a task I was holding onto desperately to keep moving, and by finishing this I had to accept that it was over. I had to find something else to hold onto now. Luckily, I knew what I needed to do next... or at least, had a sense where my destination was. I let go of the leaf of the bush I had been toying with, and made myself take a step back. It was done now.

A hand fell on my shoulder, and I flinched away from it. "Sorry!" Harrison said, holding up his hands as I stared at him, as if to show he was no threat. "I was just trying to comfort you."



“Comfort me?” I scoffed.

“Yes, my mother died when I was a boy, and I cried like a baby. I just mean to say, I know what you might be feeling right now.”

“First of all, I don’t need comfort. And second of all, you are the last person in the world I’d want comfort from,” I said, again thinking of Raymond. He might be dead right now, like my mother. This man standing across from me was nothing to me. I continued, “I appreciate you helping to bury my mother, but this concludes our time together.”

It was hard to see Harrison’s face, but my eyes were adjusting enough to the night that I could see he was surprised. He opened his mouth to say something, but I didn’t care enough to stick around to hear it. I started back down the trail and could hear him following me, the shovel clattering on the trail as he dragged it. When I returned to the car, I was relieved to see the leather pouch. It had actually fallen out of the car when I got out, and I scooped it up. I hung it around my neck, since my mother had done the same, and tucked it down the front of my dress.

Turning, I saw Harrison staring at me as he stowed the shovel in the trunk. I said, “Goodbye, Mr. Smyth.” I started to walk down the road, and my shoulders stiffened as I heard him following me. I snapped without turning to look at him, “What do you want? Why don’t you get back in the car?”

“Why don’t you get back in it with me?” He asked. “Is it the blood bothering you? There’s a towel I can put down in the back.”

I whirled to face him and said, “No, nothing is bothering me. Stop asking me that. I’m fine.”

He held up his hand, looking just as defensive as when I flinched away from his touch. “Okay, nothing is bothering you.



Sorry I asked. And I'm sorry I'm here, when obviously you'd rather I be someone else. But can you at least tell me where you are going?"

"I'm going to my grandfather. But you already knew that."

"And where is your grandfather?" he pressed me.

"He's in the Capitol of course, since he's the King." I said this with much more confidence than I felt. I knew from reading the newspaper that the King traveled around the commonwealth depending on the time of the year, and I wasn't sure if he was currently in the Americas or in the United Kingdom.

"And what do you know about the Capitol?"

"It's named Cornwallis, after the great war hero Lord Cornwallis, who defeated the rebel army of General Washington who attempted to usurp the crown. Lord Cornwallis led a massive army of servant soldiers into battle at Yorktown in 1781." I bit my lip to get myself to stop talking as my cheeks flamed, as obviously this wasn't what he was asking.

Harrison gestured around us and asked, "And which way is the Capital of Cornwallis?"

"That way," I said, gesturing over my shoulder with a thumb.

"It might be," he admitted. "Honestly, I don't know for sure, since we're lost. I'd head that way. But do you know how far you need to go that way? How many days will you be walking? Where are you going to rest for the night? And if you were in a car, how much faster would you get there?"

"A car like yours you mean?" I stared him down, not trusting anything about this. For all I knew, he had been working with the men who killed my mother. "No thanks, I will find another way. Like a train or the bus."



“And you know how to ride the train or the bus? You’ve done that before? You know where the station is, or where you’ll get the cash to pay for that?”

I felt like throwing a rock at him, and I had to take a breath. I am not someone with a temper to lose. I said, “You know I don’t. But that is none of your business. I am not your problem, and I don’t know why you think I am.” When he opened his mouth to interject, I held up a hand. “Look, Harrison, don’t sell me some story about you being a caring person who just wants to look out for me. I’m not buying it. If you want to come with me, you’re going to have to cut the bull. Tell me the real reason why you suddenly care about me.”

Harrison hesitated and I could tell he wanted to break my gaze—he was clearly torn between slinging more bull at me or telling the truth, but I would know if he tried it. Finally, he said, “I didn’t care about you before of course. You were just my girlfriend’s servant, and I wouldn’t have pulled you out of a lake if you were drowning. But you’re not a servant anymore. You’re a princess. And that makes me think that if I take you to the King, he might be grateful.”

I thought about it for a second, and then I nodded. “I can understand that.”

He blinked. “You’re not angry with me for saying that?”

“No, I’m never angry.” I started walking back the way I came, brushing past him on the way to the car. “Let’s go. You can take me to my grandfather.”

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



“Where are we going?” I blurted, finally unable to hold in the words any longer, after biting my tongue while Harrison drove for about fifteen minutes. The sun was rising, just visible as an orange glow over the tops of the trees, and my shoulders tensed every time the headlights of another car appeared on the road, but so far no one seemed to be pursuing us.

He snorted. “Aren’t you the one who claims to know exactly where she is going?”

I rolled my eyes and said, “I like you better now that you’re not pretending to be nice anymore.”

“And I like you better now that you’re pretending to not have emotions,” he said, and luckily didn’t look over to see as my cheeks flushed with heat. “And since you asked, I still don’t know where we are, but I’m hoping to find a petrol station.”

I looked at the gauges on the dash but couldn’t make sense of it at a glance. This was my first ride in a car after all. I asked, “Are we running low on gas?”



“No. Luckily, I fueled it recently and we have half a tank. I don’t have my wallet, so we’d be walking if the car ran out of gas. But petrol stations have a bathroom where we can clean up. And there’s a few dollars in the glove box I think, so we can maybe afford some breakfast.”

This was like the question of how I would buy a train or bus ticket—in all my fantasies of finally stepping off the estate and into the real world, I’d never considered being so hamstrung by lack of finances. It made me feel naïve, and I hated feeling so dependent on Harrison for his knowledge of how to navigate the world. I wanted to ask him how we were going to afford anything after the little cash he had was spent, but I didn’t want to expose myself any further.

“Can I ask you something?” he hedged.

“Um, sure. What is it?”

“Did you open the bag your mother gave you yet?” he asked. “I’m dying to know what’s in it. You can tell me to go screw myself if I crossed a line by asking. I get it.”

“You don’t have to give me permission to do that, I’ll tell you that whenever I feel like it,” I said, but as I thought about it I pulled the leather pouch from my shirt. “No, I haven’t opened it yet. I’m not sure if I’m ready. My mother has never given me a gift before, and now that she did, it’s the last thing she ever gave me. Anything could be in here, or nothing, and so long as I don’t look inside, I don’t know the difference.”

“I know the feeling,” Harrison said, causing me to glare at him. He saw my face in the mirror and snorted. “Yeah, I know how that sounds, but I told you that my mom died when I was a kid. A year later, I found a Christmas present that she’d hidden at



the back of a closet for me. I didn't want to open that present for years because having a box she'd wrapped for me that could have anything at all inside felt so much more important."

I still didn't trust him to not be making all this up, just to manipulate me, but I asked, "What changed your mind? What made you open the box?"

He shook his head. "I never actually changed my mind. My dad got drunk about five Christmases ago, and he got pissed at me when he saw the present under the tree. He tore open the present before I could stop him and said 'Here, it's a stupid train set. You stopped playing with those years ago. If you'd opened it back then, you could have played with it.' He just didn't get it."

I felt something shift inside me, and almost regretted being suspicious of him. There's no way he made that up, since he wanted me to open it, and that story worked against any ploy to force me to open the pouch before I was ready. Did I ever really have to be ready though? It was foolish to be so attached to a leather bag, and I didn't have any emotions. I was a servant. Things were simpler than that for me. I said, "I suppose it would be foolish to ignore this bag, when maybe there's something important to our survival here."

"It's up to you," Harrison said, but he kept looking at the bag in my lap as he was driving, and I could tell he wanted me to open it.

Not that his opinion mattered to me. As I loosened the stiff drawstring on the bag, I was doing it for me and my survival, as I needed to know more about what was going on. The bag clearly didn't want to open and had probably been closed for a very long time, and it took a couple minutes of tugging to make a large



enough opening to tip and tug the contents out into my lap. Like a magpie, the shiny object drew my eye first, and I picked up the ring to examine it.

The ring glinted in dawn's light as I held it before my face. "I think this is gold," I said in shock. The fact that my mother had had something of value all these years stunned me, and an alternative reality ran through my mind where she sold the ring and we lived comfortably rather than working our hands to the bone. It seemed selfish that she hoarded this thing away... not that I had any real sense of the value of the ring. Maybe it wouldn't have bought us a home and comfort. I held the ring closer to examine the markings on it and saw three feathers pluming up from a crown of alternate crosses and fleur-de-lys symbols. There was something written under the crown, which I read aloud, "It says, *Ich Dien*. That sounds German. What do you think it means?"

"I'm not sure," he said. "Maybe one of the pieces of papers explains it?"

I put the ring back into the leather bag for now and picked up the folded pieces of paper in the bag. The paper was thick, high quality, and yellowed with age. There were two letters, and they were folded many times over to get them small enough to fit inside the bag. The first one I unfolded had a wax seal in the center. I ran my finger over it and toyed at the edge of the page by the seal, considering breaking it, but held back. I said to Harrison, "There is a seal on this letter. It's the same symbol from the ring."

"Do you think it was made using the ring?" he asked.

"It could be," I said. "It's the right size." I flipped over the letter and saw something written on the back in my mother's neat hand. "Father... my mother wrote 'Father' on this. But did she



mean it has something in it about my father, or is it addressed to her father-in-law?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Are you going to open it?”

I thought about it, toying with the unbroken seal once more. But common sense halted my fingers from picking at the wax. I wanted to believe that there were answers about my father’s fate in the letter, which is the only reason why I was tempted to open the letter. Realistically, my mother wouldn’t have carefully sealed the letter, if it were for my eyes. And it was just like my mother offering information, while holding back more secrets. So, I stowed the letter with the seal back in the leather bag with the ring.

Then, I picked up the second folded letter, and if this one had a seal too, then I’d just be over all of this caution and tear them open anyway because there had to be something of value in this bag. Luckily, there was no seal blocking my way this time, and as soon as I unfolded the letter my name was at the top of it. “Oh...”

“What is it?” Harrison asked.

“This letter is for me,” I said. And Harrison didn’t ask me anything further as I read.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



Cecelia sat in the attic of the estate, looking down at a fine piece of parchment paper she had taken from the mistress's desk downstairs. She knew the risks of taking this piece of paper if the theft was discovered. She would be beaten severely, but not just her—the mistress would beat her daughter Ellie too. Cecelia looked at her daughter, sleeping in the bed beneath a threadbare blanket. This was her last chance to return the parchment, before marking it with ink, but Cecelia picked up her pen.

This was worth it. These words had to be written, no matter what the punishment. She settled down in the rickety chair, behind the too-small hand-me-down desk that once belonged to the mistress's daughters, and she began to write.

*Dearest Ellie,*

*I don't know when or if you will ever read this letter, that I am writing after tucking you into bed. I can't foresee any circumstances other than death that would compel me to hand this to you, but I am a woman of preparation, so I am writing*



*this for just such an event. There are things you need to know, and if I am not around to tell you with my words, then by my hand it must be.*

*You know me as Cecelia the servant, and this is who I think of myself as since I have become her now, but that was not always my name. I was once known as Priscilla Stevens, and I grew up a free person in a middle-class family. I'm not going to bother to create an accounting of my entire life from before. It's irrelevant as that person no longer exists. I can close my eyes and replay the events of her life in crystal clarity, but her accomplishments, her heartbreaks, her connections... none of these stirs within me an echo of the emotions she had during these times. So, it seems irrelevant to share these details with you.*

*What I know to be of import is your father. You're six years old right now and have been asking about your father's identity for an entire year. Every time I say that I'll tell you about him someday. And it seems like it's about time to keep that promise. Your father's name was Henry of York, but he let his friends call him Hank. I was lucky enough to earn that honor in university. I met him one night when we were both up late studying in the library. He wasn't what I had expected. Oh, he was handsome, dashing, enigmatic. But he was also kind of goofy? He liked to make people laugh, even at his own expense, like he spilled a glass of water while drinking to get my attention and make me giggle.*

*I'll never understand why he started talking to me that day, but I kept coming back for more despite my pessimism, hoping every evening to find him in the library. He was there, and we would talk. It felt to me like the world had stopped moving*



*around us, and we were allowed to have this time together, which could never be in the real world. But then, to my surprise, he wanted to see me outside of university too, and even invited me to dinner with his father.*

*You see, I wasn't from the same world as him. I was just a regular girl, studying to become a social worker, and he was the future king of our country, but somehow I had stepped into a fairytale. I even had a little princess, the greatest gift he ever gave me, a few years into our marriage. It felt like I was dreaming and never wanted to wake up.*

*I did wake up though. There was something that Hank had warned me of, very early into our relationship. He had enemies who wanted him dead. Not that he ever did anything to make the people who knew him wish harm on him, but it was because of who he was. You see, he was his father's only child, since his mother died young and his father never remarried, but this painted a target on his back. There are other families in the line of succession who hope to inherit the throne after our current King, but my Hank was in the way.*

*We had security of course, the best security that we could ask for, but it wasn't enough. When they came for us, it was all Hank could do to save us, because of course Hank wasn't the only one they'd been hired to kill. You were next in line for the throne after him. Hank pleaded and begged, not for his own life—he knew that there was no way he was walking out of that room—but for yours. He brought them to the safe room where the crown jewels were kept, but that was not enough to persuade them, since they had been promised all of that and more in exchange for their treachery.*



*But then he showed them something else that was kept with the crown jewels, the object that is the power behind the throne. The cup. Also called the grail. I have only seen it once, yet I still don't understand it. There are of course many servants who see the cup in their lifetimes, such as criminals and prisoners condemned to servitude in penance for their crimes, but many more servants never see the cup. You for example were told that you never lost your soul to the cup, as you never had a soul to lose—for many children born to soulless mothers, this is the case as the child of a mother servant is born a servant, and thus is the horrific system on which our society is built. Yet this was not the case for you. You were my daughter, born with a soul, and on the worst day of our lives we stood before the cup. Your father wanted us to continue living, if only in any form. He didn't say, but I suspect he was hoping his father could reverse it, if only we lived another day. But he begged our executioners for mercy, arguing that a soulless servant could never be queen, so they should use the cup on us and let us live. It's strange for me to think back on that moment, as Hank was dragged from the room, leaving us to our fates. I can remember how I felt, but the feelings were so turbulent that I struggled to put them in some semblance of order. Those were the last feelings that I ever felt, and yet I will never understand them. I knew that I was seeing my husband for the last time, that he was being dragged from the safe room to be executed, and yet I hated him. I was furious he hadn't protected me better, and yet logically when I look back on that moment, I know that he couldn't have done anything more for me, so how does that make sense? And I regret ever meeting him, but I wouldn't*



*have made a different choice in my life if I had been given the option.*

*We had been left in the room with one of the men. I might have tried to fight him, but he was huge, and I knew I wouldn't stand a chance. He picked up the cup to use it on me, as Hank had shown him, and I hated that this choice had been made for me. It should have been my decision if I wanted to be a servant or not. And if it had been death or servitude, I would have told Hank that no, death is preferable. I was tempted to voice my opinion now, just as the cup was held before my lips, but you made a sound as you slept in the bassinet I'd carried with me to this room. You needed me. So, I drank. I didn't know how I would look at you after I was a servant, but I vowed to look after you. If I must serve, then it would be my child who was my master. Always. I would do everything for you, my daughter.*

*And when I opened my eyes, I knew something had changed. The tiled floor beneath my bare feet felt less cold, like the edge had been shaved off the discomfort. I touched my face and my hand cupped my cheek with a sensation like my nerves had been wrapped in cotton gauze. Every sensation was lesser than it had been before. This was a part of the servitude experience I hadn't prepared for.*

*My cheek beneath my hand was wet, and I was aware that I had been crying a moment before, but the urge to do so along with the emotions that had accompanied it was gone. Just gone. I looked at you then and compared my memories of emotions to the present. Like yesterday, I had searched your cherubic face for familiar features, and felt pride in finding a*



*little of my face in yours, and some of your father's too. I had made you, a whole person, and there was satisfaction in that. Surprisingly, it wasn't all gone. Most of it was, but there was enough of a connection to you remaining in my dull senses that I cared about your existence more than I would another baby. I still looked at your face with curiosity for your familiar features. But mostly what held me at your side was memory. It was like the feeling that draws a person back to their childhood home, even after renovations have been done and everything has changed. You can still walk through those halls and get lost in memory. The cup cannot take memories of love from a servant, even when it steals that love. I no longer loved you, but I would look after you in the place of the woman who had once been your mother.*

*The large man who had taken my soul was still standing there, so I asked him, "Well? Are you going to do it to her too?" Slowly, he knelt beside your bassinet and held the cup above you. You had woken up, made a gurgling noise, and reached for the shiny thing you saw sparkling in the light. Your chubby clumsy hand touched his instead, and you gripped his pinky finger. In a display of emotion that had suddenly become entirely alien to me, he started to cry.*

*I just stared at him, waiting for some explanation or for him to follow through with his task, but neither happened. He looked at me with my deadened expression, and then back to you wriggling in the bassinet. I will never understand why, but he got up and put away the cup. He said to me, "Take her. Pretend I did it. Don't tell the others. Just take her and go, when they let you leave."*



*I was sure they would be suspicious. You were an animated baby. But it didn't bother me if he was punished for not completing his task. And as it turned out, they weren't suspicious at all, once we rejoined the group who had just killed my husband, something which I only noticed with passing interest when I saw his body. You even started to cry, but they never looked twice at you—they must never have seen a soulless baby before, so they didn't notice the differences in you. And I knew that I would have to start teaching you how to act, if I was going to raise you under this guise.*

*One of the men loaded us into a truck. I didn't know where we were going, and I didn't ask. They might have changed their minds and decided to kill us, for all I knew. But we lived again, and by the time we arrived in the countryside, he told us to get out of the car. I was left in the country at pitch black, with nothing but the clothes on my back and you in my arms. I started walking until I found a house. And we've been here until today.*

*I know that after reading this, my motivation might be hard to understand. But motivation isn't something I have much of since I was changed against my will. I am a person of echoes, living in memories, and one thing that runs on a loop through my mind is your father's last wish for you. He had wanted you to be safe, and thought the best way was if we became servants. So I am honoring his wish, and have done my best to keep you safe all these years. You probably resent the secrecy and lies, but that's not something I can change now, and secrets and lies were the only armor and shelter I could build for you.*



*That being said, this is not the life I want for you. If it were, then I would never have penned this letter in the hope that you would one day learn the truth. I became a servant against my will, and even though you never had your soul taken, you became a servant too. Our choices in life were stolen from us and it's too late for me to go back, but that is still an option for you. I want you to have your own agency again.*

*It is up to you, my daughter, where you want to go in life. You could have the whole world if you chose to. The only thing I ask of you is to be smart and cautious, as you have as many enemies as your late father. So, if it is your will to reenter the world, then be bold and brave, yet wise. Start with your grandfather. His security is impenetrable, as he has been evading assassination attempts his whole life. If Hank and I had been in the same place as him on the night we were attacked, then I'm confident that your father would still be alive.*

*So, go to your grandfather, if he is still alive at the time you are reading this letter. I think he is the only one who can keep you safe. I have done what I can to help you, enclosing a letter written to your grandfather, sealed using your father's signet ring—it and the letter will attest to your identity. Your grandfather travels often as a part of his duties, so if possible, try to time your visit in the fall, when your grandfather lives in his castle in Cornwallis. At any other time of the year, he is often overseas, when it will be much more difficult for you to go to him, as you do not have the proper paperwork.*

*More than anything, I want you to be safe. As a mother, I know that a child's happiness should be paramount, but we have long since lived without that luxury, so I have raised you*



*to not only believe that happiness is neither a part of your life, nor an emotion you are capable of. Objectively, I know this is cruel, but I have accepted that I must be cruel to you if you are to survive. I have chosen this life for you, favoring your survival over the quality of your life. It is the same choice that Hank made for me, when he cursed me to live as a servant despite my own wishes. It is for this reason that I know a free person would feel resentment for the person who behaves in such a way for another, so I know you must revile me.*

*And yet I don't care. Not because I no longer care about anything. But because I value your continued existence above all else. You are my child. I have not felt love since that night when my soul was taken, and yet I feel its echoes in my bones. You have left your mark on the place where my heart once was, and for this reason I need you to be alive.*

Cecelia signed the letter simply, “your mother.” It would have been disingenuous to add any phrase about love to end the letter, since she knew she had been the furthest thing from a loving mother. Whenever her daughter got this letter, she knew it would be too little, too late. The damage would already have been done to her daughter, and her worldview would be shattered when she learned the truth. This was a letter to ease Cecelia’s mind, not to help Ellie, so she could tell herself that she had done everything she needed to set her daughter up for the future. But that was a lie, and she knew it.

Ellie’s future had been stolen from her long ago, and this letter wouldn’t give it back to her. The way that Cecelia had raised the girl had only damaged her further, such as lecturing to her every



time the girl cried, telling her that her emotions weren't real. She was never going to be a normal person. But because of Cecelia's work, at least the girl would be alive.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“What did she say?” Harrison asked, startling me.

I had finished reading a while ago and was just staring at the black words that disintegrated into letters that then swam in nonsensical patterns on the paper as my eyes shimmered with tears I refused to let fall. I was a servant. There was no reason for me to cry over this letter. I folded it back up along with the stiff, unyielding creases of the paper, and returned the letter to the pouch that had been its home for so many years. I took a steadying breath and closed my eyes for a moment, imagining crawling back into my bed in the attic, beneath the threadbare blanket that was never warm but somehow brought me so much comfort as I thought of it now. Once I felt a bit more centered, I opened my eyes and felt ready to answer Harrison, who was patiently waiting. I said, “There are instructions here for me. She wants me to go to my grandfather’s home, like we’ve been doing. And once we get there, the sealed letter and the ring will vouch for my identity. So, my mother has planned this all out.”

“Is that all she said?” he asked, like he’d been expecting more.



I didn't answer, and just tucked the leather bag into my shirt. While this was none of his business, it also grated on my nerves that I had no idea where we were going—why should I tell him anything, when he shared so little about our current situation with me? I answered his question with one of my own, asking, “How far do you think we have to drive before we find a petrol station with a convenience store? And where are we going after that? Do you even know how to get to Cornwallis from here?”

“Geez, I won't ask if you're going to get all defensive on me. I know when to butt out.”

“I'm not defensive,” I snapped.

“Sure, you aren't...” he said. Then he nodded ahead. “That looks promising. I don't have many answers yet about where we are and where we are going, but maybe we'll find them there.”

I scanned the horizon until I saw what he was looking at—a sign advertising petrol was just peeking out from behind the trees. A shock ran through my body, similar to the feeling from when I started to tip down the stairs but caught myself from falling at the last second. Yet I wasn't physically falling now, just reeling in uncertainty as I faced society for the first time. It had been easy to forget that I had really left the estate, when all I saw was the forest and one man. But here it was. We were finally in the real world.

I said, “Remind me... why are we stopping here?”

“I've got just enough money to maybe get us something to eat. And there should be a bathroom with running water here, so you can wash some of the mud off yourself. I can get directions here too, or at least find out where we are.” As he neared the petrol station, which only had one car parked by the shop, he asked, “So do you agree? Should we stop here?”



One car, so only one person. Probably the person running the station. As far as society goes, that shouldn't be too overwhelming. I nodded and said, "Yeah, let's stop here."

Harrison pulled into the petrol station, parking beside the truck which was worn with red paint flaking off it due to rust. The building looked just as run down as the car, an ugly gray cement box, but since the sign was lit up it must be open. He pointed to the unisex bathroom to the left of the convenience store, and said, "Go see if it's unlocked. Sometimes you have to get the key from the shopkeeper. You're probably too muddy to go inside as you are now."

"I'm not that muddy..." I objected, but my head was reeling as I felt out of place. Sometimes you have to ask the shopkeeper for the key? And this was just a rule that people knew? I couldn't imagine how many other unwritten rules of society there were, and how I was supposed to learn them all.

"Yeah, you are," Harrison said, unaware of the thoughts whirling around my brain. Since he had used a shovel and I used my hands, he was cleaner than me. "You look like you have been burying a body. Because you have been. And what we really don't need right now is people asking questions. Or making the correct inferences about what we have been doing. So, since you're way muddier than me, you should wash up."

I clambered out of the car without further protest and walked quickly over to the bathroom. There was something strange about being out here, finally walking in the real world. Even in this secluded and minimally populated area, I felt exposed. As I walked past the windows of the convenience store, I let my hair fan out to conceal my face, making me feel a little safer. Luck-



ily, the bathroom door was unlocked, and finally once inside I locked the door behind me and found sanctuary. My breathing became easier, and I closed my eyes for a second as I leaned my back against the door. I was alone with just my thoughts again, with no one looking at me, and it was like stepping into the attic after a long day of holding the mask of servitude on my face. I could just be me again.

When I opened my eyes and took a couple steps into the room, I froze in place and gasped. It took me two whole seconds to realize I really was alone in the room—it was my reflection in the mirror that had startled me. Harrison had been right; I did look like I had just been burying a body. My brown hair was a snarled mess of knots, and after so many years of tying it back in a tidy bun I didn't even recognize it. There were less sparkly sequins on Dorothea's black party dress than when I had first slipped it on, having gotten snagged on bushes or lost during the labors of the night. The worst was my arms, covered up to my elbows with mud from where I had shoved my arms into the soil to shift it into the grave.

*“The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level someday,”* I said, quoting from one of my favorite books, ‘Their Eyes Were Watching God’. I felt some kinship with the main character now, as she walked back into town after burying her husband and felt everyone's eyes on her.

I turned on the tap and grabbed a handful of paper towels, scrubbing at the mud on my arms to get clean. The grit in the sandy soil scratched my skin, and the water pooling in the basin



became muddy. As I cleaned my hands, I had a sense that a part of me was washing away with the dirt, and I didn't know who I would be when this was done. While that was ridiculous, it was true that I couldn't go back to who I was yesterday before all this trouble began. I would never make tea for the mistress again or help Dorothea into a dress—as loathsome as that existence had been, it was uncertainty about the future that had me longing for it.

My mother had left instructions for me to find my grandfather. Okay, but then what? As I patted my skin dry with paper towels, I found a thought to center myself. I didn't have to plan out the rest of my life, or think about what would happen after I found my family. All I had to do right now was live. I could do that.

After I had finished getting clean, I walked slowly for the door, taking breaths to steel myself before reentering the real world. As it turned out though, the real world wasn't giving me time to be ready for it. When I was reaching for the door, it swung open and someone walked right into me. I took a swing at Harrison before I recognized him, and when I did, I took another, but he caught my wrist and walked forward, shoving me back into the bathroom and shutting the door behind us.

“What are you doing?” I hissed at him. “Let go of me. You can't be in here.”

“It's a unisex bathroom,” he said blandly, but released my arm.

Despite being with him in the enclosed space of the car all this time, there was something very different about being forced into a bathroom by him, and my nerves were screaming at me that this was dangerous. With a wavering voice, I pleaded, “Don't hurt me. Just let me leave. Please.”



“What?” He’d had a distant look on his face a moment ago, like he’d been lost in thought, but now he finally looked at me and saw how I was shaking. He asked, “Are you afraid of me?”

“I’m not afraid,” I blurted automatically. Then I admitted, “Yes... of course I am, why else would I have hit you? I have no reason to trust you, and it looks very much like you’re attacking me.”

Harrison held up his hands and took a step back from me, but I noticed he still managed to block the door with his body. He said, “I didn’t mean to scare you. I was just nervous and in a hurry to get moving, but I can see how that would alarm you.”

“What were you nervous about?” I strained my ears to hear a commotion or something outside but heard nothing but the dripping tap at the sink and our breathing echoing off the tiled walls.

He reached inside his zipped jacket and extracted a folded newspaper. “Look,” he said, as he spread it out across the sink so I could read. “It’s us.”

As someone who had loved reading ever since I learned how, I never thought I would resent doing it, but I was quickly getting tired of reading unpleasant things. Harrison was right, it was us. Frontpage news on the local Sun newspaper. The headline was ‘Midnight Massacre at local Mansion.’ I swallowed heavily and said, “Someone likes alliteration.”

Harrison snorted and said, “Keep reading.”

I did, and my horror grew with each word. My fears for the family I once served had been confirmed. The newspaper read:

*Tragedy struck last night at the home of affluent and well-loved members of our community, the Doolittle family. Authorities*



*responded to the home after receiving an anonymous tip of a disturbance, but tragically found members of the family slain. Among the deceased were Theodora Doolittle, 55 years old, and wife of the late Captain Doolittle of his Royal Majesty's armed forces, and also their daughter, Althea, 16 years old, an accomplished student of the St. Agnes School for Girls where she excelled in music. The eldest daughter of the family, Dorothea Doolittle, 18 years old, is among the injured, and she has been transported to a NHS Americas facility where she is in critical condition. The family, all of whom received gunshot injuries, appear to have been the victims of a servant uprising, though it is unclear at this time where the servants obtained the firearms.*

*One servant, an elderly male, was apprehended at the scene and is currently in police custody; however, the police are currently looking for two female servants believed to have been tied with this crime, last seen traveling in a vintage black 1996 Cadillac Fleetwood. They are a 45-year-old female and a 20-year-old female, both slightly above average in height, lean, with dark hair and brown eyes. The servants were last seen traveling in the company of Harrison Smyth, son of Harold Smyth of banking fortune. The young Mr. Smyth may have knowledge of this incident and is wanted for police questioning. Police investigation is ongoing, and anyone with information about this incident or the persons wanted should contact the authorities.*

I sucked in a steadying breath. The walls felt a little smaller than they had been a moment ago. I had to shut my eyes for a moment to process it all, running it back in my head. The mis-



tress and Althea were dead. Dorothea was injured, maybe dying right now. Raymond was... not even mentioned in the article, and I didn't know what to make of that. Rufus had been arrested, but at least he was still alive... maybe. No, not really, he wouldn't be alive long, while they thought he had had something to do with this. And they wanted me. I reopened my eyes and said, "The anonymous tip mentioned at the start of this article. That was them, wasn't it? They are using this publicity to flush us out of hiding."

Harrison nodded in agreement. "Yeah, that was my thought as well. They're trying to work the whole community into a frenzy, so there are hundreds or even thousands of eyes looking for our faces. They even included a picture of me in the paper, but not one of you. I guess they couldn't find one."

My stomach twisted as something occurred to me. "Did they kill them just for this? All for some sick publicity? That's disgusting."

Harrison bit his lip in thought, but then shook his head. "I don't think so. You heard the way they were talking when we left the room? I think they were planning something anyway. And it makes sense."

"How does any of this make sense?"

His eyes dropped to the front of my dress, where he knew I was hiding the leather pouch. "Well, it sounds like there's a lot of people looking for you. One side wants to capture or kill you before you can get to your grandfather, so it's logical that they wouldn't want word getting to the King that his granddaughter had turned up. And if Theodora Doolittle had been angry enough about what happened to her, I could see her going to the



King with what she'd learned last night, just to spite the people who were after you. So, they couldn't let her live."

It was terrifying how much sense that made. I looked down at the newspaper on the sink, seeing nothing but pointless waste. I asked, "What do we do now?"

I heard Harrison rustling in his jacket again, and then he dropped a dented cardboard box in the sink. He said, "I picked up... or rather, borrowed this without permission at the convenience store, since I didn't have enough money to buy it. But we need it. We were lucky that the man in there wasn't a newspaper reader, from what I could tell, but people will be looking for us soon."

"What is it?" I asked, turning over the box to see a smiling blonde figure on the front of the packaging.

"A new look," Harrison said.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“I’m not going to apologize for that, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Harrison said, his eyes darting between me and his own hair that was visible in the rear-view mirror. His hair had dried in spikes and the tips were now frosted from the blonde hair dye, but the roots were still very brown. It was a slight makeover, but probably not as much of the one he had been anticipating.

“I wasn’t going to,” I said, eyeing my own appearance casually in the passenger’s visor mirror. My hair was still drying, but I could tell that Harrison had done a rough job with the box of hair dye he’d split between us. The blonde highlights he’d tried to put in my hair were chunky, uneven, and bled in places. I would probably draw more attention for the poor dye job than I would for the mention of a brunette wanted by the police in the news.

“Oh, come on, you’re a woman, and you’re going to tell me you aren’t mad I messed up your hair?” he asked. “Don’t tell me pretending to have no vanity is part of your fantasy about being a servant.”



I bristled at that comment, but refused to let him rile me up. It helped me to keep calm that I really wasn't angry about my hair. I said, "No, I'm not, because I know that you were doing your best and trying to help. And I appreciate that."

"Oh."

We lapsed into silence for a minute, and for the first time it felt comfortable. I still wished I was here with Raymond instead, but I was beginning to think that if I had to travel with someone, maybe Harrison wasn't completely intolerable. I said, "I was thinking... while changing our hair is a good start so we can travel unnoticed, maybe there's something else we can do. Your car was mentioned in the newspaper article. Should we ditch it?"

"No! Do you have any idea how much this car costs?"

"You know I don't. And even if you told me a number, it wouldn't mean anything to me." I continued, trying to appeal to his logic, "Does that really matter though? If you're arrested by the police for murder, how often will you get to drive your car?"

"You're the one wanted for murder, I'm just wanted for questioning," he pointed out, sending a chill down my spine. Harrison sighed and said, "I know you're right, but I don't think we need to ditch the car. Like, if we ditch it and start walking, we will be stranded. And we might get recognized while walking. So if we keep driving, we will get where we are going sooner."

I nodded. "Makes sense."

"Plus, I had an idea. I was thinking we should stop at my friend's house." He glanced at me in the rear-view mirror, seeing my eyes widen with alarm. "I know what you're thinking, it's a risk. But I really think we need his help. We can get some food, change clothes, maybe rest, look up the best route to Cornwallis, and get some petrol money. Since I spent my last two dollars at



the petrol station, we're completely broke, and we'd be screwed if we got stranded now."

"Is that really the only reason you want to stop there?" I asked, sensing there was more to this detour.

"No..." he said, squirming in his seat. "Look, I just thought of this when you mentioned my car. I know we're going to have to ditch it, but I don't just want to leave it on the side of the road. If we stop at my friend's house, he might let me leave it in his garage while we borrow his car. He's like a brother to me. I trust him to not say anything to the police about us."

"Okay, fine, let's go to your friend's house," I relented though I still had reservations about meeting people in the real world.

"We just must make one stop along the way. I need to look up something on the internet."

My shoulders stiffened. "Why? What do you have to look up?"

"I need to look up directions to my friend's house. I know his address of course, but I don't know how to get there from here. Wherever we are. I'm lost without the map app on my phone. I don't even know what city we're in right now."

"Are you serious?" I asked. Even though I didn't know how to get anywhere, this was my first time traveling off the estate where I was raised. He had no such excuse, and I felt heat rising to my face as I snapped, "I decided to come with you because I don't know where anything is. If you're equally clueless, then why am I even here?"

As Harrison parked the car, he said, "Neither of us know where we are, but I know how to find out where we're going. Do you know how to do that? Would you think to go there?"



“Where?” I asked, looking around until Harrison pointed to the right. I read the words on the side of the building slowly. “The library... a real library?”

Harrison snorted. “You say that like I just brought you to meet your favorite celebrity or something. Come on, let’s go. They have computers in there, and I need to get on one.”

Despite my earlier skittishness of going to a petrol station with one lone person manning it, I felt no such reservations as I approached the library. This was the sort of place I’d dreamed of one day visiting, in my fantasy of walking off the estate. I could live that dream today; all I had to do was be brave. It wasn’t even hard to go through these doors. Unfamiliar people still scared me, but I completely ignored them and focused on the books. They were everywhere I looked on bookcases towering above my head, and stacked in neat rows, resting under signs promising mystery, romance, horror, and fiction. In a corner of the room under a bright mural, children were gathered while an adult read them a story. All of these were real books that people read and enjoyed, unlike the books at the mansion which the Doolittle family chose at random and displayed to make it look like they were readers. There was even a staircase to the second floor, with more books peeking tantalizingly out of sight.

I didn’t realize I was still walking until Harrison grabbed my elbow gently to stop me. I turned to face him and whispered in annoyance, “What?”

He nodded towards some computers in the center of the room. “That’s where we can look up what we need.”

I looked both skeptically and reluctantly at the computers. While I had seen Dorothea use her phone to access the internet,



and more often saw Raymond browsing on a laptop, I had never touched an electronic device like that and wouldn't know what to do if I was handed one.

Objectively, I knew that there was an entire world waiting to be discovered on the internet, but it was overwhelming enough for me right now discovering the physical world around me. I couldn't handle that right now and wanted to seek a familiar comfort in the feeling of a book under my hands. I shook my head at Harrison and said, "No, that's where you need to look up what you need. I'll just look around while I wait."

He scowled at me and clearly wanted to object, perhaps fearing that I would run off after my earlier outburst at the car. Either because he didn't want to make a scene attracting unwanted attention or because he respected my free will, he didn't voice his concerns. I suspected he just didn't want to make a scene.

I said, "I'm not going to go far. I just want to look at the books. And since people are looking for you traveling with women, isn't it less suspicious if we're not seen sitting together?"

"You're right," he admitted. Harrison looked around until he saw a clock on the wall above us. "Why don't we meet back here by the door in an hour?"

I nodded in agreement, noting the time on the clock. I could look at a lot of books in that amount of time. Harrison headed towards the computers, while I scanned the room, drawn to the shelves as if by gravity. I ran my fingers along the spines, wishing that I had the power to draw the words into myself by touch alone, imagining the ink rising from them, traveling up my arm, soaking into my blood which would carry them to my brain.



I looked around until I saw the sign, finding myself in the biography section. It was then I realized the power of the building I was standing inside. I was a woman lost in the world. My greatest weakness at this moment was a lack of knowledge, due to having been raised in the dark. Yet now I found myself in the shining beacon of light that is to be surrounded by books. I had everything I needed here, and all I needed to do was reach out and grab it. My eyes darted to the clock, seeing that ten minutes had passed, and it felt like my racing heart was keeping time with the ticking of the seconds on the clock. An hour wasn't enough... I reached for the shelf again as I tried to think about what knowledge would be most useful on this journey.

Should I look for a biography on my grandfather? Just as my fingers neared the nonfiction shelf, I abandoned the idea as a waste of time. Any book on my grandfather would just be a paean to his virtues and not contain anything of use that would keep me alive. I scanned the library again, looking for a section that might be a bit more honest than a biography. What I needed to know was why all of this was happening. Who were these other people who wanted my father out of the way, and now me—these shadowy others of the royal family who wanted to inherit the throne.

In bold black letters, I finally saw it, above a section tucked in a back corner. History. I was lost in the world because I didn't know my own history. As I walked towards the shelves, I found myself remembering what Rufus told me—knowing now that he had been aware of my hidden identity the whole time, I realized he had been distracting me with a history lesson when I asked where I came from, and he deliberately misunderstood that as



servants. While his history lessons had been useful, I sensed that even there he had been holding back.

Books had never let me down in this area, though I knew they weren't infallible. They were subject to the bias or misconception of those who wrote them, due to being penned by the imperfect hands of men. And yet books do not intentionally deceive us most of the time, and as they don't have faces it hurts less when they tell lies. Finally, I found the subject on the history of the British crown and commonwealth, and I picked up a book to start to read.

Cracking open the heavy book, I flipped to the index first, to see if this volume had what I was looking for. I read the sections in the index aloud in a whisper as I ran my finger across the page. "The legend of King Arthur. The quest for the Holy Grail. The power and influence of the British Empire. Reformation of the Church of England. British ruler as defender of the faith. The Colonization of Continents. The Failed Revolution in the Americas. The reigning might of the British Empire. The use of the Grail in modern times."

I was most curious about the current status of the world I lived in, so I flipped to the back of the book first to glance at the section on the American revolution and began reading to myself in a whisper, "*Although in the early days of colonization there were a few free people who worked as indentured servants—those with souls who worked for a time before earning their freedom—their numbers were far exceeded by the import of true soulless servants to the colonies. The Americas quickly became the home of the largest servant population in the world, as laborers were needed while the settlers worked to carve out settlements in the untamed wilderness.*



*Despite importing many of their servants from the United Kingdom, at one point the American colony rose in rebellion against their king, perhaps feeling confident in their ability to continue using the female servants to produce the next generation of the servant class. The rebel army of the colonists stood no chance against the British Army. While some servants were conscripted to fight in the Colonial army on behalf of their masters, they were no match for the British, whose army had become the terror of the world, overcoming even the greatness of Alexander when he conquered the world. Any servants in the Colonial army could never keep up with the British army, as they controlled the cup and could create as many soldiers as they needed to beat down the rebel forces. Having no sense of pain or fear of death, a servant will always be the perfect soldier, which has enabled the global domination of the British empire. For this reason, the UK is the greatest power in the world, with the Americas as their crown jewel in their empire, and very few countries have won their bids for independence, especially if those revolutions came to warfare. Also, this has allowed the British pound to become the preferred method of currency globally, and the value of the pound is unrivaled by other currencies.”*

I flipped back to the index. This was interesting, but didn't offer any valuable information which would help me in my current situation. After scanning the index for the page number, I flipped to the section on the Holy Grail and began reading,

*“Hundreds of years ago, King Arthur of England went on a seemingly impossible quest for a religious relic, the Holy Grail. When he unexpectedly returned to his kingdom with the grail, the course of history changed forever. By securing this relic for*



*the kingdom of England, Britain rose to power much in the way of Rome, and their power has never wavered since. The royal family gained power through the cup, as they became the head of the church while the cup was in their hands. The citizens gained the ability to barter their souls by petitioning the king who was in control of the holy relic, which began as a benign gesture, but soon became criticized as people feared that more righteous kings would abuse this power to punish their citizens. While no one is entirely sure of the validity of this story behind the current status quo, since it happened so long ago, the legend goes that a couple generations after the cup came into the pendragon family, a man was brought before the king from the poorhouse as an example for the impoverished people of the realm. His debts were so severe that the king told him that he could pay off his debts with his soul, which the man agreed to as he was warned they would pass to his young son after his death if he chose otherwise. Since this fateful day, a new class in society emerged—the poor exchange their souls to clear their debts, which led to a servant class who are below those with souls in a semi-feudal society. Servitude can also pass from mother to child if the mother is a servant, which was an unexpected side effect that fits with the narrative, as the original man tried to save his son from his debt, resulting in the common saying among free people ‘there’s no escaping the debt’ as the moral of this story. In the present day, the servant class continues to grow as those with souls can sell them to pay off a debt, or to escape a prison sentence, or even get rid of it to escape heartache. In comparison to those born in servitude, these servants are seen as an unspoken middle class. They*



*might be servants, but they have memories of having a soul, and therefore the free people fear them less. The true slaves are those born to servitude, who can only imagine what it's like to be able to feel emotions, which is a concept so alien to those with souls that free people struggle to empathize with their servants' lack of empathy."*

It appeared that picking up a book wasn't entirely going to help with my frustration over lack of answers. Even in this book, it said that events happened so long ago that the true events weren't certain, but at least a possible scenario was detailed here. As my head spun with this information, I continued onto the next section as I was struggling to focus and wasn't sure what information I should be looking for anymore.

*"In a society such as ours, it is necessary for there to be a strict system of laws separating the classes. As the servants and the free people are different by nature, then it is only natural that the legal system reflects this difference. The laws on the books might differ slightly throughout the Commonwealth, but in general the following is true throughout the British empire:*

*Laws or societal customs pertaining to the free class:*

- *It is illegal for a free man to lie with a servant woman due to the risk of producing a child, as the child inherits the mother's class. While it is necessary to produce more servants to maintain our society, this act is strictly regulated by the government to ensure that the servant population does not surpass the free class*



- *Wearing gray clothes as a free person (while not illegal) is considered a faux pas. Occasionally, a free person might be forced to wear gray as a form of punishment to publicly shame them, as gray is the color worn by servants in public. Often free people who wear gray in public will be victims of attacks, like thrown paint or spoiled produce, adding insult to the injury*

*Laws or societal customs pertaining to the serving class:*

- *A servant must greet free people with a bow and state 'your servant, sir/ma'am'*
- *A servant must wear all gray clothes when in public or around the free class, to mark them in their station*
- *As servants are 'pain asymbolics' who lack the emotional pain system, there is no legal punishment for injuring a servant*
- *At the birth of a servant child, doctors and midwives are required to test the children with pins, to ensure that the children lack the pain response which is the signature of their class. Free children might be subjected to this as well, but the pin test is optional*
- *Servants are issued only one legal name. If a free person is condemned to become a servant, they must legally abandon their surname, as family names are only fit for the free class*
- *It is rare to see servant families, as they don't marry, but a couple might be allowed to live together out of convenience and have a child. There is no rule that servants cannot have children, yet this is unusual as they do not feel the love and family bonds of the traditional free person family*



- *Due to the fact that female servants are legally forbidden to lie with men due to the risk of conception, male servants are more frequently conscripted to work in prostitution. They can be noticed most often due to their elaborate tattoos, perhaps to enhance their appeal or showcase their inability to feel pain*
- *In a more recent movement, the government has started allowing sterilized women to work as prostitutes following medical clearance. They are still less popular, due to the fear of scams or sting operations, yet these women can be seen often wearing midriff-baring clothes to showcase the scars of their operations. While vaginal hysterectomies would be performed on free women, servants who work as prostitutes opt for abdominal hysterectomies to obtain visible evidence of their operations.”*

I shut the book loudly, unable to bear to read another word, and then I shut my eyes. These ugly truths were things I needed to know about the world, lest this world get me killed, but that didn't help to settle my stomach. This was a cruel world.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“Miss?”

I opened my eyes, seeing a matronly woman with glasses standing above me. I was still seated on the floor of the section I'd been browsing in and probably looked rather odd to her, like I'd decided to nap with a book in my lap.

She asked, “Can I help you find anything, dear?”

Realizing she was a librarian, I held up the book I'd been reading and said, “No, thank you, I found what I was looking for.”

“Then can I help you check out that book?” she pressed, clearly wanting to get me moving so I didn't continue to clutter up the aisles of her library by sitting with my eyes closed on the floor.

My cheeks got hot, as I knew I couldn't check out the book without a library card, I was uncertain if I was even allowed in here without a card, and I knew for sure I couldn't get one without divulging my identity. I dragged myself to the feet using the shelves but couldn't walk anywhere as the blood made its way back into my tingling legs. I said, “Um, no thank you. I'm here with a friend, and we'll be leaving soon.” I glanced at the clock,



seeing the time, and added, “We’ll actually be leaving in about ten minutes.”

The librarian gave me a friendly smile, either because I said I would be leaving or because I was no longer making myself a tripping hazard on the floor. She held out her hands and said, “May I re-shelve that for you?”

I started to hand her the book but held back reluctantly. There had been one more section in the index which I’d thought would be useful.

She noticed my hesitation and said, “Miss, if you’re not finished reading and don’t want to take the book with you, you could always make use of our photocopy machine. That way you can take the scanned pages of the book with you to read later. Would you like me to show you where the machine is?”

I beamed at her by way of answer. I knew I was going to love the library.

\*

After making quick use of the scanner on the book, I was standing by the door at the agreed time, but Harrison looked exasperated when he saw me. He snapped, “There you are.”

“Well, I see while you were searching the internet, you found that chip on your shoulder,” I said. “But did you also get directions to your friend’s house?”

He snorted as we walked through the door and towards the stairs, holding up a printed map that he promptly folded and tucked into his pocket. Harrison said, “Yeah, I got everything I needed. I was just nervous when I couldn’t see you, I felt like someone was going to pop up and grab you when I wasn’t looking.”



That surprised me to hear. I knew he was traveling with me out of a hope to get a reward, but I doubted he'd fight to save my life to get that reward—the incident at the car had been to save himself, not me. I said, “If someone grabbed me, that wouldn't be your problem. You'd have just gone about your life like you'd never met me.”

He scoffed. “I think it would be a bit harder than that. In case you had forgotten, my name is in the newspaper saying I'm wanted for questioning in relation to murder, and that's not just going to go away when you do. But if I get you where you are going, I feel like that's more likely to clear this up.”

I hadn't forgotten, but now that I thought more about it there was something strange about this situation. For two reasons—my lack of objectivity and my difficulty with emotional empathy—I hadn't considered how odd Harrison was acting. Two women he knew well were dead, and the woman he might have been planning to marry was lying in a hospital, possibly dying, yet he was here with me instead and was acting totally fine. If I hadn't been so used to how servants act, I would have noticed it sooner, but he wasn't processing this situation the way a free person would. I stared at his profile, looking for worry lines on his forehead, a jaw clenched from stress, or red eyes from tears he shed when I wasn't looking, but I saw none of these. He seemed completely unfazed by Dorothea's condition. Not being one for subtlety, I opened my mouth to ask him how he felt about what happened to the Doolittle family.

“What the...” Harrison's eyes grew wide, and he stopped walking. He reached out a hand to put on my shoulder, stopping me in place too. He didn't seem to notice when I stepped to the



side to get out from under his hand, but his hand stayed in place in the air as if he was frozen by what he saw.

“What?” I asked, but when I looked, I saw it. We had just left the library and were standing on the street, and he was looking down the street where he’d parked. The black Cadillac had a police car parked beside it, and two officers were standing beside it, one writing on a pad while the other said something into a little black box on his shoulder. Suddenly, I had the odd thought that it would be nice if Harrison’s hand were still on my shoulder, warm and comforting. “We should move.”

“Yes.” His eyes darted around, flicking several times to the library doors as he appeared to debate going back inside, but ultimately, he focused on the corner of the building. “There. Don’t run. Just follow me. Act casual.”

We strolled over to the corner of the library and stopped. I leaned against the building, just trying to give my racing heart a chance to settle down, while Harrison peeked around the side of the building. I asked, “Are they looking? Did they see us walk over here?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t think so. “They’re still standing there. I’m trying to figure out if they’re only writing me a ticket or if they’re responding to a BOLO.”

“What’s a bolo? Other than a necktie.”

He shot me a look with a raised eyebrow. “BOLO means ‘be on the lookout. Haven’t you ever watched tv before? Like police dramas?”

“There wasn’t much time to watch tv in my line of work,” I said through gritted teeth. I took a deep breath until I was able to lower my shoulders. “Why would they be writing you a ticket?”



Because that's obviously the better reason for them to be looking at the car."

"I didn't feed the parking meter," he said, looking around the side of the building again.

"You didn't feed the parking meter," I repeated in disbelief. "When there are police looking for us and in particular your car? Are you a moron?"

He turned to look at me, and my first instinct was to apologize for the harsh words, but I stared him down. This was a stupid mistake, and mistakes like this could get us killed, so I wasn't going to say I was sorry. Harrison said, "In case you had forgotten, we don't have any money. I used my last dollar to buy us breakfast, so what exactly do you think I was going to put in that meter?"

"Oh..." I said. "Sorry."

Harrison turned to glance around the corner again, and his shoulders stiffened. I knew before he said anything that it was bad news. He said, "Another police car just showed up. It's got to be a BOLO."

"Shouldn't we be going?" I asked, worried that more police cars might come down this road and see us lurking.

"But that's my car," he said. "How are we going to get anywhere without my car?"

I was getting a bit better at reading his emotions and could tell that it was said without conviction. He knew that the police weren't going to leave the Cadillac there and didn't need me to tell him that. If he didn't have a strange emotional connection to his car, we would already be walking away. Finally, I realized what I could say to help. "They're just going to hold your car, right?"



He looked at me and nodded. “The police impound cars.”

“So, once you take me to my grandfather, he can get the police to release your car from the impound. You were going to leave your car at your friend’s house anyway, so this is the same thing. Your car will just be in a different garage for a while.”

The tension in Harrison’s shoulders eased for a second, but only a second, before stiffening again. He said, “Will we get anywhere? We’re stuck in this city and the police are probably going to start canvassing the area once they confirm that’s my car.”

“We should get moving then,” I said, gesturing for him to follow me as I started walking down the sidewalk, away from the cops. “I have an idea. Trust me.”

It wasn’t long before I came up to what I had been looking for, a bus stop. Harrison had been following me in silence, but when he noticed me reading the map that was labeled with the bus schedule, he protested, “That’s your idea?”

“Yes. Could I see that map you printed at the library?” I asked, holding out my hand. He sighed but handed it to me. I held up the maps beside each other for comparison and was relieved to see that Harrison’s friend lived in Baltimore city, which was in the direct line of one of the bus routes from here. We could probably be there in an hour. I turned to beam at Harrison, but my smile faltered when I saw his expression. I couldn’t read his emotion, but knew it was a negative one, so I asked, “What?”

“You don’t get it, do you?” he snapped. Ah, frustration was the emotion.

“What?” I asked again, handing him back the map.

“We. Don’t. Have. Any. Money.” He drew out the sentence with exaggerated slowness.



“I know that,” I snapped in return. “I was about to ask, how much would the trip cost?”

He shrugged. “Two bucks each probably. So, four pounds altogether.” Harrison saw my confusion, and added, “It’s not a lot. Remember, I had two pounds in my car, and got two bananas with them at the shop? But the amount doesn’t matter because we don’t have it.”

I didn’t appreciate the condescension in his voice, but at least I now had the information I needed. I said, “I might not know things about the world like the value of a pound or how to work on a computer, but there are things I know about the world that you don’t. Like, this world is full of generally good people.”

As I turned to scan the area, Harrison muttered under his breath, “Yeah, you really don’t know anything about the world.”

I ignored him and approached one of the people standing near the bus stop. He was a man in his late twenties wearing a blue suit. The stranger was staring at his phone and had headphones in, so I waved to get his attention as I approached. When he pulled one of the earbuds out of his ear, I said, “Excuse me. I’m sorry to bother you, but my friend and I were mugged. We don’t have any money, but we really need to ride this bus. Do you happen to have four pounds we could use to ride the bus?”

The stranger held up a finger, indicating I should wait. He rifled in his pocket before pulling out four coins and passing them to me.

I had been expecting bills, but hastily cupped my hands to receive the coins which were warm from his pocket. “Thank you so much!” I said, as the stranger nodded and popped the earbud into his ear again. I turned and returned to Harrison’s side with a triumphant smile on my face. “I told you, good people.”



“I’d have thought of that,” he grumbled, holding out his hand for the money. I passed him three of the coins but held back one of them. Harrison realized why I did, and said, “Oh, yeah, this is your first time seeing your relative.”

I squinted at the profile on the coin, looking for familiar features, but it was hard to find any in profile. His hair was long and curved around his ear. The skin on his neck hung loose, and his nose was hawkish. I tried to assign various attributes to him, likewise or kind, but it felt like I was reaching or personifying a coin. Realizing that Harrison might have a better sense of him after seeing my grandfather on the news giving speeches, I asked, “What kind of person is he?”

“Your grandfather?” Harrison asked, seeing what I was looking at. He shrugged. “I’m not sure. He’s one of those royals who always keeps his distance when making public appearances. Like, he just presents this stiff persona to the world, keeping his personality and his views to himself. He doesn’t share all of himself with the public. Although...”

“What?” I pressed him when he paused.

“Well, it’s just an observation, and not even my own. My dad would talk about the king sometimes. Because I was just a child when your father died, so I don’t remember what the king was like before, but my dad said the king used to smile a lot more before he lost his family. He said he looks lonely now, maybe a little broken. But anyone would be after a loss like that.”

I stared at the coin, but I couldn’t let myself believe all that. It felt too much like wishful thinking that this man and I could find each other and make each other whole. My life was not going to turn into the novel *Heidi*, especially since my grandfather



was surrounded by a nest of vipers vying for the throne, not Heidi's friendly goats. I said, "There's one thing we haven't talked about doing yet." When Harrison looked at me, I continued, "What if I just didn't go to Cornwallis? What if I disappeared as best I could and never went to find my grandfather? I know my mom said my grandfather could keep me safe, but he didn't keep my father safe. I might be safer if I turned my back on all of this."

"You might..." Harrison said, but he didn't sound like he liked the idea.

The profile on the coin looked disappointed in me, so I tucked it into my pocket. Sighing, I said, "I don't know. It's just something I'm thinking about. But it's hard to commit to that idea, now that I'm picturing my grandfather as a lonely old man."

Harrison's shoulders relaxed. He said, "Here comes the bus. Follow me, we want a seat as far back as we can get. Remember, we're wanted."

"I hadn't forgotten," I grumbled. But I was really missing Harrison's ridiculously ostentatious car about now. My heart started to race as the bus approached, but oddly I was more nervous about this unfamiliar social situation than I was about the police finding us. Hastily, I shoved the coin in Harrison's hand and said, "Take this. Please. I don't know what to do with it."

He looked both exasperated at my panic and sympathetic at the same time somehow, but he took the coin from me. He said, "It's nothing to freak out about. We just pay to get on the bus. I'll show you."

The bus rolled to a stop in front of us, and we boarded after the businessman who had given me money. I craned my neck past Harrison to see how the man gave the bus driver money



but was even more confused when I saw that he was showing the bus driver a ticket on his phone, rather than purchasing one. I didn't have a phone... I took a deep breath to settle myself, and Harrison approached the driver. Instead of doing something with a phone, Harrison dropped the coins into a box near the driver, and he grabbed two tickets when the box spit them out. He looked over his shoulder, seeing me still standing on the stairs, and he waved for me to come closer.

"Here's your ticket," he said, pressing it into my hand. "And follow me."

Harrison headed for the back without interacting with the driver, but I hesitated, still holding my ticket, just in case I had forgotten to scan it somewhere. The bus driver, who had been about to start driving, noticed me still standing there and looked at me. He gave me a broad friendly smile. I froze as I stared at him. The bus driver's smile faltered, and he stared at me harder, eyes flicking around to take in how I was dressed and the solid mask that was my face.

At that moment, I knew how I'd screwed up. When in public, free people often wear exaggerated expressions on their faces, like the smile he'd given me. As the people in society who possess a full range of emotions, their expressions are a way to showcase their class and distinguish themselves in public. As I had been raised as a servant, I had been trained to never let my emotions display on my face. And I had just marked myself by not returning his smile.

"Ellie?" Harrison called my name, likely after noticing I wasn't following him.



Even though it might be too late, I gave the bus driver the biggest smile I could manage. It felt wooden and unnatural on my face, and my cheeks hurt. But it worked. The bus driver's intense stare relaxed, and he looked away, back to the road as he started to drive. I took a deep breath and walked down the aisle between the seats as the floor rocked beneath my feet. For a few seconds, I had forgotten how much danger I was in, but I wouldn't again.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Harrison and I got a seat near the door, perhaps both of us feeling the need to be near an exit. After we sat in silence for a moment, he said, “Here.”

I looked at the closed fist he held out to me and asked, “What is it?”

“Take it and see.”

When I opened my palm, he dropped a coin into it that was warm from his skin. I stared at my grandfather’s visage on it and asked, “Where did you get it?”

He shrugged. “I thought you might like to have one to keep. So, I asked someone if they could lend it to me. You know, just because surely the first time someone gave you coins was a fluke, people aren’t really that nice, and I just had to prove you wrong. It wasn’t because I actually wanted to give you a coin to have.”

Smiling at his sarcasm, I tucked the coin into the leather pouch with the rest of my treasures. I said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said with a shrug. It seemed like this display of emotion made him uncomfortable, which was something I understood.



My nerves were still jangling from boarding the bus, so I tried to settle myself with a distraction as I asked, “Have you ridden the bus often before?”

He shook his head. “I rode the bus to school as a kid, but it was a different kind of bus, one the school system ran.” Harrison noticed something odd about my face, and he asked, “What?”

I touched my face with my hand, as if unfamiliar with the way my lips had curved, and then I continued to hide my expression in embarrassment. “Oh, it’s nothing. I just realized that you must be feeling like a fish out of water right now, too. And for some reason that makes me feel better.”

He snorted and said, “I’d think you’d prefer it if we weren’t both fish right now, flopping around on land, and that I knew which direction the water was.”

“That would imply that I was expecting you to save me. But I’m not. I can find the water on my own.” As I looked around the bus, my lips twitched in an unfamiliar way, and I had to resist the urge to cover my mouth self-consciously with my hand again. This had been my idea to board the bus, and I had gotten us the money for the ride. I felt so much satisfaction in that, and it gave me confidence that I could do this. I could get myself to my grandfather and to safety.

Harrison saw me looking around the bus, and he asked, “Does it look like you thought it would? Like, since you only ever read about places like this?”

Seeing the water bottles rolling around the floor, the empty candy wrappers stuffed in and under seats, and the graffiti on the windows, I confessed, “It’s a little dirtier than I expected, but I feel like I’m in a fairytale.” I glanced at Harrison, and he was



giving me the odd look I'd expected. I said, "Don't judge me, I know how that sounds. And I'm not the sort of person who loves fairy tales with knights and princesses anyway, not my sort of book. But that's how I feel right now, like I've walked into one."

"Well," Harrison said, dropping his voice so we couldn't be overheard. "I suppose that's fitting, you are a princess."

"I'm not," I insisted. "And that's not what I meant. I'm not the princess in this story, I feel like I'm an adventurer on an epic quest right now. I feel like for the first time in my life, I'm the hero in control of my own destiny. I think I know a little about how those knights felt in stories now, when they jumped on their horse and rode to save the day. Only I'm riding a bus right now. It's a little less glamorous than a horse, but it feels just as exciting to me right now." My cheeks felt hot, and I felt the sudden need to stop talking. "I know how that all probably sounds..."

"No, no, I get it," he said, reassuring me quickly. "I get it. The way you say you feel like you're in control of your destiny. You're getting a taste of independence for the first time in your life, and that feels good." Suddenly I was feeling less reassured, due to the horrible circumstances that had caused my independence which didn't seem like they should result in a good feeling, but he didn't seem to notice how his words had made me feel, as Harrison continued, "I remember the first time I ever felt like that. I was fifteen and I was behind the wheel of a car. It wasn't the first time I ever drove, just the time I felt like I knew what I was doing, and it struck me as I was driving that this was something I *could* do. And I knew all the things this meant for me. I wasn't going to be dependent on my parents to drive me places, like to the movies. I didn't have to keep riding the bus, since my friends and I could



start carpooling. And I could literally go anywhere I wanted. It was like the world opened to me. It was amazing.”

“You don’t have to do that, you know,” I snapped.

“What?” he asked.

“The way you always try to relate to me with a story. I don’t know why you do it, but don’t bother. You’re not here to be my friend, so stop pretending. I’m not interested.” I refused to look at him, though he leaned forward to try to catch my eye. Instead, I stared out the window, watching as the bus rolled past several businesses. This urban area still felt so alien after a lifetime spent in the countryside on one little property.

“Did I say something to upset you?” he guessed.

I swallowed heavily, as if trying to eat my guilt over the freedom I’d been enjoying. Then I said, “That’s ridiculous. I don’t get upset. You know that. Stop trying to assign emotions I don’t have to me.”

We sat in silence for a minute, and for his part Harrison at least didn’t dispute my claim. When he finally did speak, he simply said, “Our stop isn’t for a while, close to the end of the bus line. If you want, you could take a nap while we ride. I’ll wake you when we get there.”

“As if I could fall asleep,” I said, but my eyelids did feel a bit heavy. So, I leaned my head back against the seat, and I closed my eyes experimentally. Despite the jarring motion of the creaky bus whenever it went over a bump, I fell into unconsciousness an indefinite amount of time later.

\*



I slept without dreams, so it felt like only a second had passed when a large hand was on my shoulder, shaking me awake. I flinched away from the touch and bumped my head against the window before blinking awake, seeing Harrison. He held up his hands to show he wasn't going to touch me again, and said, "Sorry, sorry. I was just trying to wake you up. We're here."

"Where?" I asked, blinking up at him. My brain hadn't quite caught up with my body yet.

Harrison sighed in exasperation and said, "Well, get off the bus and you'll see." Turning his back on me, he headed down the aisle as if he were leaving me here. It almost felt like he was calling my bluff about going our separate ways earlier, so I scrambled to my feet to follow him, half out of annoyance and half out of fear of being left behind. It didn't seem like we were holding up the bus driver, who had apparently come to the end of the line, and we were the last to disembark the bus. After I joined him on the ground, Harrison waved his arms around, gesturing to the water and skyline behind him. "Welcome to Baltimore."

As he said it, I remembered where we had been going of course, as the last of the sleep fog cleared from my mind. I stayed in the same place, but walked in a circle, slowly taking in my surroundings and staring at the carved marble on the building facades. Then I made another circle, this time looking up at the glass buildings that touched the sky. Even though this was the first city that I had ever seen, I could tell it was a unique place; the architecture was a surprising mix of old and new, antique and modern. It was a city in an identity crisis, and somehow that only enhanced its charm.



“Not much, is it?” Harrison said with a grimace, and I saw his eyes dart to the graffiti on a mailbox, the trash in the gutters, and the pigeons the size of house cats fighting over French fries spilled on the sidewalk.

I shook my head at his superficiality and said, “I’ve spent my entire life that I can remember living in one place that was carefully maintained to the point that it didn’t even feel real. This in comparison to that? This is reality, and it doesn’t have to be perfect. I like it the way it is. Even the air feels different out here. Like, I know it doesn’t smell as good here and when I open my mouth, the petrol in the air tastes like it’s coating my tongue, but I’ll take that any day over the air in the house I grew up in that was thick with artificial smells like cloying perfume. For the first time in my life, I can breathe deeply, and it makes me feel free. That probably doesn’t make sense...”

Harrison shrugged. “I’m not going to try to relate this time to you with some story, because whether I get it or not doesn’t matter. It makes sense to you, and that’s all that’s important.”

My heart thumped in a way that didn’t make sense to me, and for once I didn’t feel annoyed with Harrison. I felt like thanking him for saying that, but I found myself staring at him for an awkwardly long period of time instead.

He noticed and narrowed his eyes as he stared back, but didn’t question me. The sun would be setting soon, and it was painting everything with a yellow light, including Harrison’s brown hair which was feathered with highlights as it was ruffled by the breeze. Finally, he broke the silence and said, “We should start heading to my friend’s house. It’s not too far on foot, but it’s not really safe to walk around after dark, so we should get going.”



“Oh...” I said, looking at the way he gestured down the street.

Harrison raised an eyebrow. “Was there something you wanted to do?”

I went in the opposite direction, looking down Calvert Street. When I was looking at the bus route, I noticed how close we were to the water. I said, “I had been hoping that we could see the water while we were here...”

Harrison looked at the sky, trying to guess the time based on the sun’s position, and shrugged. He said, “Why not. It’ll probably be a twenty-minute walk from the harbor to my friend’s house. There should be time to get there. Let’s go to the inner harbor.”

My eyes widened. “Really?”

He snorted and started heading south on Calvert Street. “Don’t look too excited.”

My cheeks were hot. “I’m not excited.”

“Sure, you aren’t,” he said and ignored my indignation as he led the way. As I stepped into place beside him, I untucked my hair from my ear to try to let it fall across my face to hide it. Harrison noticed and said, “Just try to look confident like you have nothing to hide.”

I shot him a side-eyed look because he made that sound easy, when his face was in the newspaper with only some hair dye to hide behind. But then I remembered that my face wasn’t there, and I had practiced hiding my thoughts behind an emotionless mask for years, and trying to appear confident wasn’t so different. I glanced at Harrison again, trying to see how he was achieving it. There was a slight upwards curve to his lips, an intensity to his eyes as he gazed forward like he was intent on his destination,



and his shoulders were relaxed with his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets as he walked down the sidewalk.

Harrison returned my sideways glance as I shook out my shoulders and hovered my hands over where my pockets would be if I had any in this black sequined cocktail dress. A breeze whipped down the street, making goosebumps stand up on my arms, and I gave up the confident strut to hug my arms around my middle instead, rubbing my arms to warm them. For a second, I thought he was going to offer me his jacket, but he didn't. For a moment, I imagined that he was Raymond because I knew that Raymond would offer me his jacket. He had before, and I'd refused Raymond's coat, as it would be wrong for a free person to give their coat to a servant. Perhaps that's why Harrison didn't offer me his jacket; I bet he would if I were Dorothea.

Then I remembered she was lying in the hospital, possibly dying right now, and my stomach twisted that I had been wanting to switch places with an injured woman over something so trivial as a coat. But no... I was being unfair to myself. As tragic as Doro's circumstances were and as much as I hoped she would recover, I wasn't asking for too much. I didn't want to switch places with her or have her life, I just wanted to be treated like a human in the same way as her. And that's something I was starting to realize that all of us deserved, servants and free people alike.

"There it is," Harrison said, putting a light hand on my shoulder to get my attention. When I looked at him, he gestured forward and said, "There. See it?"

"Oh..." I had been so lost in thought that I wasn't looking ahead. Now that I did, I saw blue water shimmering in the light. There was a small park between us and the water, and I stood on



my toes to try to look around a tree. I asked Harrison, “Can we get closer?”

“Sure,” he said, and led the way. I expected him to take the winding paved path around the trees, but he cut across the grass.

After hesitating a second, I followed him until we were standing as close as we could get to the water without stepping on the dock—my toes itched to walk closer, but the way was blocked by a woman accepting tickets from people who were boarding a cruise boat. I closed my eyes for a moment, just listening to the lapping of the water, the caw of seagulls, and the excited shouts of children playing in a sprinkler in the park. I reopened my eyes, seeing Harrison staring at me, and asked, “What?”

“Nothing,” Harrison said and shrugged.

“Why were you staring at me like that?”

“It’s nothing,” he said, but then admitted, “It’s just I’ve never seen anyone act so excited to see water before.”

“What?” I crossed my arms over my middle to stop squirming, unsure if I disliked being stared at or if I was more bothered by the reason why he was doing it.

“I didn’t mean anything bad by that,” he hurried to say. “It’s something I wish I could do. You know, look at things the way you do. It’s like everything is new and exciting for you, and I guess I’m just jaded in comparison.”

“Well, it’s easy to look at everything like it’s new, when it’s the first time you’re seeing it. That’s what happens when you’re raised in one place and not allowed to set foot out the front door.” I shrugged and looked out at the water, not wanting to think about the estate right now. I added, “Besides, it’s the ocean. Who doesn’t stare at that the first time they see it.”



“Oh, well that’s not the ocean,” Harrison said. When I looked at him, he gestured at the water and continued. “It’s fresh water, not salt water. This is just the harbor. But I suppose the Baltimore Harbor looks cool if you’ve never seen anything else.”

As I looked out at the water, now shimmering with the orange light of the setting sun that was also setting the glass building of the skyline afire with light, my vision blurred a bit but I wasn’t sure why. It was something about what Harrison said—one second, he was complimenting me for the way I looked at the world, and in the next moment he was making me feel like a naïve child. He might not have meant that last comment badly, but that’s the way I heard it, so I said, “You would make a good servant.”

“What?”

Turning away from the view I’d rather be looking at than him, I met his gaze and repeated, “You would make a good servant. If you can look at something as beautiful as that and feel nothing, then you might as well not have your soul.” As he gaped at me, I kept going, saying something I’d wanted to talk about for a while. “I’ve known you’d be a good servant for a while, ever since you found out your girlfriend was in the hospital. What kind of man doesn’t immediately go to the side of the woman he loves, when she might be dying?”

“I...” Harrison took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. When he reopened them, he seemed a bit steadier, but that was all I could guess about his emotional state—I really wasn’t good at reading people. He said, “Not that it’s any of your business, but I don’t love Dorothea. I don’t even like her to be honest.”

“Why were you with her then?” I asked.



“You’re going to judge me for this.” He took another breath before continuing as he rubbed the back of his neck in a sheepish gesture. “I was just with her for her family’s money. My family used to have money, but it’s almost all gone, so my parents are trying to set me up with a girl whose family is wealthy. And that person is Doro...”

“Oh,” I said. And then I shrugged. “I don’t judge you for that.”

Harrison raised an eyebrow. “Seriously? You judged me for not being at the hospital with her when you thought I loved her, but you don’t judge me now that you know I don’t?”

“Nope,” I said with another shrug. “Feelings as a motivation don’t make much sense to me, but now that I know no feelings are involved, how you’re acting makes more sense to me. I can understand that you’re acting solely in the interest of money here.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’re a strange woman.”

“I’m a strange woman you’re escorting to Cornwallis for money. And so long as you’re a man with a simple motivation like that, I have no issue with you.” I glanced back to the water and my eyes widened. I asked, “Is that a pirate ship?”

Harrison followed my gaze, but didn’t seem surprised by what he saw. “Oh, I’ve heard of that. It’s just a tourist thing. If you want, I can take you there someday, but it wouldn’t be my first choice.” He gestured to another boat that was cruising along the harbor and said, “We must get going in a minute, but I’ll bring you back here for a cruise when we can. I think you’d like a ride on that one. It takes you on a tour around sights in the water, like bridges and lighthouses, with a tour guide giving historical narration.”



“Oh...” I said. “That does sound nice.”

Harrison nodded to a shop at the end of the inlet on the left. “And after the tour, I’d get you some Italian ice if you liked. We’ll come back here someday and do all that. Does that sound like a deal?”

My chest felt funny, so I didn’t try talking and just nodded. I very much wanted to do all that, but I doubted that I’d get the chance. And I doubted the motivations of the man who was offering as well. It wasn’t that I thought he didn’t mean to follow through, I was sure he did, but I didn’t trust why he was offering this to me. A man who was going to marry a woman for her money was not a man who I believed was innocently offering me a day at the harbor with no personal gain in mind. He wanted something from me in return, I was sure of it.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“We should be getting closer. And... there it is!” Harrison said. “My friend’s house is around the corner from here.”

We had just stepped off St. Paul Street, and a white pillar had appeared in the distance. It was hard to see all the detail in the dimming light, but I saw the figure of a man atop it. Then my attention shifted to the statue at the base of the white pillar, and I stared at it as we got closer and closer with more resplendent details popping out—the waves in the mane of the horse he was riding, the ruffles of his sleeve, the determined look in his eyes, and somehow all captured in bronze. I asked Harrison, “Is that Cornwallis?”

“Hmm?” Harrison glanced back, seeming distracted as if he’d been intent on our destination, rather than the sights we were walking past. “I don’t think so... Oh, there’s a plaque. See?”

I looked where he was pointing and read, “General Benedict Arnold.”

“He was the war hero who switched sides halfway through the war, helping Cornwallis defeat the general of the other side.”



“I know who he was,” I said, looking up again to admire the face of the man astride the horse in the statue. Knowing Harrison was anxious to get going, I turned away from the statue and started walking.

Harrison eagerly led the way across the street towards a residential area. He started counting the numbers on the houses as we walked past them, until we came to one with a large tree in the yard behind a black metal fence. “This is it,” he said in a whisper. “Maybe we should walk around to the back and knock on the back door... I don’t want his neighbors to see us. I’d never forgive myself if I got Hal into this mess.”

Shrugging since I didn’t have an opinion on the matter of Hal’s neighbors, I followed Harrison as he made the roundabout way to the back entrance of the house. I said, “It might be a bit too late to be asking this, but you’re sure that we can trust this friend of yours? No offense, but you’re not the sort of person I can see inspiring unflinching loyalty in his friends.”

Harrison snorted, but didn’t look at me as he shoved branches and clematis vines out of the way along the overgrown garden path beside the house. He said, “I might not deserve it, but Hal is a good friend and a good person. He’s like a brother to me, and I trust him to not turn us in. He’ll hear us out, and when he knows what really happened that night, he’ll do what he can to help us. He’s just that sort of person.”

“Definitely sounds like a friend you don’t deserve,” I said, batting at the purple clematis that went swinging at me when Harrison let it go. Feeling a little better about this, I continued following Harrison until we came to the back door of the house. The garden area was small and simple, with just a small stone



courtyard with a table where someone had left a newspaper and a mug, but I was more focused on the high wall—no neighbor’s prying eyes would see us here.

“I was hoping he might be out here,” Harrison said, shooting a longing glance at the mug with a teabag in it. With a sigh, he climbed the three steps to the back door and knocked. Someone must have been near the back door, as the lock was already clicking before a minute passed, and the door opened slightly.

I leaned forward, seeing a dark-skinned woman peering through the gap at Harrison. There was a gray scarf wrapped around her head, and I was all but certain she was a servant. Only one of her eyes was visible, and it widened very slightly when she focused on his face—she was skilled at hiding her emotions, and if I hadn’t been a servant, I wouldn’t have noticed the tiny tell that she was alarmed. She knew his face, which wasn’t surprising given that the master of the house was his friend, but something about Harrison’s appearance at the door alarmed her. Either she had seen the newspaper or heard Harrison’s friend talk about the incident.

I was tense, sensing danger and wanting to run, but I had no way to warn Harrison that we should go. All I could do was watch to see what happened next, as the woman inclined her head while saying, “Your servant, sir.”

“Hey, I’m not sure if you remember me, I’m a friend of Hal Rogers.” When she nodded, Harrison continued, “Is he home? Can we come inside?”

She glanced behind her, seeming reluctant, but after a minute she nodded. The servant took the chain off the door and stepped to the side so we could enter. She said, “Come in, follow me. The



master is upstairs. I'll take you to the living room and then fetch him."

"Great," Harrison said, and he eagerly crossed the threshold. He didn't notice for a few seconds that I wasn't following him, until he turned to see why she hadn't closed the door. A crease appeared between his eyebrows, and he said in exasperation, "Come on."

I shook my head, and there was a lump in my throat that wouldn't let me speak. My legs couldn't carry me across the threshold, yet I couldn't explain to him why.

"Let's go," Harrison said impatiently. He didn't seem interested in understanding why I had halted, and he just wanted to bend me to his will. He leaned forward to grab my arm and dragged me up the steps and into the house, ignoring when I thrashed and smacked at his arm. He didn't release me until the servant, who was ignoring our scuffle, shut the door behind me.

Having the way shut behind me did nothing to calm my nerves. My shoulders were so tense they ached. I rubbed at my arm, which was stinging from where he grabbed me, and glared at the side of his face.

"The living room is that way, right?" Harrison asked with a gesture. He was ignoring me, which only made the fire in my chest blaze hotter.

"Yes, follow me," the servant said. She led the way through the kitchen, which I was too busy glaring at Harrison to notice any details about.

I had wanted to run from this place since I sensed danger, convinced that the house was filled with police officers who would arrest us as soon as we stepped inside. Now that I was here, I had



to admit the house was empty. As we walked through the rooms, the only sound in the entire house was the ticking of a grandfather clock. It was peaceful, in an ominous sort of way. But as soon as the servant led us to the living room, I quickly became distracted from my fears.

An entire wall of the living room was filled with books, from floor to ceiling packing the built-in bookcases. And there were high ceilings in this room—it was an odd sort of room that was taller than it was wide, giving it a funhouse feel like the walls might start closing in on us at any moment. But if I were going to be crushed by walls, I might not mind it as much if they were loaded with books.

“Please take a seat,” the servant said, gesturing to the sofas in the middle of the room, which were circled around a coffee table. “I’ll fetch the master from his office upstairs.”

Reluctantly, I stepped away from the bookcase and sat down beside Harrison where she’d indicated. I frowned at the coffee table when I noticed there weren’t any coffee table books on it, just a bowl with mints in it. I should’ve had enough of books after spending a morning in a library, but I’d felt rushed while there this morning, and now felt like a hungry child being ordered to sit still while in a candy shop.

Harrison didn’t seem to feel like he was under any such order though, and he rose with a stretch before crossing the room.

“Where are you going?” I asked, as he reached for the door. I hissed the question slightly, as if afraid of reprimanding that we weren’t following the servant’s instructions.

“The bathroom? Not that I must tell you where I’m going...” He raised an eyebrow when he noticed the alarm on my face.



“Relax. This is my friend’s house. I’ve been here hundreds of times. You don’t have to be so stuffy and formal about it.”

I watched as he walked out the door, having to suppress a whine. He might be a guest here, but I wasn’t, and I was sure that any minute now, someone was going to walk through that door and... what? My shoulders relaxed slightly, as I realized that I probably wasn’t in life-threatening danger. Perhaps Harrison’s friend would call the police, that would be the worst possibility, but more likely he would order us to leave his house. That was the most likely negative outcome of this evening, but even if we were ordered to get out, we’d be in the same circumstances as the day before. But we survived today and would tomorrow as well, if nothing changed for the worse.

Also, I reminded myself that I didn’t have to take orders from anyone anymore. I stood up. I crossed the room and allowed my fingertips to run across the spines of an early collection of encyclopedias—the spines were embossed with gold lettering that shimmered in the light from the chandelier above. My eyes scanned the shelf until they landed on a photo leaning near a bookend. I would have moved quickly to more interesting titles, but the face in the photo made me pause.

I picked up the frame to get a closer look at the photo. Two young men stood with their arms thrown over each other’s shoulders. They were wearing matching sports jerseys, and both had long scruffy tousled hair. Although he was about five years younger in the photo, the dark-haired man was unmistakably Harrison, with narrowed mischievous eyes and a cheeky grin. The other man had sandy blonde hair and a sweeter innocent look, made boyish by rosy cheeks. They looked almost mismatched, and if



they were schoolboys, I'd brand them the class troublemaker and the teacher's pet... how did Harrison and Hal ever become friends?

"What are you doing in my house?"

I gasped and dropped the picture, which clattered to my feet. Luckily the glass didn't break. I looked up, seeing a man glaring at me from the doorway. His expression was so transformed from the photo that it took me a few seconds to recognize Hal. There was a lump in my throat, so I just stared at him.

"I said..." Hal started slowly, as he walked further into the room. He crept carefully by the bookcase, and a quick glance betrayed his intent—he was headed for a pistol that was standing on display on the bookcase, and he was much closer to it than me. "What are you doing in my house?"

"I was, um," I tried to answer, but my voice quavered, and my words faltered. My heart was hammering in my chest, and I started to sweat. This was too much like the other night. In fact, this room was starting to remind me a lot of the living room from that night, and suddenly I could see Rufus lying on the floor in a puddle of his own blood. And my mother... I could smell her blood. She was stabbed, not shot, but I could still feel her blood on my hands as I tried to hold it in her. My knees started to shake.

"Answer me!" he shouted.

I flinched. I wanted to beg for him to not hurt me, but the lump in my throat had grown too great for me to get the words out. He was going to shoot me, I knew it, and I was too terrified to even run. Not that there was anywhere to go, since Hal was standing between me and the only exit.



Hal reached for the pistol, and without taking his eyes off me he set a hand on it. He muttered, “Maybe this will motivate you to talk...”

“What’s going on here?” Harrison asked, as he appeared in the doorway behind Hal.

Hal grabbed the pistol, but even as he turned armed, his shoulders seemed to relax. Perhaps he recognized Harrison’s voice, because it only took a few seconds for all the animosity to drain from him. “Oh, is she with you?” he asked.

The servant stepped around Harrison with wide eyes. Seeing Hal standing there with a gun and me shaking like a leaf, she darted across the room to put her body in a defensive stance between me and her master. The posture reminded me so much of Rufus that I wanted to scream—after seconds ago thinking about him lying injured on the floor, I couldn’t stand to see someone else in that position. I would not watch her get hurt.

Hal turned away from Harrison, almost reluctantly, and his brows knit together in confusion. His face had regained its cherubic charm, making the pistol in his hands look odd. He asked, “Mary? What are you doing?”

“If I may say, do not hurt this girl, Master.” Her posture remained firm and square, yet her eyes dropped submissively as she spoke to him. She was making herself as bold as she dared, continuing, “It was my fault, Master. I should have told you that your friend brought a companion. Please don’t hurt this girl. Punish me instead.”

“Oh...” Hal said, looking at the pistol in his hand like he only just remembered it. Then he put it back on the stand on the bookcase. “No one is getting hurt. I overreacted. Sorry.”



“It’s okay,” Harrison said, either ignoring or oblivious to the fact that I was still shaking and not yet completely okay. He slapped a hand familiarly on Hal’s shoulder and said, “Good to see you, man.”

“You too,” he said, and looked around the room. Hal asked, “Where’s the other one?”

“Where’s the other what?” Harrison asked.

Hal looked at me, but continued speaking to Harrison as he said, “The other servant. The newspaper said you were traveling with two of them. Or was it wrong?”

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Harrison and I exchanged a glance while I stood there mutely, just feeling the weight in my stomach. Finally, he answered his friend's question, saying, "A lot has happened. I'll explain it all to you. But I should start at the beginning."

"Sounds good," Hal said, and he gestured to the sofas in the center of the room. "Why don't you sit down, and you can tell me all about it. Oh!" he said, turning to his servant. "You must be thirsty or hungry. Mary, will you get some refreshments? Maybe iced tea and sandwiches."

The servant was still standing in front of me after having stepped in the line of fire so to speak, a few moment previously. She nodded as she accepted the task.

Before thinking about what I was doing, I said, "I can help." I saw Harrison give me an odd look as he sat down on the sofa, and I added, "I like to keep busy. I'd like to help in the kitchen."

Hal sat down on the sofa across from Harrison, seeming to think nothing of my volunteering to serve. After reading a little about me in the paper, it probably seemed natural to him that I



wanted to serve. He probably didn't even consider that I wanted to be anywhere but in the room with him, after he pointed a gun at me—after all, most servants would be immune to fear. I wasn't sure why I wasn't, as I couldn't deny the way my heart was racing or my palms were sweating. Maybe it was just because I had seen up close the damage that a gun could do, and that was the sort of fear you didn't need a soul to appreciate. Perhaps it was a more primal thing, like a survival instinct. Even a fish swims away when it sees a shark.

Making like a fish, I followed Mary back the way we'd come, until we entered the kitchen. I got to take a closer look at it this time, surprised to see that the appliances were so different from the ones in the manor house I'd grown up in. I ran a hand across the bright yellow stove, inspecting the large silver knobs on it. The other appliances in the kitchen seemed to be in a similar style.

Mary noticed me looking, and she said, "The late mistress, Master Hal's mother, designed the kitchen. And he has kept everything the way she liked it. When an appliance needs to be replaced, he always purchases an antique to match the décor."

I just nodded and looked around for something to occupy my hands, uninterested in the decorating habits of the man who had scared me so badly a moment ago. There was a large kettle resting on the stove, and I hefted it to the sink to fill it with water before returning it to the stove.

As I lit the burner to boil the water, I saw Mary staring at me. Her efficient hands worked on the task of assembling tiny sandwiches without any guidance needed from her eyes. I guessed that she really hadn't been expecting me to help in the kitchen at



all. It was probably my clothes —Dorothea’s fine cocktail dress was a bit worn from travel, but I still wasn’t dressed like a servant. Mary probably didn’t know what to make of me at all. I asked, “Which cabinet do you keep the tea in?”

“I’ll get it,” she said, and she reached into a cabinet near her that had various boxes of tea. She saw me watching her this time, and her dark eyes went to my fidgeting hands. Since I had left the estate where I grew up, not much had made sense to me, but I was standing in a kitchen now with a servant woman, and an understanding passed between us. She was the sort of person who was unused to receiving help and never asked for it, but she saw that my hands needed to be productive, and that was something she sympathized with. Mary nodded to the glass cabinets above the sink. She said, “If you like, you can get the tea service down from there. Make sure you get the sugar bowl and cream pitcher too.”

She didn’t need to give me further instructions than that. Both of us had performed this task before, so we worked in silence, our hands moving in tandem as a team. I placed the cream pitcher on the tray, and she filled it from the fridge. Together we made quick work of the task, and as we completed the last act of arranging cookies on a plate, it wasn’t until I looked up from our hands that I remembered who I was standing beside. Seeing the servant Mary’s face, I had to swallow a lump in my throat. Even though her hands didn’t resemble my mother’s, the work was so familiar that I’d turned off my brain for a moment and allowed myself to forget where I was and what had happened.

Or had I been forcing myself to forget what happened the entire time I’d been traveling with Harrison, ever since the start



of this journey. I didn't know. All I knew was that my shoulders felt so much heavier than they did a moment ago, when all I'd been concerned with was the best way to artfully arrange cookies on a plate.

Mary noticed something off about my face and asked, "Are you okay, Miss?"

The fact that my expression wasn't composed just made everything worse. A servant isn't supposed to show anything on her face, as she has no emotions to show. I felt betrayed by my own facial muscles, and then I felt betrayed for feeling betrayed... at this point, I knew I was being ridiculous, but there was a turmoil of something in my chest that was making it hard to breathe. "I'm fine," I said between panting breaths. Nodding to the tea tray, I said, "We're finished here, right?"

"Yes, Miss." If she thought anything was odd about my behavior, she hid the judgment from her eyes well. With a gentle touch, she brushed my hands away from the tray and said, "I'll carry that."

I followed Mary through the house and back to the living room where Harrison and Hal were sitting and talking, but I was having trouble focusing on them. It took me a few seconds to notice that Harrison was smiling at me and gesturing to the open spot on the sofa beside him, and a few more seconds for me to realize that that gesture was an invitation to sit.

"Are you okay?" Hal asked.

"Oh..." I said, realizing only when I noticed everyone staring at me that he was talking to me. I had expected to feel uncomfortable sitting across from Hal, but all my animosity for him had evaporated on the walk back from the kitchen. Perhaps Har-



rierson had said something to him while I was in the kitchen, but this man now exuded nothing but warmth and welcome.

Something in the room was making me uneasy, and I realized it was Mary, her silent movements as she served us tea and then went to stand in the corner of the room in case she was needed. I couldn't bear the way she looked in my direction, though I knew she was just waiting to be called.

"Excuse me," I said abruptly and stood, interrupting the conversation. Both of them stared at me, but I didn't wait for a response as I hurried through the back of the house, and out into the backyard. The air was cooler and smelled sweeter in the garden, and yet I still struggled to drag it into my lungs. Shakily, I sat at the table in the backyard I'd seen earlier, which was still littered with the remnants of Hal's breakfast.

I stared at the half eaten English muffin on the plate. Apparently, our arrival hadn't allowed Mary a chance to clear the table yet, which is completely understandable, yet my own mother would have been berated for a similar action. I hoped Hal was more lenient with his servant... I pictured Mary having the same insults hurled at her that my mother might have endured, and my hands started to shake, though I wasn't sure why. Self-conscious though I was alone, I hugged myself to hide my hands in my armpits.

As I heard the squeak of a door hinge, I looked up, expecting Mary to be standing there asking if I needed anything. But it was Harrison. He stared at me for a few seconds, and I returned his gaze, trying in vain to read the expression that was twisting his face. Perhaps he was doing the same thing as me, but I wasn't sure if he had any better luck. After a moment, he stepped off the doorstep to sit across from me at the table in the garden.



“Are you okay?” he asked.

I uncoiled my arms, and luckily my hands had stopped shaking. I said, “Yes, I’m always okay.”

“Then why are you crying?” he asks, leaning forward to touch my cheek, which I hadn’t realized was damp.

I cringe away from his touch, rejecting both the gesture and his words. “I’m not crying.”

He holds up his fingertips so I can see them. “Are you seriously denying this? You’re upset. Tell me why you’re crying.”

“It’s just an automatic response,” I said in a deadpan voice, repeating the same words my mother had fed to me so many times over the years. When I skinned my knee when I was five years old. When the cat I loved to pet had died in the barn. When I scalded my hand on hot water in the kitchen. When Dorothea rejected me after years of friendship. I might have cried all these times, but it wasn’t from emotion or pain, and my mother had explained why. I continued, “I’ve seen people with souls cry and I’ve read stories about the emotions that cause it, so my body is reacting in the same way. But it’s just an automatic impulse, like yawning after someone in the room does. It’s not due to any other reason.”

“Don’t give me that bull.” Harrison said, and he sighed in exasperation. “Do I have to slap you to get you to admit that you feel something?”

That did it. That made me lose it. My tightly leashed temper got free, and I shrieked, “You’re just like the rest! I’ve known about it since the moment I saw you. You’re vile and cruel and heartless where servants are concerned. You think just because we don’t scream when you cut us that you can do anything you like



with servants. Servants might not have souls, but you're the ones who behave like you have no heart. You're monsters."

He rolled his eyes, which made me want to hit him, and said, "Yeah, I might be a vile person, I'll admit that, but when are you going to admit what you are? I've been really patient with your delusions up until now because I get it, but my patience is running out. You have emotions. You're just ignoring them because it's convenient for you to not have feelings right now."

I gaped at him for a long moment, and he just waited with a little smirk on his face, almost taunting me like he knew the expression made me despise him even more—that feeling just proved his point even further. The more he made me hate him, the more I couldn't deny that I could feel hatred. Grasping on a point, I said, "I can't believe you would say it's more convenient to be a servant. That just shows how evil and ignorant you are. Only a person who knows nothing about the lives that servants are forced to live would think that servitude is easier than being free."

Harrison sighed and said, "You're either deliberately misunderstanding me, or you're too upset to see the logic of what I'm saying. I'm not talking about servitude in general, I'm just talking about you. You would rather be a servant right now because emotionally that's easier than admitting what you're feeling right now."

"And just what am I supposed to be feeling?" I snapped. I crossed my arms defensively, as I had to admit that half the reason why I asked that question was because I didn't have words for the turmoil roiling in my chest and I was curious if he could name it for me.



“I’d imagine you’re feeling a few different things right now, and that’s confusing you because books and movies always simplify that and make you think humans just feel one thing at a time.” As he said that, his lips curved slightly at the corners—he could apparently tell from my expression that he’d nailed that guess. He continued, “And of course you’re mourning your mother right now, but at the same time you finally have a name to put to your father who is also dead. You feel like you should be equally mourning them, but you feel worse about your mother dying than your father because you knew her and not him, but that makes you feel guilty. And lastly, I would guess that you’re very angry right now with her, which further complicates the feeling.”

I shook my head at the last part and said, “Why would I be angry with her? For lying to me about who I am? She was just trying to protect me. Maybe I’ll be angry about that later, but right now I know she was just doing her best, and I have her to thank for my life.”

“No, you’re angry with her for dying,” he said, and I froze. Harrison didn’t miss that, and he put a hand on my shoulder. The hand felt heavy enough to knock me over, and yet it steadied me. Softly, he continued, “I know because I was angry with my own mother. It’s something that doesn’t make sense, since I know she didn’t want to leave me. But I felt abandoned anyway. She’s supposed to have been the constant in my life, but instead she’s gone and that feels like a betrayal. I was angry with her for a long time, and at the same time I love her. Those two emotions don’t feel like they should be able to exist in us at the same time for the same person, but somehow, they do.”



My throat felt so tight that swallowing caused a sharp pain. My eyes stung too, and it felt like the pain of the emotions I'd trapped in my chest were now causing other symptoms in my body. Sucking in a shuddering breath, I said, "None of this makes sense. It's all too much. It feels like there's this pressure in my chest. Like there's something inside me that will burst if it doesn't get out. How can this be an emotion? Emotions are supposed to be simple things like happy, sad, mad. But this feels nameless and alive and like it's clawing at me." I focused on his face between bleary vision obscured by tears and demanded, "Make it make sense."

Harrison shook his head but put a hand on my shoulder. He said, "It's not something that makes sense, even to people who have been navigating emotions all their lives. It's confusing to all of us."

Unsure why I was doing it and why it felt nice, I leaned into the hand on my shoulder. Noticing that, Harrison wrapped his arms around me, moving slowly just in case I would shove him away. I didn't, and as I broke down crying on his shoulder. At that moment, he wasn't Harrison—I was crying in the arms of my dead mother, who was never able to hug me with feeling after she lost her soul. And these were also the arms of my father, who could never be there after he died saving me. And also, Raymond, who I now knew I was capable of loving after spending so much time distancing myself from him. And my grandfather, who I hoped would feel like home when he embraced me for the first time. For a long moment, I felt all of these arms around me as I sobbed, feeling all the good and bad at once, and it was all too much but somehow, I continued to exist with it.



Eventually as the tears started to subside, I remembered who was holding me, and I pulled out of the embrace. Looking away as I wiped my cheeks to dry them, I asked in a hoarse voice, “Why? Why are you acting like you care?”

“Maybe I do,” he said. When I shot him an incredulous look, he added, “You’ve gotten a bad deal in life. That makes me sympathetic. I can’t deny it.”

“So, you just feel sorry for me. Like how you’d pity a three-legged dog or something.”

Harrison shrugged. “Hey, I’m just being honest here.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about being pitied by Harrison. If I weren’t so wrung out by emotions, I’m sure it would have annoyed me, and might later after I’d rested. And rest was all I could think about right now. I asked, “Do you think your friend might have a guest bedroom where I can lie down for a while? Even a sofa... I don’t know how much longer I can keep my eyes open.”

He nodded. “I’ll go ask Hal which room you can use.”

# CHAPTER NINETEEN



Inside the dark room, I wasn't sure how much time had passed when the door cracked slightly, but I would guess it had been a couple of hours. A couple of hours of hell—tossing and turning while I was torn between two torments. When I was awake, I would weep for my mother, and when I was asleep, I would dream of her. I hadn't known how to mourn her, so I'd put it off, pretending I was immune to grief. Now I felt guilty and like I had to cry even more, as if paying interest for the tears I owed her. The light bleeding into the room looked like salvation, a respite from my roiling emotions, and I didn't feel as terrible as I should have by grasping for this distraction. I croaked, "Hello?"

I was still half asleep as a face peeked through the crack in the door at me, and so I struggled to sit up slightly. Seeing this, Mary stepped further into the room and pushed the door open further, letting in the light from the hall light. She said, "Your servant, miss. I didn't mean to be walking in on you. The master asked me to check to see if you were up. And if so, I was to see if you were feeling up to joining them for dinner soon."



“Hmm,” I said as I rubbed at my sore eyes, trying to wrap my brain around the concept of food. As soon as I did, I felt the hollowness in my belly. With emotions once more under control, food was now a priority for me apparently. I nodded and forced myself the rest of the way up. “Yes please, I’d like to join them for dinner.”

“The Master will be pleased to hear it,” Mary said, as she reached for the light switch. Then she asked, “Will you need any help dressing for dinner? The closet has some dresses that belong to Master Hal’s sister, and he has said his sister wouldn’t mind if you borrowed one.” She crossed the room to open the closet door, displaying the selection. Either my expression or my silence had her sensing my discomfort, and she asked, “Is something wrong, Miss? Have I caused offense?”

“It’s nothing you did,” I hurried to assure her. Honestly, the thought of getting out of Dorothea’s dress thrilled me. I just wasn’t sure how to answer the first question though. There had to be a way to dismiss her; she didn’t need to waste her time with me, when she had the duties of an entire house to run. Hesitantly, I started, “I’m not sure how to do this from this side of things... I’m not used to any of this. I don’t want to get used to any of this. Um, thank you for your time. I can dress myself and won’t need any assistance.”

She hesitated with a hand on one of the dresses. “Some of them have tricky fastenings. Zippers that can’t be reached without the assistance of another set of hands.” Then she let the hand fall from the dress and kept her eyes on the floor as she confessed, “I was actually hoping to ask you something, Miss. And I thought there’d be time to ask it while I helped you with your garment or hair.”



“What is it?” I asked, as I put my feet over the side of the bed and searched for the shoes I’d kicked off.

Mary turned to me and met my eyes in a move uncharacteristic of servants. She asked, “I was wondering, if it’s not too impertinent to ask, are you a servant or a free person?”

The question, which should be black and white, shouldn’t have been so hard to answer. Swallowing heavily as I looked at the floor, I said, “I’m sorry, but that isn’t a question I’m prepared to answer. I’m still figuring that out.” I looked up then. I was ashamed to meet her eyes—to Mary, it must seem terribly privileged, that I had the luxury of figuring out if I was a member of the servant class or a free person... Harrison might be right that I wanted it easy, a life where I had no great decisions weighing on me that would change the course of my life.

Yet Mary didn’t appear to be judging me. She just nodded sagely and gestured to a pile of towels on the nearby table. “Would you like to take a shower before dinner, Mistress?”

I twitched at the title that felt wrong. I didn’t know what I was, but I wasn’t a mistress, and I never would be. I ran a hand across my arms, which had only been hastily washed in the bathroom of a petrol station. I imagined I could still feel the grit. Yes, I very much wanted a shower.

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About thirty minutes later, I was sitting at the dressing table of Hal’s sister while Mary brushed the tangles out of my damp hair. My skin was finally scrubbed clean, but it continued to crawl as I now felt unnerved by the shift in this situation. How many times had I run a brush through Dorothea’s hair? Of all my chores as



a servant, that had been one of my least favorites... standing so close to her, doing a task I had performed since we were both children, but feeling nothing but coldness from her. I couldn't stand the thought of someone feeling that animosity from me too, while performing such an intimate task.

Looking at the reflection of Mary's face in the mirror, I asked, "The question you asked me earlier, was that the only thing you wanted to know? Or was there more?"

For the briefest of seconds, her hands paused in their task. No one who hadn't served would notice the tell that she was tense. Her gaze remained fixed on my hair as she answered, "There was more, Mistress."

I twitched at the title. No, I couldn't take being called that. I said, "Please, Hal's sister is your mistress, not me. Could you call me 'Ellie'? And ask me your question, please."

She inclined her head in acknowledgment, and I knew she'd call me Ellie. But she'd do that out of obligation rather than familiarity, as my request had been received like an order. Mary would pick up a hot pan without a potholder if I told her to do so... Yet there was a spark in her eyes. My second request, that she ask her questions, had kindled a blaze inside her. She said, "I heard my master talking with his friend. Is it true that your grandfather is our king?"

I started to nod but remembered the brush in my hair. Clearing my throat, I said, "Yes, I believe he is. I just found out."

Mary's eyes flicked to meet mine in the mirror for a fraction of a second, before returning to my hair. She said slowly, "So... that would make you a princess?"



My nose wrinkled at the thought. I said, “I wouldn’t say I’m that.”

Someone like Dorothea would have prattled on about how amazing it is to be a princess, listing her favorite fairy tales and their heroines. Mary simply said, “Since when do we have a say in what we are?”

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes as I absorbed that. That was true. I didn’t choose to be raised as a servant. Why should I get to choose what I am now? My fate had never been my own before. Mary understood that better than anyone.

“Look at me, brushing the hair of the future queen...” Mary said softly.

My eyes snapped open. I insisted, “I’m not going to inherit the throne. I don’t want it. I’m just going to my grandfather for his protection, nothing else.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Mary said. My hair was free of tangles, yet she continued to run the brush through it. Her hands seemed happier with a task to occupy them, so I didn’t object. She continued, “The people who don’t want to sit on the throne always make the best rulers, or so I’ve heard.”

I raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure that’s true. A good ruler would be one who wants the job and has spent years preparing for it. I’ve never been anywhere. I haven’t been to university. I barely know anything about the world.”

Mary pressed her lips together, like she was trying to hold back the words. As a servant, she would have spent a lifetime censoring her words to keep herself safe. Yet now, she couldn’t hold back. She said, “You can learn about the world. Anyone can learn that. But what only you have had is your experience. Princess,



you are in a unique position. It's a rare thing that someone who has been raised in the lowest position of our society has a chance to rise to the highest. And since you have seen this part of our society, you know what is wrong with the world. If you become queen, you know what needs to be fixed. That's an opportunity that shouldn't be passed up lightly."

I wanted to agree. It would be right to agree. But suddenly, the weight of the responsibility hit me, and I just stared at her in stunned silence in the mirror. I had an opportunity to change the world. How could I turn away from that?

After placing the brush down on the dresser, Mary bowed her head and backed up a step. She said, "Forgive me, Mistress. I shouldn't have spoken so."

I turned in the chair so that I was facing her directly and not her reflection. I wanted to reach out to take her hand, but the touch would probably startle her rather than reassure her, as I knew from experience. I said, "There is nothing to forgive. I was just surprised. I don't know if I would have had the courage to speak so freely, had our situations been reversed."

Her eyes flicked up to meet mine for the briefest of seconds. Hesitantly, she said, "If I may speak freely once more... it must be your youth, Princess. You hadn't yet faced the same choices that I had. The reality is that were I to be a mother, any child born to me... or a servant woman like me would have no soul. And realizing that, I can't make the same choice that my mother made to have me. I can't bring a child into this world. Until the world changes, I will have no child at all."

She was right. I hadn't thought of that yet for myself, of the horror it would be to bring a baby into the life of servitude. I



would never have done that, I would have made the same choice as Mary. But what if I might one day have the power to make life better for women like her? My mind went back to the book I found in the library, detailing servants working in the sex trade and breeding programs. What if I could change it all? My head spun with the possibilities.

The corners of my mouth twitched with a smile, and for once I didn't immediately rush to reassure myself that it wasn't real. I said to Mary, "Thank you for making me think about this."

# CHAPTER TWENTY



“What do you mean we’re not leaving after dinner?”

“You didn’t seriously think we were leaving today,” Harrison said, not bothering to rise from the sofa.

I put my hands on my hips, feeling the fabric of the dress that Mary had helped me into under my fingertips. It was a short pale blue sheath dress, thankfully free of sequins since Hal’s sister had a less ostentatious style than Dorothea. I still wasn’t used to wearing anything other than my maid’s uniform, but at least this dress was a subdued color closer to gray. I said, “Yes, I was under the impression we would be leaving. We were only here for assistance from your friend. We never discussed a delay.”

Harrison rolled his eyes. He said, “Assistance doesn’t just mean Hal helping us to get to the Capitol. It also means food. You can’t deny you’re starving; I know I am. And a bed for the night. Since you’ve never driven a car, maybe you don’t realize it’s dangerous for me to do so without sleep.”

My hands slid off my hips as I relaxed. All of that was reasonable and I would have thought of it if I realized how travel



worked in the real world. Two dots might look close together on a map, yet I was learning the time and logistics that it took to get from one to the other. Nodding, I said, “You’re right... we’ll go in the morning. I’m sorry. I just want to get somewhere I feel safe.”

“It’s okay to relax here, nothing bad will happen.” He gestured to the space on the sofa beside him. “Come, sit down.”

I shook my head and glanced towards the kitchen. “I’m going to ask Mary if she needs help setting the table.”

“Oh, don’t bother, we’re eating in here.”

I blinked. “What?”

\*

I didn’t believe him, not until I saw it for myself. We weren’t eating at a table, but in front of the television. I eyed the forks haphazardly tossed on the tray beside my plate and couldn’t bring myself to pick them up until I had straightened them, so they were precisely aligned with the plate. Mary had made a vegetable soup with a toasted grilled cheese sandwich, and the scent made my mouth water. I lifted a spoonful of broth to my mouth and closed my eyes and was transported to the kitchen at home. My mother was standing at a kitchen counter, her shoulders squared, and her brown ponytail bouncing as she deftly chopped vegetables. What was left of my mother in this world... Was the pea soup she made still in the freezer? Would anyone eat all the food she had made, or would it be disposed of, leaving no trace of her?

I rubbed my eyes with the back of my hand before anyone could notice and blinked blearily at the TV. It seemed strange to be looking at one during dinner. The family I’d served never ate



in the same room as a TV, and the odd times I had been in the room with one, I would've been chastised had I looked and let it distract me from work. Harrison and Hal were watching a rugby match, though I couldn't tell which team they were rooting for and didn't care to find out. The scene playing out on the TV... it was madness. The dash for the ball. The violence. The mud. The chaos.

It looked like my life since leaving the estate. When I had looked out the attic window before and imagined leaving, I never thought that it would be like this. That I would wake up in the morning and not know where I was going, when I'd eat, and where I would be sleeping that night. I didn't mind things being rough... I just minded feeling unmoored. The estate hadn't been a nice place, but it was the only home I knew. What kept me going though was the knowledge I'd been born elsewhere, so maybe there was another home out there, one I'd forgotten, but that some part of me could maybe recall. Not actually remembering in the physical sense since I was so young when I left there, but in another way, some sense of belonging. If the palace with my grandfather wasn't that place, then I would keep walking until I found that other home.

Perhaps it would be a little farm of my own where I would find peace. I would grow my own food and be by myself, and never again have to compose my face for the convenience of another person.

Hal and Harrison startled me out of my thoughts by giving a particularly loud shout in the direction of the TV, just before the rugby game changed for what appeared to be an advertisement for cheeseburgers. I asked, "Is it over?"



Hal snorted. “No. You sound like my girlfriend. It’s just a commercial break.”

“I’m getting a beer,” Harrison announced as he stood. “Want one?”

“Yup. Please. Thanks, mate.” After Harrison left the room, Hal turned to me and assessed me.

I looked away, pretending not to notice, though his gaze was unnerving. Living as a servant for so long, I was used to being stared at occasionally by free people when they bothered to look at me, judging me before dismissing, all the while knowing that they could look at me all they liked while I wasn’t afforded the same right. It was like they were taking from me as they perceived me, as they asserted this right over me. I’d had enough. As I turned to face Hal, I asked, “Can I help you with something?”

His eyes glinted in amusement, as he heard the edge behind my words that otherwise might have been polite. Hal said, “I’m just trying to figure out what has drawn my friend to you.”

I glanced in the direction of the kitchen, which Harrison had yet to return from. I said, “Well that isn’t hard to figure out—he is helping me so that my grandfather will reward him for assisting me. It’s really very simple.”

“Could be, could be,” he said, scratching his chin. “He mentioned who your grandfather is. And yeah, that’d be quite the reward. I’m just thinking... it’s an awful lot of trouble to go to. Already he’s lost his car, and if that was me that cost him that car... well, if he ever bothered to speak to me again, I’d never hear the end of it.”

“He will get his car back, it’s just been impounded,” I protested. Perhaps I should be bothered that he disclosed who my



family was without asking me... but as I thought about it, the alternative was letting Hal think I was a murderer, after what he read in the newspaper. What other explanation was there that would secure his help, other than the insane reality of the truth?

Hal snorted, "You don't know Harrison very well yet, do you? I spilled a can of soda in that car once and he didn't speak to me for three months. Me! Anyone else who endangered his car would be cut out for ever, no matter how they might benefit him. He's very protective of it. Very self-serving. The only people he ever cuts slack for are the people he likes. Then he'll go out of his way for them. And that makes me think... does he like you? I've heard the way you two take digs at each other. Reminds me of my grandparents arguing."

"He likes me?" Now I snorted. "I find that highly unlikely."

"Doesn't seem so unlikely to me." It was said softly, so that the noise of the TV might muffle it. Currently an announcer was shouting about the deals going on at a theme park where children and their parents were screaming in delight on rides.

Before I could reply or pretend I didn't hear, Harrison returned to the room. He was carrying two cans of beer in his hands, and a third in the crook of his arm which he handed to me as he sat down. I stared at the can, running my fingers across the condensation on the can. Unlikely, yes. But was it possible? All I could say was, "Thank you."

\*

I didn't know where I would be sleeping tomorrow night, but I had to push that anxiety out of my mind. Tonight, I'd be sleeping in Hal's sister's bedroom. Knowing where I was sleeping tonight



would have to be enough for now. Harrison walked me to the door of my room that night, and I was too exhausted to wonder anymore about if his motivation was more complicated than profiting off escorting me. I leaned back against the doorway, letting it support me as I turned to face him.

He looked down at the carpet and swung his hands at his side like he was uncertain what to do with them. Busy hands made bothered by a lack of purpose; that was something I could relate to. Harrison said, “I just wanted to let you know, I talked to Hal about our situation. He’s going to lend us his car. I’d only asked for money for public transport. But he offered his car since the fewer people that see us, the safer we are.”

I nodded. “So, we’ll be in Cornwallis tomorrow then? It’s a short drive?”

“Yup. I’ll get you there tomorrow. Get some rest, Ellie.”

“You too,” I said automatically, staring down the hallway at him as he walked into his own room and closed the door. That was the first time he’d ever said my name. I was starting to suspect that he saw me as a person and not just profit personified.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



“Wake up, Miss. Oh please, wake up.”

Someone was shaking my shoulder. I blinked rapidly, trying to find myself. I muttered under my breath, “What is it? Do the cows need to be milked?”

“No, Miss. The coppers are here. Please, you must get up.”

My eyes focused and I was able to make out Mary’s face above mine. She was as stressed as I’d ever seen a servant as she continued to shake my shoulder. I squeezed her wrist, trying to calm her. I said, “I’m awake. What’s going on?”

She took a steadying breath. “I dunno. I just answered the door, and they were there. They asked to speak to the master of the house. Mr. Hal is on the front porch now, speaking to them. I overheard them ask him about Mr. Harrison and servants he might be traveling with.”



“What did he say?” I sat up in bed. I looked down, seeing the nightgown I had borrowed with lace cuffs. If I ran outside in this, I’d draw too much attention. Too conspicuous...

“I don’t know. I ran to warn you.”

“Where is Harrison?” I asked.

“He went out. I don’t know if he has returned.” Her dark eyes darted around the room. “What if they search the house? You must hide somewhere.”

My mind was racing... Harrison was out, and now the police arrived? That was too big of a coincidence. Either they caught him, and he directed them to the house, or he heard there was a reward and turned me in. In which case it was over. There was no use in hiding if they knew I was here, thanks to him. Yet I smiled reassuringly at Mary, wanting to calm her. She really believed in me... she thought that if I could make it to my grandfather, I could change the world. I said, “Why don’t you go see if Hal has invited the police in for tea, maybe you can hear something. I’ll stay here. I’ll hide in the closet if they come in. It will be okay.”

Mary took a deep breath before nodding. She straightened her apron before leaving the room.

I tried to even my breathing as well, as I drew my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them, though I didn’t feel the need to be steadied or comforted. Nothing about this situation filled me with fear. Perhaps I’d spent too long detached from my emotions, but while I logically knew the results of being arrested here—I would be taken to jail to await trial, ultimately being executed by the law or those seeking my death for political reasons—those realistic possibilities didn’t scare me now. Nothing had scared me as much as seeing a gun pointed at those I



loved. It was like I really was immune to pain now... My own pain had never bothered me much, just the suffering of those I loved. And it seemed like they were all gone now.

Out of the corner of my eye, red and blue lights started flashing on the lace curtains covering the window. I slipped out from under the bed sheet and squinted through the corner of the curtain. The police were outside, as Mary had said. They were getting into their cars and leaving silently, no sirens blaring, no one in handcuffs.

I tried to inhale deeply again, but my chest felt tight, and the gesture was forced. If they were leaving, then where was Harrison?

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Hal was frustratingly uninformed about the location of his friend. When I asked, he just shrugged and said, "He borrowed some money from me and headed out. Said he needed to buy something."

Mary placed a plate of fruit salad in front of me for breakfast and I was expected to eat as time ticked by on the kitchen clock. Just as I had accepted he was gone and that I'd have to find my own way to the Capitol, the back door to the kitchen opened. I blinked into the light coming through the door. It glinted off those horrible highlights he'd put in his hair, and he gave me a slanted grin when he saw me sitting at the small table in the kitchen.

He turned to shut and then locked the back door, so he didn't see when I got up and crossed the room to swat his arm.



“Ow!” Harrison rubbed the spot on his arm as he gave me a wounded look. “What was that for?”

“Where were you? The police were here,” I hissed under my breath, as if they were still close enough to hear it.

“The police were here?”

“That’s what I said!” I hissed louder. “They asked Hal about you. Then left.”

“So, everything is okay then?” he asked. “Makes sense they’d ask my best friend where I am while I’m missing and wanted for questioning.” Harrison assessed the irritation on my face before holding up a plastic bag. He said, “I was out getting us phones. Like, if everything goes well, we won’t need them. It’s a few hours’ drive from here to Cornwallis. But we shouldn’t assume it’s a quick drive. What if we stop for food? What if we get separated? It would be nice to have a way to contact each other, or Hal if we get into trouble.”

My shoulders relaxed, though my arms remained crossed. I said, “That sounds like a good idea. Though I... don’t know how to use a phone.”

“I thought of that.” He fished a bright pink box out of the bag. The label on it advertised that it was a child friendly phone that even a toddler could operate.

My eyes narrowed again.

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As fond of Harrison as Hal might have been, that fondness appeared to be limited when it came to having police knock at his door. Both of them agreed that it was time to go, and I was of the same mind. Within an hour of Harrison returning home with



the cell phones, we were in the car that he was borrowing. Hal slapped him on the shoulder, they clasped hands, and the keys were passed over without another word of goodbye.

I had my own wordless farewell, looking out the passenger window at Mary, who was standing on the back porch where I'd first seen her. Her eyes were scanning the distance, keeping a watchful gaze out for the police. No one had asked her to do it, and only I noticed she was doing it. She was still looking out for me. She still had faith in me.

Mary noticed me watching her and met my eyes. I didn't smile at her, like a free person would have, over-exaggerating their expression to display their class, almost parodying the emotions they were actually capable of feeling. Something that both of us knew, which those born free people and those who had always been free would never know, is that emotions aren't just for show or decoration. So, I looked back at her, knowing that she would understand what I was saying without needing to display it on my face.

When Harrison got into the car too and closed the driver's door loudly, I glanced at him, startled out of my thoughts by the sound. I glanced back to the door, but Mary was gone. The engine turned over, the car started to move, and then the house was gone too. We were on the move again, winding through the narrow streets of Baltimore city.

That unmoored feeling hit me again, making my stomach squirm. I turned to Harrison as I tucked my hair behind my ear. I asked, "Will we be there by tonight? At the White Palace?"

"By tonight?" Harrison snorted.



I picked up a water bottle from the cup holder and twisted the cap hard to break the seal. “That’s what I said. Will we at least be in the Capitol?”

He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. “We’ll be there within the hour. Ninety minutes tops if we hit bad traffic. But that’s unlikely at this time of day.”

I choked on the sip of water I’d just taken.

“You’d better not be dying, come on.” He gestured to the sides of the street that were packed with parked cars as far as the eye could see. “There’s nowhere for me to pull over if you need a Heimlich.”

“You’re an ass,” I croaked past my scratchy throat after I cleared the water from my windpipe.

“It’s been said before.” The traffic ahead of us slowed to a crawl and I saw his blue eyes flick to my face out of the corner of my eye. He said, “What is it... I expected you to look happier about this. You’re the one who bit my head off last night when I said we weren’t driving through the night to get there. And now we’re nearly there and you’re... I don’t know.”

“I did not bite your head off.” I took a deep breath. “I don’t know what I am either. I still don’t have a name for all these things.”

“What things? Emotions?”

I shrugged. “All I know is that I would feel happier about this if I had some sort of plan. Because I know now that in an hour, I’ll be looking at the place where my grandfather lives, but I can’t picture what the next few minutes after that looks like. And that isn’t something I’m used to, after living my entire life on a schedule up until recently.”



“Oh!” Harrison said suddenly. “I can help with that. There’s a folder on the backseat, do you see it? Grab it and take a look.”

I leaned through the seats to retrieve a manilla folder while Harrison watched me in the rearview mirror. “What’s this?” I asked, as I returned to my seat and opened it on my lap. There were papers in the folder, the first of which was a map, so I guess we wouldn’t have to stop at a library again. I read aloud from the top of the second page, “White Palace Tour?”

Harrison grinned wide, flashing his white teeth. “You’re not the only one who likes to plan. I’ve booked a tour for us, so we can get inside without having to hop a fence. Figure that that wouldn’t go well.”

“I didn’t even know they held tours...” I scanned further on the paper, seeing we were booked on the afternoon tour. We’d easily make that in time, even if we hit traffic.

“And once we’re touring, it should be simple enough to slip away. And then we’ll find your family.”

I smiled widely at him. I didn’t have to smile to show Mary what I felt earlier. Harrison might be no different, if he now knew me well enough to read my mood by some other tells. But this time, I wanted him to know without a doubt how he had made me feel. I said, “Thank you, Harrison. Thank you for this, and for everything.”

He looked away from me, gazing ahead at the road though a smile still played at the corners of his mouth. While free people could experience intense emotions and understand them when displayed in others, that didn’t save them fully from awkwardness. Harrison’s cheeks got a tinge of pink as he accepted in a gruff voice, “No problem.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“Does it look like home?” Harrison asked. We were standing outside the White Palace which was surrounded by a black iron fence. A nearby tour guide was gesturing to the fence, which he explained had been there since 1833. Previously the grounds had been open to the public, who were permitted to walk the White Palace gardens or picnic on the lawn.

My eyes traced the lines of the palace, along the straight pillars and across the curved balcony. I thought of the cramped little attic where I’d once looked out a window, envisioning a day where I would be able to wander the world freely. Had I grown up here, maybe I would have stood on that balcony in the evenings, looking across the Capital of Cornwallis as it gleamed with light in the night. I shook my head and said, “It’s hard to see it as anything but a government building, not a home. But I suppose we shouldn’t judge it from the outside.”

Harrison nodded, but before he could say anything else, our tour group started to move through the gate. A security officer



was collecting all large backpacks and purses from guests before they were permitted to pass, and Harrison and I went empty-handed. The only things I carried were a small white bag the size of a fist, and my mother's little leather pouch, now tucked down the front of a creamy white dress that Mary picked out for me, when it was decided I'd borrow one of Hal's sister's nicer dresses for this tour. I had no objections to the color, since bright and bold colors still felt uncomfortable and ostentatious to me, after a lifetime spent in gray. I didn't think of the extra meaning behind the color until Mary said, "That's perfect, just like the rose. For your Yorkist Plantagenet family crest."

It was a detail that might be noticed and appreciated by my family as I met them, and so I entered the White Palace wearing white, feeling cloaked in protection by Mary's forethought. Immediately upon stepping inside, the details overwhelmed me, and there was too much to notice. Obviously, I was surrounded by wealth—ornate ancient porcelain and other *objets d'art* on display on pedestals, gilded wallpaper shimmering in the light of chandeliers—but more than anything what overwhelmed me were the portraits on the walls. Everywhere and all around me were eyes staring at me from portraits, following me as I passed through each room with the tour group. They were the eyes of my ancestors, the late kings and queens of the Commonwealth, and something was heavy about their gaze.

I shrank under it and stepped closer to Harrison's side.

"What is it?" he whispered.

I shook my head and swallowed the lump in my throat. This was ridiculous. If I couldn't stand tall under the gaze of my long dead relatives, then how was I supposed to do that when standing



before my breathing family members? I took a deep breath and said, “Nothing. I’m fine.”

We had fallen to the back of the crowd touring the White Palace, and Harrison had been paying more attention than me as we traveled from room to room. He muttered in my ear discreetly, “Not seeing anywhere we can slip away. No velvet ropes to jump, no room to hide in, no staircase to run down... there are guards everywhere.”

Now that I was looking too, I could see that he was right. Uniformed men and women were standing at each doorway, carefully watching each person who entered and exited the rooms during our tour. It was impossible to slip away unnoticed.

We had approached this entire issue on the premise that we had to be discreet. If I walked up to the door of the palace and announced myself, it would be assumed that I was: 1) mad, or 2) a scammer, or 3) myself... and if I was believed, then what if the person who I was speaking to had been part of the plot that had already left my parents dead? I couldn’t risk it. The only person I could reveal myself to was my grandfather, the one person I was sure had no motive to hurt me but every reason to protect me.

That didn’t mean I necessarily had to be discreet though. I parted my lips to whisper my plan to Harrison but decided against it at the last minute. If his reaction was genuine, then it would be all the better. It sounded like the tour was close to wrapping up, as the guide had started to lead us back to the staircase that would take the group to the ground floor. There was no point in waiting... I only glanced down to see that I would land on a plush carpet rather than a hardwood floor. Then I allowed every muscle in my body to sag as I feigned a faint. There was



a moment of dizzying freefall before I landed face first on the carpet. It knocked the breath out of my chest, but I didn't allow myself to gasp. My hair had fallen across my face to conceal it, but I shut my eyes quickly, knowing my hair would be brushed aside as people came to check on me.

The crowd was muttering in alarm around me as they gathered in a circle.

"Did she trip?" someone asked.

"Over what, her feet?" another said. "There's nothing there."

I heard the carpet shift as someone knelt beside me. As expected, my hair was brushed aside from my face. What I didn't expect was how gentle the touch would be. Harrison asked, "Ellie? Ellie, are you okay?"

"Does she have a medical condition?" a voice asked. I recognized the voice a second later as the tour guide.

There was a pause. Finally, Harrison said, "Yes, she does. She has a blood sugar condition. Is there a doctor here?"

The crowd whispered around me. I held my breath, hoping that someone in our tour group wasn't a doctor and that this plan worked. So far, it has been going pretty well considering that Harrison had to read my mind.

A floorboard creaked near my head as someone shifted their weight, as the whispers grew louder. No one volunteered to say that they were doctors. Finally, the tour guide admitted begrudgingly, "Well... there is the royal physician who is in residence."

"The King's doctor is here? Can he see her?" Harrison asked, perhaps a bit too eagerly.

The tour guide didn't respond immediately, and the crowd had stopped whispering. All attention was on him. Some of these



people would probably report the story to the news when they left here today—on a patriotic visit to the White Palace today, a young woman fainted due to a medical condition. They called for the royal physician. Did he heed the call, or were they refused medical care?

Exhaling with a heavy sigh, the tour guide said, “Let me radio the physician, to make sure he’s available. And I’ll call someone to help you carry her to his office, if he’s free. Not promising anything, okay?”

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About fifteen minutes later, I was lying on an examination table in the office of the White Palace physician. It seemed like about the right time to “come around from my fainting spell”, so I was blinking slowly up at the bright white lights hanging from the ceiling while also still trying to appear weak and dazed. I saw Harrison lingering near the door, where he appeared to be taking advantage of his proximity to the hallway to scope out the surroundings.

A man in a white coat approached suddenly to peer in my eyes with an even brighter light, and I was blinking in earnest now. He took my pulse and blood pressure next, all without introducing himself. Seeing the readings, he made a noise of assessment before finally looking me in the eyes. He asked, “You seem fine. What condition do you have?”

I cleared my throat and sat up a little bit on the table. It seemed best to tell a lie with a vein of truth, so I said, “I don’t have a personal physician, so I haven’t been formally diagnosed. I just faint sometimes.”



The doctor shrugged. “I can’t give you any medication or treatment without a diagnosis. That wouldn’t be ethical. Have you eaten yet today?”

“No, sir.” I could see where this was going. And I was fine with that direction—we only had to come to the doctor’s office to get away from the tour group while traveling deeper into the palace. Now that we were here, there was no reason to stay in the office under the watchful eye of the doctor. It was better to move on as quickly as possible, before he became suspicious.

Exhaling loudly, the doctor glanced at the files piled high on his desk. Clearly, he had a lot of work that he was eager to return to, and he didn’t even look at me again as he said, “Look, sounds like you just had an attack of low blood sugar. You should have an appointment with a doctor just to be sure, but for now I don’t think you’re in danger. Just to be safe, before you leave you should visit the kitchens. Tell them I’d sent you to get a glass of orange juice. That should clear up the dizziness for now.”

Harrison came over to take my arm, as if he were helping me. He said, “Thank you, doctor. I’ve got her from here.”

I leaned on Harrison as I got up, struck by how normal it felt to touch him, when less than a week ago it had shocked me that he took my arm to lead me down the stairs in the guise of Dorothea. Now, I didn’t even second guess it, as I kept hold of his arm while smiling at the doctor. The smile even felt natural on my face, as I said, “Thank you, doctor. For making sure that I was alright. I’m sorry to take up so much of your time.”

He waved a hand in dismissal, as he settled in the chair behind his desk. I made a mental note of the nameplate on his desk, Dr. Martins, in case we were stopped while pretending to look for



the kitchen for orange juice. The doctor said, “It was no trouble. Hope you feel better.”

“Thank you again. I hope you have a nice day, Doctor.” I kept a brittle smile on my face as we walked through the door, in case there was a White Palace guard outside the room, waiting for someone to escort us elsewhere. There was no one, and my face relaxed into a more natural state.

Harrison closed the door of the doctor’s room behind us, and we were alone in the long hallway... we could go right, or we could go left. Neither path seemed outwardly different, and yet there was a weight to this choice. There wasn’t much time before we would be noticed wandering where we weren’t supposed to be, and every second counted. Left or right... right or left.

I looked to Harrison, trusting him since he had been watching the hallway and might have a better idea of which was correct.

He nodded to the left and led me that way. As we walked, he whispered, “I heard some people talking as they walked down the hall earlier. This place is huge, and people get lost all the time, especially new workers. But someone was telling a new guy, ‘If you can find the doctor’s office, you can find the king’s office because he works just down the hall from him.’ You know, so he can get to the king’s side in a hurry.”

My breathing stuttered in my chest. I asked, “And the workers... they said his office is to the left of the king’s rooms?”

Down the hallway from us was a large ornately carved door. The doors were closed. Harrison’s hand squeezed on my arm. He said, “I don’t know. But if we are lucky, he might be right through here.”

I huffed out a breathy laugh. “And when have I ever been lucky?”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Everything had led me to this moment, to the solid opulence of this door—the past few days that had changed my life, the death of my father and twenty years in servitude—all that time, all the work to get back here, in the house where I was born. All that time... and now it felt like time had been sped up. Everything happened fast. way too fast as we stepped through the doors. They opened. I took a step through. I blinked at the light coming through the wall of windows. And then I saw that Harrison was holding a scalpel at the throat of a man in a black suit.

“What are you doing?” I hissed. He must have picked up the scalpel in the royal physician’s office down the hall... he must have gone mad.

“Uh-uh, no,” Harrison said, as he pressed the scalpel harder against the man’s neck. I realized he wasn’t talking to me when the man moved his hand away from the radio at his belt.



“Let him go!” I hissed louder. This was insanity. If we showed up like this, knife in hand, what would people assume? We were trying to clear our names from suspicion of murder, and he was just making things worse.

Harrison met my eyes. “So, he can radio the others? No. Go talk to your grandfather. That is the only way this will end.”

“You aren’t going to get away with this...” The guard in the suit muttered as he squirmed under the scalpel. A dot of blood appeared on his throat, and a glint in his eye said he wasn’t going to stand still much longer. I probably had less than a minute before he made up his mind to fight Harrison for the blade.

Swallowing heavily, I turned towards the bright windows and stepped further into the room. The windows overlooked a garden with a bird feeder attracting finches and a fountain in the distance with ornately carved statues. Then I stopped noticing the garden through the window, as my attention focused on the chair beside the window in the room—there was a hand gripping the arm of the chair. Since the back was facing me, I didn’t realize until just now that someone else was in the room with us. Carefully, quietly, cautiously... I approached the chair. As I rounded the side of it, I saw snow white hair falling in a straight curtain to the person’s shoulders, and I thought the person might be a woman until I saw his profile. Hawkish nose and loose skin around his neck... the coin had been a good likeness. The only differences were that his hair was slightly longer, and it appeared to have been several days since he shaved. On his coin he had been regal, but here he was human.

Hearing footsteps approach him, the king looked up at me. His skin was almost as white as his hair, except where liver spots



speckled his cheeks. There were dark circles under his blue eyes, which focused on my face vacantly. There was no recognition, but more than that, there was no emotion as he noticed me. He just seemed... empty. If I didn't suspect it was grief that left him empty, I'd think he was a servant. He asked, "Have you brought my tea?"

I swallowed heavily and shook my head, wishing I'd planned what to say at this moment. Only now did I realize I never expected to make it this far, standing before him, so I hadn't prepared the words that would convince him. I opened and closed my mouth several times, as if the motion would produce the words without input from my brain.

The king's eyes widened as he finally realized I was not a member of his staff, and he couldn't place my face. He knew I was an intruder now and looked around for his guard. How long until he pressed a button or did something to summon the entire army?

"Wait, please!" I held up my hands to show I was unarmed, but his eyes got no less wild as I towered above him. I probably should have bowed earlier, so I got down on my knees before him to seem both respectful and less intimidating. I begged, "Please, let me just talk to you for a moment."

"What are you doing in my house?" He demanded, voice tinged with anger. The king's eyes had hardened, and he no longer seemed afraid at least.

I swallowed heavily and dropped my gaze. *It was once my house, too* was the wrong answer obviously. I clasped my hands on my knees to try to stop them from shaking. The silence was going on too long and I had to say something, so I opened my



mouth again and this time words spilled out, “I don’t mean to cause you trouble by coming here. I just had nowhere else to go. I lost my home. I lost my mother. I didn’t know what else to do... she told me to come here. So, I came here.”

His eyes remained icy as he said, “I’m sorry to hear it, but that doesn’t give you a right to invade my home, young lady. You understand that don’t you?”

I hung my head in shame as I sucked in a deep breath to steady myself and hold back the tears. It seemed ridiculous to want to cry right now, when the last thing that had made me cry was the loss of my mother. But what he said about a home invasion... it brought back the terror I’d felt the night I’d been ripped from the estate, and I’d never wanted to make anyone else feel like that. As I fought off the guilt, I found the strength to look up again to meet his eyes. Something had softened there as he watched me struggle. I said, “I’m sorry, sir. For invading your home. But I had to bring you a letter from my mother. It was the last thing she gave me before she died, and I couldn’t let her down.” I pulled the pouch out of the front of my dress and retrieved the gold ring and sealed letter from it. Placing them on the king’s knees... my grandfather’s knees, I pleaded, “Please, take them.”

My grandfather’s hands were pale with large veins running down the backs of them and bulging bony knuckles—the ring on his finger, which was like the ring I’d just placed on his lap, looked like it would never make it past the joint on his hand if he tried to remove it. His hand shook as he raised it to reach out, but instead of taking the ring or letter, he placed it on my hand. My skin tingled where his cold hand made contact with mine. I wanted to warm him up. I wanted to curl my hand to clasp his until we both didn’t feel alone anymore.



I looked up to meet his eyes, only just now noticing how similar the shade of blue was to my own. But a hand on my shoulder pulled me back, away from him. The hand then roughly dragged me to my feet by my arm, before I'd even turned around to see that another man in a suit had entered the room. Several men in fact—I glanced at Harrison, seeing he had been disarmed and was now standing with his hands up looking at the guard he'd previously held hostage. I swallowed heavily. It was over.

“Just who do you think you are?” an irate woman snapped. Her speech was clipped and her accent made me suspect she was from across the pond. She was dressed in a dark, dress skirt and blouse that almost made her blend in with the guards in their suits, if only the tailoring hadn't been so much finer and the diamonds in her ears set her apart too. She was probably a couple decades older than me, though her makeup made her age hard to judge. Something made me think she wasn't a member of the security staff. Her hair was the same dark shade of brown that mine had been, before Harrison put highlights in it, and it was pulled back in a severe bun. Her eyebrows slanted down in a scowl as she demanded, “What are you doing in here? Why are you bothering our king?”

I opened my mouth to answer, ready to say it all without fear anymore of reprisal—after coming this far and making it to my family, I wasn't going to hold back from saying who I was anymore. I was just... tired. If I had to fight to get back to where I was standing again, I didn't think I could do it.

The woman held up a hand to stop me. “No, don't speak. Nothing you can say will make this okay.” She turned to one of the guards. “Take them downstairs. And notify the police if they haven't been called already.”



The hand on my arm started tugging me away as I squirmed to escape the grasp. I couldn't do this. I couldn't walk away, not once I'd finally found my family. I looked at the king, seeing he was watching me too.

And he was holding up the letter, which was now open with the seal broken on it. His voice boomed, "Stop!"

Everyone in the room turned to look at him. The woman looked most startled of all, like she hadn't heard the king speak so loudly in years. She knelt before him, where I'd been a moment before, and rested a hand on his arm. She said, "My dear brother, don't let this girl upset you. I'm having her taken away."

"You'll do no such thing." He held the letter closer to her face, so close that she couldn't possibly read it, but had to lean back slightly. From this distance, I couldn't make out the words, but I could see that the handwriting didn't match my mother's at all. The envelope... it had the word "Father" on it. Could it have been written by my dad before he died? The king's voice boomed again, "I'm not letting you take my granddaughter anywhere."

Suddenly, it felt like the hands that were dragging me away were now supporting me as I sagged in relief. Every eye in the room was on my face, but I kept my expression impassive with the ease of a skilled servant—it felt like we were through the worst of it. Everything would be okay now.

"Another one?" asked the woman who had said she was my grandfather's sister, though she looked too young to be so. I wished I'd read more about the current royal family tree... perhaps her name was somewhere in the unread photocopies from that library book. She stepped closer so that she was standing before me, as her eyes flicked over my face. She said, "This girl



looks less like your relative than the last half dozen women who have shown up, claiming to be the late princess.”

“Yet none of them came carrying a note written in my son’s hand,” the king said. “Or his ring.”

The letter was resting on my grandfather’s lap again, and I leaned forward a little, aching to read it and know my father better. Maybe after all of this was over and I was finally safe, I could ask to see it.

The woman shook her head and said, “That could be a forgery. Both the ring and letter could be fake. Everyone knows about your son. There are samples of his writing available to the public. And she has every motivation in the world to fool you. My dear brother, I am just trying to protect you.”

I swallowed heavily and tried to catch my grandfather’s eyes, hoping that with a look I could say what I couldn’t get my mouth to form... *Please don’t send me away.* But he didn’t look up. And I didn’t have to catch his gaze.

My grandfather sighed heavily. “Send for the blasted physician then. We’ll have him collect DNA for a test.”

I could breathe again, having no doubt what those results would be.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



When I entered the room, the first thing I went to see was the window. From the time that I was tall enough, I'd stood at the window of my bedroom in the attic and looked out across the world I'd wanted to be a part of. I couldn't see, or know any further than the tree line, and now that I knew more of the world, I just wanted to come inside again for a bit and view the world from a window again. The world would be there to explore again soon, but I wanted to put roots down first. I wanted order again... as stifling as it may have seemed to others, I missed the routine of waking up every morning and knowing what I'd do that day. Even if what I'd be doing was dusting the bookshelves and polishing the silver.

The real world past the tree line was so untidy, in comparison to what I'd had in the much smaller world of the estate. And not just in the sense that it was chaotic, but there was just so much wrong with it. It made me wish that I could approach the real



world as I would a disordered table, that I had the power to rearrange all the plates and silverware that were misplaced on it.

The little attic that had been home felt very far away, as I clutched the plush yellow curtain of my new room where I was trying to ground myself. With time, the view outside might start to feel more familiar. There were even trees there, at the base of the white pointed tower of the Cornwallis monument. A white light was flashing at the top of the monument, as the city lit up the night, refusing to settle down with the setting of the sun. I breathed deeply as I shut both pairs of yellow curtains, wanting to think about nothing than the room I was in for now.

I looked around, realizing I'd been here once before, on the tour with Harrison this afternoon. The room was an odd collection of textures and colors that seemed more the result of a desire to preserve antiques, than to adhere to style or interior decorating trends. The creamy wallpaper had a gold pattern criss-crossing on it that was attempting to go with the gold frames around paintings and mirrors hanging on the wall, but really was clashing with the dark wood polish of the furniture in the room—the long bed, the frame of the sofa, the dressing table. It was a room that couldn't decide if it wanted to be masculine or ornate, and it didn't feel like home.

Yet I was starting to think no place would feel like home to me until I made it so. For tonight, all I needed was a place to sleep, and this would do. I sat on the down quilt covering the bed and tried to settle myself. I managed to not move for about twenty seconds before I was reaching for the white knitted purse that Mary had leant me to match my dress. I didn't have many possessions to my name, and what I had all fit inside a purse that



was borrowed—a pound coin with my grandfather’s face on it, a pink cellphone I didn’t know how to use, and a packet of papers I’d photocopied from a book at the library.

I pulled out the folded bundle of papers, and flipped to a page printed from the chapter, which I’d thought of earlier. The family tree of the current royal family of the British empire... I should have read this sooner, before coming here, but at least I’d read it now. Going to the bottom of the tree felt too personal. I felt I couldn’t read it right away and see the names of my direct relatives, so I went to meet my ancestors at the top of the tree first.

Despite being sure that the story that Rufus told me about King Arthur and the Holy Grail being a fantasy, I was still a bit surprised to not see Arthur at the top of the tree. Instead, it started with someone named King Henry in 1207. Several of the names were bolder, like I should know who they are, and a fact in the margin beside one informed me that my ancestor King Richard III defeated his nephew Henry Tudor in 1485, securing the throne for the York branch of the Plantagenets that rules today. While what Rufus told me about King Arthur wasn’t visible on this tree, I could see the impact of the army of servants there—I didn’t have to see it written on the page to know that King Richard III had controlled the cup and made an army of servant soldiers to win the War of the Roses.

Feeling ready to skip forward to the present, I scrolled to the bottom of the tree. My eyes swam and I had to blink to be able to see the names. Oddly, the first one my eyes focused on was my own, though I didn’t know it right away. I recognized my birth year at first rather than the name, Eleanor of York. No one had ever called me that before, but that had to be me...



Above that name, Priscilla was listed as the mother of Eleanor. The woman I'd known as Cecelia apparently wasn't the only one with two names, and I still hadn't processed that my mother had had this other life, this other identity. Although now that I thought about it, the name she had chosen for herself to live under, Cecelia, was very exotic for a servant, so much so that if a free person had to address her, they would often intentionally shorten it to "Celia".

Traditionally, servants have brief names of just a syllable or two, in yet another example of the class divide with the free people with longer names and family names. My mother had chosen to be called Cecelia, like some part of her was still holding onto her former identity, if only in a small way.

I shook my head, trying to clear my mind of all the questions she wasn't here to answer, and refocused on the page. It was the only thing here that could offer me any information right now. Beside our names there was one additional piece of information, an asterisk. When I followed the symbol to the bottom of the page, it said: "Missing, presumed dead." Well... that presumption was true for one of us now. I blinked my eyes rapidly before returning to the center of the page.

There was a name connected to my mother's former name, which said Henry the Prince of Wales. The dates below his name informed me that he died twenty years ago. He was just twenty-four when he died, not much older than me. I tried to picture him the same age as my mother, with just a bit of silver starting at his temples, maybe a pair of glasses on his nose. They'd been robbed of not just their lives, but the chance to spend their lives together. I wondered if my mother had remembered how it felt



to love him too, when she became a servant, but that was another question she wasn't here to answer.

Taking a deep breath, I went to a branch higher in the tree. My grandfather, King Richard the VII, was listed as living of course, being the only unpruned branch on my battered family tree, but I was surprised to learn he was ninety-one years old. He had looked old when I met him, but I had assumed grief had weathered him more so rather than actual passage of time. I realized now it was both. He must have been an older man when he had my father, though the page provided no reason why. No other lost children listed below the name of his late wife... maybe he knew that any son he had would get caught up in political drama and die young, so he avoided having one until he had Henry, who had been Hank to my mother. At least in this case, my grandfather Richard was a living relative who I could hopefully press for more information.

I traced a finger across the lines on the page, trying to unwind the web of relations to place the other relative I'd met this afternoon, the younger woman who'd called my grandfather her brother, though she'd seemed a generation or more younger than him. He had no sisters, but one brother, who was younger but had died in his eighties. The brother, the late Prince George, had been married to a much younger woman named Matilda.

Ah, there she was... Matilda was forty-five years old according to the tree and must have been the woman I met this afternoon. She'd had a son with my great uncle, named Edward. Edward was eighteen and he was my... cousin. Some degree of cousin that I was too tired to figure out right now. My eyes were aching from squinting at this small text, but one last detail drew my eye,



another asterisk. I followed this one to the bottom of the page, expecting something ominous like what had been indicated by the one beside my name.

Instead, what I saw made me raise my eyebrows. Beside the symbol at the bottom of the page, it said, *Edward the Duke of Norfolk, like his late father is the presumed heir to the throne. While the King had been persuaded to name his brother Prince of Wales, in a symbolic indication that he was the heir apparent, he has made no such gesture yet for his brother's son, and neither has he removed the missing princess from her place in the line of succession, despite her long absence, which has led to speculation of an impending succession crisis.*

I hadn't come here to cause a crisis or interfere with the order of things... I'd just wanted to be safe and maybe find my family. I didn't want anything from them, or to take things from them. Looking at Edward's name on the page, I didn't feel a rivalry with him. I wished that this page was filled with the names of cousins, aunts, and uncles. Skimming the rest of the page, I saw that this was it. Other than some distant relations in Europe, our family tree had come down to a few names on a page beside those of the dead.

I swallowed heavily. It was all because of the cup that the throne controlled. None of it felt worth this.

\*

While walking through the room, I found a nightgown and robe hanging in the wardrobe, presumably placed there for me for the night. I didn't know what the plans were for tomorrow, if my great aunt was planning to jettison me as soon as the DNA test



came back negative, so I wouldn't need more clothes than this, or maybe my grandfather was planning to have outfits ordered for me once he knew I was his. Either possibility turned my stomach, and I shut the wardrobe without withdrawing the nightgown.

Clothes were becoming a sore reminder for me of how little I had in this world to my name. Even back on the estate, my gray maid's uniform hadn't been mine, and now in the real world I was reliant on the generosity of others to cover my skin. I couldn't do it anymore tonight, not more than I already had, so I lay on the bed in what I was already wearing, the white dress that I would hopefully be returning to Hal, and just tried to relax for a moment.

The bedside lamp was still switched on. I hadn't slipped between the sheets. And I hadn't checked the en-suite bathroom to see if it was stocked with a toothbrush and toothpaste. I just breathed, trying to exist for a moment in time without having my mind race over the past few days in disbelief as I tried to make sense of them, or over the thoughts of an uncertain future. For one moment, I wanted to be peaceful, to find calm and solace in this moment. I closed my eyes, and behind my lids I saw the little attic with my bed tucked beneath the eaves, the table with a stack of books, *Little Women* sitting unfinished on the top, and the window with dust motes drifting in dawn's light. It hadn't been much, but here I was safe. Here I could be myself. The problem was... the farther I got from home, the less I knew who that person was now.

A loud noise startled me from my thoughts, and my eyes snapped open. I lay on the bed with my heart racing until the sound repeated and I recognized it—three fast *raps* on wood.



Someone was knocking at my bedroom door in a sound I was more accustomed to making than receiving. As I got up to answer the door, I remembered all the times I'd knocked on Dorothea's door to bring her something when summoned... if I lived here, would a servant brush my hair or bring me breakfast? Was that something I could refuse? I couldn't imagine having servants.

I cracked the door, seeing a man in a dark suit rather than servant gray. So, he was a member of the security staff.

He said, "The king would like to see you."

"Now?" I blinked. Not seeing any need to answer an obvious question, the man remained silent. "Okay, I'm coming," I said, as I stepped into the hall and closed the door behind me, grateful I hadn't changed out of the white dress.

As the guard escorted me down the hallway lit dimly by wall sconces, it wasn't until we were halfway down it that my heart and mind started to race. Too late, I realized that I'd been foolish to follow a stranger from my room late at night. What if I was led into a trap? Wasn't my father also killed here? And then it hit me... my father was assassinated here, in the heart of the Commonwealth's power, in what should have been the safest place in the world. It was impossible that it wasn't an inside job, aided by someone else in the government. Someone who might still be here.

The thought that I was foolish didn't seem so unlikely anymore.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Just as I froze in place, paralyzed momentarily by the thought of my situation, the man who had escorted me opened the door. I saw the light of a fireplace glinting off the curved metal handle of my grandfather's wheelchair, and my shoulders relaxed marginally. Before I could think further about this, I was nudged inside the room by the impatient staff member, and the door was shut behind me.

I prepared to curtsy in the direction of the wheelchair, as I'd been shown to earlier by a woman who said she was an etiquette instructor. The chair was empty though. I looked around the room.

My grandfather was standing several meters away, leaning slightly against a large ornately carved desk. He had glasses perched on the tip of his hawkish nose, and he was dressed more casually than I saw him earlier, in an oversized yellow sweater



that looked soft. There was a glint of amusement in his eye as he caught me mid-curtsey at his empty chair.

I quickly redirected the curtsey at him, making it deeper than strictly necessary before daring to meet his eyes again. My cheeks were flaming but he just looked even more amused.

He gestured with one hand to the chair, while still supporting some of his weight with the other hand on the desk. It was only then that I noticed my mother's letter on the desk, seal broken on it. I wondered how many times he had read it today. He said, "I can walk a little, if you were wondering."

"I wasn't," I said politely.

"My legs are weak," he continued. "They can only support me for part of the day. Every time I sit in that chair, I wonder if it will be the last time I rise from it under the force of my own will. I wonder if I'll have stood for the last time today." My grandfather glanced at the letter on the desk, squared his shoulders, and returned his kind gaze to my face. "Seeing you today, meeting you... I found the strength to stand just a bit longer. Your face made me find the will to keep going deep inside myself, in a place I thought I lost long ago."

I took a step towards him, wanting to touch him but afraid to do so. All this time that I had searched for him, I thought of him only as a vague sense of being safe with him. I knew now that there was no safety for me here—I would have been safer if I'd never set foot in the place my father died—but there was a man here who needed me. My mother probably hadn't expected her father-in-law to be so frail when she sent me here... she wouldn't have sent me here if she knew. Seeing him now, I had to stay



though. I felt a pull to him, a sense of being tethered to family, which I thought I'd lost when my mother died.

My wrist twitched in an abandoned gesture to reach for him, as I hesitated to close the gap between us. I said, "Please, don't push yourself too hard on my account. Your Majesty, you must sit if you need to do so."

He waved a dismissive hand, both at the title and offer of the chair. "You are a member of my house, and of my blood. That title isn't necessary. And this is something I must do on my feet. I will walk so long as I am able."

I breathed easier. "The blood test came back then. You are sure of who I am."

He gave a small shake of his head. "That blood test is for my officials and will take a few days. While I don't have any doubt who you are, there is a different test that will prove it. Come, follow me." My grandfather offered me the crook of his arm like a gentleman, asking for support while maintaining dignity.

I took it, feeling his thin bones through his sweater, and just tried to soak in the feel of him, his warmth, his scent. I had found family. I was home while I was at his side. Something deep inside me that I hadn't realized was tense since I lost my mother had started to relax, even as I couldn't help noticing the way the cadence of his walk slowed and the way his breathing became labored. I had family... for now.

As this feeling distracted me, I didn't notice immediately as my grandfather led me through a door and down a hallway, not until he gestured to an electronic pad beside a closed door. He said, "There. Do you see that slot? Put your fingertip inside. I must warn you though, you will feel a jab."



I didn't hesitate to put my finger inside. Believing I was immune to pain for years had taken all my fear of it. The electronic pad lit up and some mechanism inside pricked my finger, and I managed not to flinch. I didn't need to ask my grandfather about it, figuring that this was the test he'd mentioned. The only thing I was curious about was why his doctor was testing my blood for his officials, if this door required a blood test to pass it—this door must not be common knowledge.

As the screen blinked out *"calculating results"*, I felt my grandfather hold his breath beside me. He let out a sigh as it read, *"access granted"*.

He looked up at me and smiled, saying, "I never had any doubt. You have your father's eyes."

I blinked and swallowed heavily, working hard to get a handle on the emotions that roiled inside me. Harrison had told me that emotions weren't as simple as they seemed in books—you could hate someone and love them at the same time. Yet it still didn't make sense to me that it could make me happy that I had my father's eyes, while at the same time despising the people who had robbed me of the chance to see those eyes for myself. Determined to not cry again in front of my grandfather, I shoved the emotions down to be sorted through later, while I followed him into the room to which we'd been granted access.

"The family treasures," he said vaguely, gesturing a hand at a wall of items that glittered under the light. Tiaras towered on a rack, rings were in a box behind glass to keep the dust off, and black velvet boxes hid more untold wealth.

Family treasures indeed... If Dorothea walked into this room, she would have shrieked in delight, but none of this felt like it



was for me. I came here for family, not their treasures, and so I looked away with the same disinterest my grandfather had had for the items. There must be something else he'd brought me here to see.

My grandfather hobbled towards the back of the room, holding onto bookcases and display cases of ancient texts for support as he made his way to a chair near a box at the end. He sat down heavily, took a deep breath, before putting his hand on the lid of the box. Nothing in the room had held his attention, nothing but this. After sweeping his hand across the top to clear it of the minimal dust that had settled there, he looked up to me with a smile. He beckoned me to step closer with a hand before saying, "Come. Come here, my dear. I want to give you back your soul."

"My soul?" I asked, blinking in surprise.

"Please, my dear. Please," he extended a hand to me, and it shook in the air between us as he reached. I couldn't stand to see him like that, and I took his hand entirely out of instinct, allowing him to draw me a step closer. Impulsively, I knelt beside him, so that my eyes were level with his.

My grandfather then lifted a cup from the box, which he held up between us, and I held my breath as I realized what it was... not a cup, a grail. *The Grail*. He was holding the most powerful object in the world, yet all his attention was on me. His eyes searched my face as he said, "My darling girl, I have never been able to give you the things you deserve. In fact, I fear that being my blood has cost you everything. So now, please allow me to give something back to you."



“My soul,” I said again, now understanding a bit better why he had brought me here. Yet I had even more questions. “You can return souls to people?”

He nodded. “There are instructions in these books, if you ever need to know how. But please, just trust me. I can give you back what they took.”

When he raised the grail to my lips, I put a hand on his wrist rather than taking a sip. His eyes widened in desperation and his hand shook harder. I insisted, “I don’t need this, it’s okay.”

“Please, take it, let me put this right for my son,” he begged, blue eyes shimmering with tears he was too desperate to let fall, as he pressed the cup harder into my hands.

Something finally clicked in my mind, and I put a hand over the mouth of the grail as I said, “There was something in the letter from my father, wasn’t there? He told you that I had had my soul taken. He thought I did. But it didn’t happen. I’m fine.”

“Yes, the letter was written on the night he died. He let me know what had happened to you and your mother and asked me to help if you ever came to me. As if he had to ask...” My grandfather blinked as he processed my words, and he asked, “Did you say it didn’t happen? You’re okay?” Only when I nodded my head in answer did he lower the grail to rest it on his knee. His shoulders were still tense though, as if he hadn’t quite processed this development yet. He asked, “How? My son was sure that...”

“The man who was supposed to do it pitied me I think. I don’t know. My mother wrote me a letter. You can read it if you like, she described what happened there. I still don’t understand why he didn’t do to me what he did to my mother.” My gaze fell to the grail in his lap, realizing belatedly that this was the cup that



had cursed my mother when it was raised to her lips. A cold chill ran down my spine.

A hand cupped my cheek, as my grandfather lifted my face until my eyes met his. He was smiling as he said, “I should have known when I saw you that you were whole. Of course, I see you now. My sweet granddaughter, you hide who you are behind a mask, but you are still there.”

I leaned my face against his hand, tempted to close my eyes and rest for a moment as I felt safe, but I didn’t want to miss anything about this moment now that I could see him up close. My eyes trekked the lines across his face, memorizing the map that the years had traced across his skin. I wanted so badly to know him better, to know if his eyes would twinkle with amusement or if his wild white eyebrows would arch when he felt cheeky, and just all the ways that emotion would flicker across his face. In trying to give me back my soul, was he wanting to do the same? I said, “Thank you, for trying to make me whole.”

Nodding in acceptance of the thanks, he dropped his hand from my face as he turned to place the grail back in the ancient box at his feet. When he sat up straighter in his chair, his eyes had a distant appearance, like he wasn’t seeing me sitting before him in the present. He said, “I’ve thought of nothing else for twenty years. I wish I could say that in that time, I had got justice for your father. But I have failed him in so many ways... Only one person has been punished for that night. Your father’s guard, Rufus, came to me the day after he died to present me with his account.”

I blinked. “Rufus?”



My grandfather just nodded, not noticing my reaction to the name. But surely it was a common name... As I assured myself it wasn't the same man who had been the closest person I'd had to a father growing up, he continued, "When Rufus told me how he had failed him, my fury ignited. My family was gone. I had no leads on the men who had done this. All I had before me was my late son's guard on his knees, begging for forgiveness as he wept for failing him. They had been very close, you see. They were friends more than merely an employer and employee. But I would hear none of it. I wanted to punish someone."

I swallowed heavily, looking at the box where the grail had been stowed. I asked, "So, you took his soul?"

With that far-away look still in his eyes, like he was seeing it acted out before him, he nodded again. "Yes, I took his soul to punish him. I don't know what became of Rufus after that. But someone had to pay for my son's death. Even if that person was someone my son cared deeply for."

That cold feeling iced down my spine again, this time making me shiver violently enough that my grandfather looked up as he noticed the movement out of the corner of his eye.

He smiled reassuringly and put a hand on my shoulder as he said, "I'm sorry, my dear. I shouldn't keep you any longer. It's late and you are cold. There's probably nothing that sounds better in the world right now than a warm bed."

"It does sound appealing," I admitted, knowing that when I returned to my room that I wouldn't be able to resist sliding between the sheets rather than laying atop them.

My grandfather squeezed the hand on my shoulder once before letting it go. His eyes darted across my face, and I knew I



wasn't imagining that he was memorizing my face like I was his. He said, "I'm sorry to have kept you so late. I just don't know how much time we will have together."

"Are you alright?" I asked, alarmed.

"Yes, my dear. I'm in good health. But that doesn't mean much at the royal court. I fear that since you have returned, I won't live much longer." Seeing the fear in my eyes, he smiled as if that would calm me. "Don't blame yourself when it happens. It is just the way of things here. It is my fate in this system, and I have a feeling that you know more than most about the system in which we live. Now, how about we get you back to bed?"

I swallowed heavily but rose to my feet without argument. He wasn't making much sense right now and I thought he might be even more tired than me. Although what he said about the system was true—I did know it well, so well that I thought that if the system was going to keep costing me my family, then it wasn't a system worth having.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



“Excuse me...” I said, getting the attention of the woman standing in my room. Sunlight was struggling to filter past the thick yellow curtains that I’d left drawn shut though it was morning. I had just come from the shower and my head was still swimming from the steam and thick floral scent of fancy soap—something I was sure I’d never get used to—and I had finally given in to necessity as I’d donned the thick white robe that was hanging in the closet. I’d left the white dress on the bed, intending to put it back on, but the bed was empty now, and had been turned down. I should have thought about doing that... a tour group might come through here in the afternoon again.

A small, slight woman wearing a gray servant uniform looked up when I spoke. She stared at me attentively, while not looking into my eyes, as she awaited instructions, inclining her head as she said, “Your servant.”

This was another thing I’d never get used to... and if I ever did get used to it, then I wouldn’t be the same person anymore. With one hand I clutched the robe tighter across my chest, and with



the other I pointed to the bed. Rivulets of water ran down my arm and dripped from my still-drying hair; I hoped I wasn't damaging an expensive or historic carpet. In a quiet voice, I asked, "Um, my dress. I left it on the bed."

The servant nodded. "It has been taken down to the laundry, ma'am." She said the word oddly, not like how I'd address Dorothea's mother, but closer to the word 'mom' than 'ma'am'. She asked, "Will you be needing anything else?"

"Yes, please." I clutched the robe tighter, convincing myself that I wasn't giving her an order, but I couldn't go running in the halls dressed like this to get my clothes. "That dress was the only thing I had to wear. Would you help me, please?"

Instead of answering as I'd expected, she walked over to the wardrobe which I'd closed after taking out the robe. Opening the door, she revealed an assortment of dresses, tops, and pants hanging in its place, some with tags still hanging from the sleeves. The servant asked, "Will there be anything else, ma'am?"

I shook my head. Realizing she must have been the one who hung the clothes in the closet while I was showering, I cleared my throat and said, "No, thank you. That's all."

She curtsied and then headed to the door. Before leaving, she turned to face me. Her eyes still didn't meet mine, but there was a curiosity to her gaze, something similar to the way Mary looked at me. When they watched me, something made them hold their shoulders up higher, almost like I gave them hope somehow. The servant said, "When you are dressed, the king has asked that you join him for breakfast at your leisure. If you need assistance finding the dining room, the guard stationed outside your door can lead you there."



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About twenty minutes later, I was dressed in slacks and a soft cream sweater that I'd taken from the closet. I'd pulled the tags from the clothes, having no concept of the value of the numbers on the tags—if two pounds was the cost of a bus ride, was sixty pounds a lot for a sweater? It seemed like a lot, but maybe all sweaters cost that much—but either way, as the fabric rubbed against my skin, it felt like the finest thing I'd ever worn. I brushed my hair before glancing at myself in the mirror, self-consciously arranging my highlighted hair over my shoulder.

I didn't much mind how I looked, and yet I wanted to look like I could belong if I was going to sit down at the table with my family for breakfast, like I could be one of them. When I tried to picture it, I couldn't envision myself anywhere but standing beside the wall in servant gray. So, I would just have to experience breakfast with my family to be able to conjure up the image in my mind's eye.

As the servant had promised, there was a man standing outside my door, and he didn't need to be asked. The guard gestured for me to follow him before he led me down the hallway and through a series of rooms until he opened two large glass doors. A large window filled the room with dazzling natural light, and I had to blink several times before I could make out some details of the room. There were several servants in the room standing along the wall in finely tailored gray uniforms, much finer than I wore in the service of the Doolittles—rather than a solid gray, theirs were banded with darker gray along the seams and embroidered with light gray in a delicate floral design—they were servants



still, but something about them seemed to suggest they were of a higher class, if servants had an internal class structure.

One of the servants, a man who wore his dark hair in a tidy cut, was bringing a platter to the table loaded with sausages and beans. He placed them beside the king at the head of the table, who inspected the platter, but then looked up from it when he noticed me standing in the doorway. He had shaven this morning, and it seemed like the first time in a long time as the loose, delicate skin of his neck was whiter than the rest of his face, and his shoulder-length white hair had been carefully brushed. As he beckoned me over, the large purple sleeve of his silk dressing gown waved like a flag. My grandfather's eyes shone brightly as I approached the table, and he waved invitingly to the chair next to him, which a servant pulled out for me.

“You must meet everyone here. And they must meet you,” my grandfather said. As his hands sailed through the air with introductions, a ruby ring on his hand flickered in the light. He said, “Everyone, this is my granddaughter, Eleanor. Please make her feel welcome at our table this morning.”

The young man seated to my left had a full, rounded jaw and dark tousled curls that appeared to be carefully styled with product. I noticed he had the same blue eyes as my grandfather, down to the twinkle in them. He extended a hand to me, saying, “Nice to meet you. You're the fifth Cousin Eleanor I've met.”

I was not surprised by this statement, given what my aunt had said. Accepting his handshake, I asked, “Am I the first to go by Ellie?”

He laughed and gave my hand a squeeze before releasing it. “You are.”



If our grandfather noticed what he said, he didn't comment on it as he said to me, "This is Edward, the son of my late brother. He's about your age, so I hope you two get along."

"Nice to meet you," I said genuinely. His first words to me could be taken as aggressive or dismissive, but it was understandable that he was suspicious of me, and I just hoped that the DNA test cleared that up.

My grandfather's hand swung to indicate the woman sitting to his right and across the table from me. Of all of us at the table, she was the only one dressed formally in a bright yellow dress with a prim lace collar around her neck. He said, "And you remember meeting Matilda yesterday, my sister-in-law. Please feel free to call her your aunt."

Matilda's eyes were downcast demurely on the empty plate before her. If she were a servant, the gesture would be dismissive, but there was some quiet emotion behind her solid posture, and I wasn't skilled enough at reading free people to know what it was... all I could glean from her was that she really didn't want to look at me.

Once again, I just hoped that the results of the DNA test would warm her to me. I inclined my head though she wouldn't see and said, "It's good to see you again."

The king gestured to the last person sitting at the table across from Edward. He was wearing a green knit sweater and glasses, and his light brown hair was similarly styled with products like Edward's. My grandfather said, "And this is James. He's seeing your cousin."

"Call me Jimmy," he said with a smile.



“Nice to meet you, Jimmy,” I said, relieved to finally speak to someone who didn’t have a problem with me.

Looking around at the table, my grandfather grinned at all of us. “It’s so good to have you all gathered here. Finally. It’s been too long since there have been empty seats at this table. Now one of them has been filled again, and we get to share food as a family. This is all that an old man could ever ask for.”

I reached over to clasp the back of his hand with mine and give it a gentle squeeze, mindful of the large veins in the back of his hand. He looked so fragile, but when he turned his hand over to take my hand in his and squeezed it hard, I felt better about his strength and health. I said, “This is all I could ask for, too.”

He gave my hand one more squeeze before releasing it and pointed up to a painting high on the wall. There were so many paintings on the wall, practically going all the way up to the high ceiling, that the immediate sight of them had been an overwhelming amount of information. I hadn’t looked closely at them, not until I followed my grandfather’s finger to two portraits hung side by side, halfway up the wall and overlooking the table. The people in the two paintings, were at a three-fourth angle to the viewer, facing slightly to the side.

It appeared the portraits had been hung side-by-side by design, so it looked like the subjects were on the verge of turning to the side and facing each other. My parents. My mother, with a long brown tail of hair hung across her shoulder, and my father forever frozen in his twenties. I swallowed heavily, unsure how I was going to stomach breakfast under the painted gaze of my lost parents.



Still pointing at the paintings, my grandfather said, “Perhaps this isn’t all I could ask for.”

After a moment of silence, Edward asked, “Is it okay if we eat now? Before it gets cold.”

“Of course, of course,” he said, seeming to return to the present. My grandfather made one last grand gesture that caused the ruby on his hand to catch the light in a fiery flash,, this time at the bounty spread out across the table. “Dig in, my family.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



At the estate, I had become accustomed to breakfast being cereal, pancakes, waffles, eggs, and bacon. Especially on the weekends, my mother would prepare a large breakfast with orange juice which I would carry to the table of the family we served. After performing my duties, I would join my mother in the kitchen, as we had to eat too. We wouldn't be allowed the finest cuts of meat or use of the spices, but still over the years I got to sample some of the leftover dishes and came to like the traditional breakfast of the Americas.

What I had this morning was much different. There was bacon and eggs, but several styles of eggs were on offer—fried, poached, and scrambled. Pork sausages were beside baked beans on the serving platter I'd seen placed earlier. Also, there were things I'd never even think to eat for breakfast, like grilled tomatoes, fried mushrooms, fried bread, and a strange sausage I didn't recognize until I heard Matilda ask a servant to pass her the black pudding.



It was all just so... English. This more than the British accents made me realize the gap that lay between me and my new family. While I'd never left a small estate in the Americas until this week, my family were well traveled aristocrats who were just here on a royal tour yet considered the United Kingdom their home. They were probably eating a traditional English breakfast out of nostalgia. If I stayed at my grandfather's side, would I eventually travel across the sea with him? I couldn't imagine that future, though it was likely inevitable. My life had just changed so much recently and so abruptly that I couldn't imagine what the next few days had in store for me. I was still trying to find my footing in the present.

Reaching for what was most familiar before me, I grabbed a serving of eggs and scooped them up onto a slice of toast to eat.

"How are you liking your room?" my grandfather asked.

Of course, he asked just as I had a mouthful of food, and I nodded as I hurried to chew.

Unbothered by my silent response, he said, "There are other rooms available if you don't like it and want to change. I won't be offended. I just put you there because... well, you could probably guess from what you heard on the tour. It used to be your parents' room."

I took a sip of orange juice and swallowed heavily. During the tour I was so distracted by my mission that I hadn't heard the guide mention my parents.

He continued, "That had been your father's room since he was a boy. He picked out the furniture from the royal collection. He didn't have the best taste for interior design or matching pieces, but he loved it, so I never said a word—he was the same with his



clothes, never learned to not wear styles or patterns that clashed. And then when he met your mother at Cornwallis University and brought her home to live with us, she hung up those awful curtains.” He laughed long and painfully, sounding like he had the same lump in his throat as me. He took a sip of his drink too before continuing. “What a pair they were. They had no taste in anything, but each other. The room is unchanged since they left it, other than removing things like personal papers to the archive. But I thought you’d appreciate seeing it and staying there.”

“I do,” I said in a small voice. “Thank you.”

He cleared his throat. “Speaking of personal papers, did you say you had a letter from your mother? If it isn’t too personal... I’d love a chance to see it. I do miss your mother so much.”

I became very aware of the letter in the pouch down the front of my shirt. Yet I was even more aware now of who was absent from the table as I kept stealing glances at Edward’s boyfriend. Harrison wasn’t here... I’d expected him to be here, but he hadn’t even said goodbye. Surely, he would have said goodbye. Thinking of the phone that I’d left in my room, I said, “Sure, I’ll get the letter for you. It’s back in my room.”

My grandfather turned to Matilda and asked, “Will you walk Eleanor to her room to get it, please? After we finish breakfast of course.”

The glance she shot at the servant by the wall and the security staff by the door let me know whose job Matilda thought that was, but she didn’t object to the request. Instead, she downed the rest of her orange juice in silence.

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Back in the bedroom I now saw with new, more appreciative eyes, I opened the bedside drawer that contained a borrowed purse, and the coin and pink cellphone that Harrison had given me. While bent over the drawer, I pulled the letter out of the leather pouch around my neck before concealing it again, now empty, down the neck of my sweater. I turned, holding it in my hand, though my aunt wasn't watching me or this subterfuge. Instead, she was looking around the room.

Noticing my gaze following her as she walked along the walls, she smiled and said, "It's been a while since I was in here. I hope you don't mind me looking."

"Not at all," I said. The room and the objects in it were still new to me, and nothing but what was in the drawer felt like it was my own.

Matilda touched the curtains, perhaps thinking of the story we'd both just heard at the dining table. "You're probably wondering how well I knew your parents."

"I was curious," I admitted. "There's things I'd like to know about them, but I don't want to upset my grandfather by asking everything."

"Probably best, he's very fragile," she said, releasing her grip on the curtain to leave it swinging. Matilda turned to face me as she crossed her arms over her middle. "Their deaths devastated him. Or rather, your father's death and your mother's presumed death. He never gave up on her. I was one of the ones who presumed her dead. And you. I still don't understand how you both survived."

I noticed her gaze flick to the letter in my hand, and I wondered if she was going to ask my grandfather if she could read it after him. I answered her unasked question, "We survived be-



cause of compassion. And mercy. My dad begged for our lives, and so we lived.”

“Compassion... I sometimes must wonder if the servants are the stronger ones than us.” Turning to face the room again rather than me, she started picking up decorative objects from the shelves to examine them, placing back down the little figurines and vases just slightly askew as she spoke, “I knew your father a bit longer than your mother. I was living in England with my late husband—fiancée at the time—who invited his great nephew to visit whenever he was in town. The first thing I ever noticed about your father was his kind eyes; he was just one of those gentle souls who were too good for the world we live in. It wasn’t long before he met your mother and then he started talking about her at our dinners. I met her when he invited her to our wedding. I didn’t get the chance to know her better, and that’s a shame. You probably know a lot more about her than I could tell you.”

Shrugging, I said, “I didn’t get to know her either. Not the whole of her.” Which was precisely why I was asking the question, not that Matilda would understand this, if she thought servants were stronger than free people. It seemed like she had said all she was going to say, so I held up the cellphone from the drawer as I asked, “May I please request a favor of you

“Hmm?” she turned to face me, and her brown eyes focused on the phone. “What’s that?”

“Harrison gave this to me.”

“Who?” She stepped closer to take it from my hand.

“The man who came here with me. I was hoping to use this to get in touch with him.”



Matilda looked up at me from the phone in her hand. “What do you need help with? You need to find his number? Like, have someone look it up?”

“He said it was...” I struggled to recall the exact words he’d used. “He said it was on the phone. Programmed into it? Does that make sense?”

“And?” She raised her eyebrows.

I was probably going to regret this, but I pushed forward before I lost my nerve completely. I asked, “How do I use it... um, how do I use this thing? He never showed me. And I’ve pressed buttons, but nothing happens. No numbers show up. There’s no voice, it never connects with anyone. Please, can you help me?”

She looked at me like I had three heads for a moment before glancing back at the phone in her hand. She pressed a button on the side of it, but the screen remained black, and I didn’t know if I should be relieved the thing was working as badly for her as it did for me, or if I should be disappointed. Yeah, no, I was disappointed. I still had no way to reach Harrison. Matilda said, “The battery is dead.”

“Is there a new battery I can put in it?” I asked.

She stared at me for a second longer. “You’re not very good with technology, are you?” At the shake of my head, she handed the phone back to me. She said, “The battery doesn’t need to be replaced. It needs to be charged with a wire. You know, like those things that lamps and televisions are plugged into the walls.”

“I don’t have one of those,” I said, realizing that Harrison must have the wire on him. “Is there one here I could borrow that would work with this phone?”

“No, sorry.” She clapped her hands, as if she was drawing the room to attention. “Shall we get that letter to your grandfather?”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



My grandfather thanked me for the letter with a kiss on my cheek before tucking it into his pocket. A man in a suit appeared behind him, pulling his wheelchair back from the table. My grandfather said, “I have some meetings that I need to attend, though I wish I could spend the whole day with you. Please, while I am occupied, feel free to explore the palace. Go anywhere inside the premises that you please. I will be back with you as soon as I can.”

After he was wheeled away, I was alone under the unyielding gaze of the portraits of my ancestors on the wall. Matilda had vanished, and her son and his boyfriend, too. Not even the servants were standing against the wall anymore. Being alone didn't bother me; what nagged me most was the feeling that one of those chairs at the table should have been occupied by Harrison. I was certain he wouldn't have left without saying goodbye, even if he had got paid for helping me. It wasn't just that I missed someone who I had gotten used to having around... he was the



person who was with me when I learned that I was capable of feeling. He was the person who taught me that people can feel more than one emotion at once. And he made me think he liked me, if only a little.

If he could make me think all of that, and then leave without saying a word, then I... then I just don't know what to think about anything anymore.

Turning away from the table with its empty seats and the unyielding gazes of the long-lost faces on the wall, I started walking towards the door and tried to turn my brain off. No more worrying about who wasn't here and what would happen next and who else I might lose. Instead, the only things that held my interest were the grain of the wooden door beneath my hand as I pushed it open, the way light glinted off the chandelier in hanging from the ceiling, the rough feeling at the unglazed mouth of a large decorative pot in the corner, the shimmer of light along the gilded paint along the runner of the wall, and the way the stairs creaked under my feet as I went down, down, down into the heart of the home.

While the residents of a house might state that the heart of it is their living room where they spend the evening gathered, anyone who has worked in a house will tell you that that room is just an extremity of a house, not vital to its operation. Not the beating core of the building. The heart is the source of warmth in a body, and in a house, this is its kitchen, the hearth. The tick of an oven timer is its pulse, the food is its blood that carries vital nutrients from it to the body, and the fire of the oven is the spark that keeps it going. If the fire ever falters, then the heart stops beating, and the house will crumble around it.



Or at least, this is how it feels. What would a home be without a kitchen? A body without a beating heart.

The kitchen wasn't my primary workplace at the estate. I just flitted in and out of it as my duties dictated, but it always felt right to be in here. Like, a place to center myself. I didn't have to control my expression while in the kitchen with my mother or watch my words. It was almost as freeing as being in the attic, even if I had to keep my hands busy with work while standing in there.

Which is why when a man in a white coat looked at me in confusion, as I stood in the doorway, I said, "I'd like to bake a pie."

Either he knew who I was, or he didn't care. The man in the white coat shrugged and he waved his hand in invitation of the kitchen, as he returned to washing pots in the sink. It appeared that with breakfast over, the kitchen was mostly abandoned. And I could bake a pie.

The oven was a huge hulking thing on the far wall, with a massive hood to suck up smoke. I started by preheating the oven to 400 degrees. Next, I checked the fridge to see what ingredients I had to work with—there was a wall filled with large stainless-steel fridges and freezers, so it took a minute—and I found everything I'd need for an apple pie except a premade crust in the freezer, but honestly that was asking for too much. So, I'd be making a crust from scratch.

My fingers twitched in the air, as if I was turning the pages in my mother's cookbook. I could imagine it before me... and then I remembered everything. This pie would have two crusts, top and bottom, so I started by sifting together two cups of flour



and a teaspoon of salt, added a two-third cup of shortening, and used a wire pastry blender to mix until it looked like a bowl of little peas. Slowly, I added five tablespoons of cold water and mixed until I could form a soft ball. I divided the ball into two even halves, and then took one to roll out on a floured surface. I floured a pin too before rolling the dough, careful not to work the crust too much.

It was time to work on the filling now. In the crisper drawer of the fridge, I'd found seven Granny Smith apples, which I pared, cored, and cut up finely. Then I greased a pie dish before adding the crust and layering the apple slices into it, two tiers of apples since the dish was deep. When there was just one slice left on the countertop, I popped it into my mouth instead of the pie dish. It was naturally sweet... but not sweet enough. I dusted the apple slices in the dish lightly with sugar first. A dash of cinnamon and nutmeg went in, along with chunks of butter, followed by a tart squeeze of lemon juice. It was time for the top crust now. I formed the second ball of dough into strips, which I placed over the apple slices in a crisscross pattern. I then used a pastry brush to wet the dough with milk before sprinkling a little sugar on the crust, which would help it to brown.

The oven was hot and ready for the pie. I figured it should take forty-five or fifty minutes for the pie, which I should turn occasionally so it baked evenly. I placed the pie on the center rack and set the timer, and I... my arms hung heavy at my sides, as all the purpose flowed out of me with this task done.

My grandfather had said I could explore the house. Did that mean I wasn't allowed to leave the grounds of the White Palace? It seemed like it, and something about that made my skin itch.



It shouldn't matter, after all the trouble it had taken to get here, and especially after the years I had spent forbidden to leave an estate. I should be used to feeling trapped by now, but after the days I had spent traveling with Harrison, freedom was hard to give up now.

Deciding I didn't care if the pie needed to be turned to bake evenly, I headed in the direction of sunlight flooding through a little window at the top of a door. I blinked into the light until I could make out that I had stepped into a garden. This wasn't the finely manicured rose garden visible from my bedroom window, but a little chef's garden.

There was a trellis of orange cherry tomatoes that were about to turn red, companionably planted beside basil. Small, succulent red strawberries begged to be plucked from the vine and popped into my mouth, but I resisted. The spearmint plant was in a pot to prevent it from overtaking the garden, and it appeared to be heavily pruned—I bet that if I requested a glass of iced tea or a bowl of ice-cream it would come garnished with a leaf from this plant.

Walking across the cobblestone path to the other side of the garden, I was faced with a long wall. A tree was growing beside it with dark bark and thick branches hanging over the wall... very thick branches, thick enough to support me likely. I dug my trainers into the bark and looped my arm around a branch to pull myself up. The branch bent, but it was springy, and I was able to reach for another to keep climbing until I was several feet off the ground. Just as I was nearing the top of the wall, a small leap away, a shout made me turn my head.



“Hey, stop!” The voice was unfamiliar. He was obviously one of the guards.

I saw a tall man with red hair going silver beside his ears. He was racing to the tree I was perched in, and I coiled like a cat about to spring for the wall. Just before I jumped though, I saw another guard pushing my grandfather down the path towards me, and I... I couldn't. Even from this distance, I could see that his eyes were wide with worry. He looked like he wanted to jump from the chair and like it broke him to sit there while someone wheeled him over to me. I couldn't do this to him. Sighing, I started to climb down the tree, and I made it there just as my grandfather joined the red-headed guard at the bottom of the tree.

“Did something happen?” My grandfather asked. “Someone saw you climbing on the security cameras and alerted me. Did you feel like you were in danger?”

I hadn't *not* felt like I was in danger since the moment armed men invaded the estate. But that wasn't why I was climbing, so I said, “If I had tried to leave through the front door, would I have been allowed?”

“No, not without an escort for your safety,” he admitted. “I'm sorry.”

I shrugged. I was used to living in a cage. Although it did hurt more, now that I knew from my experiences outside with Harrison what I was missing now.

“Would you like me to organize an escort for you?” he offered.

“No thank you, I don't want to... It's not that I want to leave, not after all the trouble I took to get here. It's just that I'm worried about someone.” I bit my bottom lip as I looked around, still



half expecting to see Harrison appear from around a corner. I'd gotten so used to seeing him every day, even if it had only been a few days that we traveled together.

"Who?" my grandfather asked.

"The man I arrived here with," I said. When he stared at me blankly, I added, "He was in the room when I met you yesterday."

My grandfather shook his head. "I'm sorry, my memory isn't the best anymore. I was so overwhelmed at that moment... I just remember seeing you. Who is this young man? Is he your boyfriend?"

My mouth hung open for a moment. "No, nothing like that."

"Your friend then?"

"No," I insisted, unwilling to even admit feeling that much fondness for Harrison. "He's just someone I traveled with for a bit. I feel like I owe him for helping me when no one else did. And I'd just like to thank him."

"Then we must find him, so I can thank him as well." With a smile, he gestured to the tall red-headed guard to his right. "Sean here is one of my most trusted security agents. If you tell him about your young man, I'm sure he can find him."

Sean approached me with an extended hand, and he said, "Nice to meet you. Your parents were dear friends of mine. I miss them both every day, but I'm missing them a little less right now, seeing you standing before me."

I took his large hand in mine and gave it a squeeze, and my heart felt lighter in my chest. Something about him inspired trust, and I believed he could find Harrison. I proceeded to tell him everything about Harrison and the last time I'd seen him, while Sean took notes on a pad.



\*

After Sean left the garden, disappearing around a corner to begin his search, I noticed my grandfather in his wheelchair beside the open door to the kitchen. The other guard who hadn't been introduced was standing watchfully nearby, ready either to push his chair or protect his king as need be. My grandfather smiled at me and nodded towards the kitchen. I saw my pie sitting on the counter, luckily retrieved from the oven before the crust turned black. He asked, "Is that Priscilla's apple pie?"

I blinked, as it took me a second to remember my mother Cecelia's original name. Then I nodded. I offered, "You can have it. I only baked it to keep busy."

He inhaled deeply. "I never thought I'd smell that again. Or taste it. Let's have it after dinner, so the others get to try it, too."

As I was starting to suspect that no number of pies or DNA tests would win me their favor, I didn't have anything to say in response to that. He could share the pie with them if that made him happy.

"I'm sorry about leaving you alone this morning. I wanted to say, my calendar is clear for the rest of the day now. I'd love it if we could spend it together."

"Of course," I said. The shimmer in his blue eyes broke my heart. I'd seen the sadness in his eyes since I met him, and I'd wanted to heal that not cause him more. I reassured him, "I know you have an important job, the most important job in the world. I never expected you to drop all your meetings for me. You don't have to apologize."

He exhaled and something seemed to ease him. "It's an important job, but you are more important to me. I want to know



you. I want to know everything about you. There's so much time we have to catch up on, and so little time to do it in. Please, tell me about yourself. I know now that you like to bake. What else do you do for fun?"

I opened my mouth, reflexively wanting to correct him that I don't like to bake, it was just a job, and servants don't do things for enjoyment. But I closed my mouth now as he didn't need to hear that. I had spent the entirety of my life insisting to myself and to the world when asked that I had no emotions, took no enjoyment in anything, and had no interests, so much so that now that I was free, I was a stranger to myself. How was I supposed to introduce myself to my family, when I didn't even know who I was? As I dug deep inside myself, I latched onto one scrap of information that I could offer him. I said, "I like to read. I enjoy reading. That's my favorite thing to do."

"You like to read?" His blue eyes sparkled in delight, and he grinned at me with large off-white teeth that were very slightly crooked. "Me, too. I'd love to share my library with you and show you some of my favorite books. Maybe we've read some of the same ones."

I smiled back, my cheek muscles still feeling unused to the motion, but it felt more natural each time I did it. I said, "I'd like that."

"Take us to the library, please," he said, waving his bodyguard over. Instead of entering through the kitchen, the man started to wheel him down the garden path, slowly as I kept pace at their side. We hadn't walked for more than a few minutes before my grandfather held up a hand causing the guard to halt. He said, "Wait, wait for a moment please."



Turning to look at him, I saw a tear roll down his cheek. Instinctively, I knelt so that my eyes were level with his. Yesterday, I'd knelt before him as I tried to look unimposing, begging him to listen to me and not send me away, and I'd been the one crying. Today, I knew that I would never be sent away, but I feared he would be the one to leave me as I assessed him for whatever had hurt him. I asked, "What's wrong? Are you in pain?"

When I reached out to touch his tear-streaked face and felt his papery skin for a fever, he lifted his hand to cup mine and pressed it hard against his face. In his touch, I felt it before he said it... the depth of what passed between us in this moment. I saw it in the way he met my gaze, which I returned without fear. My chest was suddenly warm. Then he said it, as I knew he would, "My darling granddaughter, I have to say something. I couldn't wait any longer to say it. Because we never know how much time we'll have, and something like this needs to be spoken. I had to tell you, I love you. So much."

My eyes stung and I had to blink rapidly. No one had ever said that to me before, and I never expected to hear it in my entire life. And I never expected to be able to say it back, but there it was at the core of me, at the soul that I could no longer deny was inside me. It was overflowing with love for this kind man who had accepted me into his home. Past the tight feeling in my throat, I choked, "I love you, too. Very much. Thank you for saying it. You have no idea how much that means to me."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



When I was a child and my duties of servitude had been lighter, I had sometimes lain in the grass looking up at the blue above me as clouds drifted by and flocks of birds flitting across the sky. I felt the warmth of the sun on my face, and thought of nothing as the time passed, just existing peacefully in a moment.

These times were long gone now, and I couldn't imagine doing that today. Over the years my hands had gotten used to being constantly in motion. There was too much work to be done, something surely had to be cleaned or carried from place to place. And my mind felt like a buzzing beehive, whirring with thoughts. I felt entirely alien from the little girl who once lay in the grass, existing as she watched the sky.

I wanted to try though, when after dinner my grandfather asked me to sit on the balcony of the White Palace to sip tea. He said, "Let's just sit and watch the sun set. We don't have to talk."

As I fidgeted while holding my teacup in a white wicker chair, making it creak, the sky turned orange and pink before us, as



the streetlights started to flicker with light along Pennsylvania Avenue. It really was beautiful and after a while my shoulders relaxed a little and my breathing started to become even with my grandfather's. I wanted to ask him if he did this every night, and if I could join him, as I could foresee years ahead of us, sipping hot drinks every night together. Yet I was reluctant to break the silence that had fallen.

"I just realized we've never discussed something important," he said, apparently not having the same qualms as me. "What should you call me?"

I blinked. I knew his first name, but of course he didn't mean that. I asked, "Do you mean in an official sense, like your title? Or in the familial sense? I've just thought of you as my grandfather."

"That won't do. The last time you saw me, you were a baby and not talking, so it wasn't a settled issue. Now, I'd like to know what you'll call me." He lifted a hand to rub his chin and seemed surprised when he felt it was trimmed of whiskers. My... I didn't know what to call him now... my-soon-to-be-named paternal ancestor thought for a moment, before suggesting, "Pops is too informal. I don't feel like a Gramps or a PopPop. Granddad is a possibility. What do you think?"

"I'll call you whatever you like," I said neutrally.

"I want to know what you'd like to call me," he insisted. "Tomorrow morning is going to be important. The test results are coming back, and I'm going to tell everyone with an ear that you are my granddaughter. I want you to be able to point to me too, to say I'm your family. What word would you like to use to refer to me?"



I weighed the option he'd given along with others he hadn't. Grandpa, Papaw, or Grampy... no. I answered, "I'd still like to call you 'Grandfather.' I hope that doesn't sound strange or too formal."

"Really?" His bushy white eyebrows rose. "Why that name? Did you just grow attached to it?"

"A little bit," I said. "But really, I like the name because in the book *Heidi*, the character calls her grandfather that. While they're much different from us, she met him later in life than most kids, they had to get to know each other, and she went on a journey to be with him. It just kind of fits. And when I read the book a while back, I wished I'd had a grandfather like her. And now here you are. So, you are 'Grandfather' to me."

He put his hand on the back of mine where it rested on the arm of the wicker chair and squeezed it. "And so, I am." My grandfather opened his mouth to say more, but something in the distance caught his eye. He pointed, as he said, "I told you that Sean would find him."

I followed his finger, seeing the crown of Sean's red hair bright despite the dimming sunlight as he stepped out of a vehicle near the front gate of the White Palace. Exiting the other side of the car was another man with his hair haphazardly streaked with blonde highlights, still the mirror to my own terrible hasty dye job disguise in the bathroom of that petrol station. I gasped, seeing Harrison, and then looked at my grandfather. I couldn't ask to go, yet I couldn't be in two places at once...

Seeing my distress, my grandfather just smiled and waved me off. "Go. Go say hello to your friend. I'm going to get ready for bed anyway. I like to turn in early."



I leaned in to kiss his cold cheek, muttering thank you under my breath, before racing through the glass doors of the balcony, through the halls past guards, and finally down the grand staircase. My heart was racing in my chest now that Harrison was no longer in my sight, paranoid that Harrison would vanish again before I had a chance to finally speak the words I'd been holding back, but by the time my shoes were crunching across the white gravel of the driveway... there he was, walking to meet me. Without thinking about why I wanted to do it, I threw my arms around him.

He made a soft sound of surprise before hugging me back, his warm hands pressed against my back. Less than a week ago, it had felt strange to have him hold my hand while I was disguised as Dorothea, but now it felt natural for him to touch me.

As I pulled out of the embrace, a little self-conscious that my grandfather might still be watching from the balcony above, I asked, "Can we go somewhere to talk?"

"Sure," Harrison said, and he followed me past the guards at the front door, up the grand staircase, and down the hallway.

I glanced over my shoulder a couple times, still paranoid that he'd disappeared, but he was behind me the entire time as I led him to my room. Hopefully he wouldn't find that odd, but it was the only room I could think of where we might be able to speak in private, or as private as a conversation could be behind a guarded door.

Harrison glanced once at the man in black standing beside my bedroom door, before entering before me. After I shut the door and gestured to the sofa and chairs, he sat down on one side of the sofa, leaving room for me to join him.



I did, and finally got to take a better look at him in the bright light of the chandelier above us. The first thing I noticed is that he was wearing the same clothes I saw him in last, now heavily wrinkled like he'd slept in them, even though I knew he'd brought a change of clothes in his backpack from Hal's house. So, something had clearly occupied him.

As if he could guess what I was thinking, he said, "Remember how I was wanted for questioning by the police? I was detained. That's where I've been since you last saw me. They weren't buying my story about what happened at the Doolittle estate, so they kept me for questioning overnight, to see if my narrative changed, every time they asked it."

"That's terrible..." I said, noticing the dark circles under his eyes, knowing now they came from a night sat awake under bright white lights in a room.

"It sucked, but I'm glad that I was arrested," he said with a shrug.

My eyebrows rose. "You are? Why?"

Harrison smiled as he said, "Because when the king's people showed up at the jail to order my release, I got to do some good. The police were finally listening to me now, believing my story. I guess when you say you know a long-lost princess, people think you're lying or crazy until men who work for the royal family show up, asking about you."

"So, your name is cleared now?" I asked.

"Not just mine. Rufus's name too. That's the servant who was shot, right? The one you said was your friend? I explained he was innocent, and when I told your grandfather's men about him, they arranged both for his release and for him to be brought here



for the best medical care. The royal physician is going to take care of him. Doro too, if she's well enough to be transferred here."

Rufus and Dorothea... here and getting well. Where I could check in on them. Where I could help nurse them back to health. And all because of Harrison, because he listened to me talk about them and knew they were important to me, especially when I'd lost everyone else who I'd ever known. Just knowing they were alive and maybe on their way here, I felt a little less unmoored from my past.

My chest felt so full of warmth that there was only one thing I wanted to do. I eyed Harrison's lips for a second before leaning in. He made little sound when I kissed him, so I pulled back immediately, after the briefest of contact that left my mouth tingling.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that."

"I wasn't complaining," he said breathily.

As I stared at the awful carpet my parents had put in this room, I spoke quickly and gestured with my hands as I did. "It's just that I missed you and now you're back, and you have done all these wonderful things. I don't know why I wanted to do that."

"I wanted you to do that, too," he said.

"You did?" I finally looked at him again, seeing the way he was watching me with warm eyes, the casual way he leaned back against the sofa, and the upturned corner of that lovely mouth I had kissed.

"Of course. Why do you think I came back here?"

"I kind of hoped you came back here for a reward from the king. Money as motivation, I can understand. This..." I reached out to take his hand, threading my fingers through his. "This is



harder. I don't understand it. The way it feels. Why does it feel good? Why did I want to do it? There's no logic behind any of it. It's just so new to me, and it makes my head spin when I kiss you."

He squeezed my hand. "It's new to me, too." When he saw me eyeing him suspiciously, as he's known he has emotions his whole life and should have more of a handle on them by now, he explained, "I've kissed people before who I felt nothing for, like Doro. I'd kiss her while thinking about a hubcap that needed replacement on my car. But you... you overwhelm me. And that's something that has never happened to me before."

There was no logic to any of this, so I relied purely on instinct instead. I wanted to be closer to him, so I shifted on the sofa until we were inches apart. I said, "So, if this is new to both of us, maybe we could help each other sort through the emotions? Then it will feel easier."

"I don't think wanting you will ever be easy," he said, as he ran his fingers through my hair, and then cupped the back of my head gently. "Worth it though? Yes."

We both leaned in to kiss again, but immediately my senses were overwhelmed as feelings I didn't have names for welled up inside me. As Harrison moved his lips against mine, I kept my mouth still as I struggled to sort through my thoughts. Emotions were nameless faceless guests at a party in my mind, sending me cowering in a corner away from them, but logic was my old friend that could help me here. Harrison leaned away from the kiss, seeming to sense that something was wrong. He looked at me expectantly.

"I don't understand this. I don't know why I want to kiss you," I said, struggling to rationalize who he was in my mind. The jerk



who had planned to marry Dorothea for her money while having no affection for her, the free person who had dressed me in her clothes knowing I might be hurt in her place, and then had helped me solely for a reward. Was he here now for a new reason, having changed completely over the course of our journey? Perhaps due to an attachment I might feel too, but not understand... an attachment I distrusted.

He didn't say anything.

I shook my head to clear it, not understanding my train of thought, the emotions coursing through me, or the desire I still had to passionately kiss Harrison Smyth.

"Do you still wish I was him?" he asked.

"Who?" I asked, though a second later I knew he meant Raymond, which just added more uncertainty swimming into the mess roiling in my head. I'd never told him about Raymond, but he must have sensed it.

"The man you were wishing I was instead, the whole time we were traveling together," he said. There was a strong emotion evident in his eyes, though I couldn't fully place it. Jealousy? Pain? Acceptance?

Though my mind was still a torrent of thoughts and feelings I had to sort through, I was able to reach for something true to offer him, which I hoped would be enough. I said, "I don't wish you were him right now."

With his hand that still clasped mine, Harrison's thumb was moving in soothing circles across my skin. He looked like he wanted to lean in to kiss me for a third time, as his eyes darted to my mouth, but instead he asked, "What do you need right now?"



I took a deep breath, and muttered, “Why did I think you were such an ass when we first met?”

He smiled. “Because I was. Ever since I’ve met you though, something has made me want to do better.”

Looking down at our clasped hands as I answered, I said, “I’d really like to talk to my grandfather for a minute. To thank him for bringing you here, and maybe say good night? I hope that’s okay if I go talk to him, and then come back. Otherwise, it will just keep bothering me that I didn’t say goodnight to him earlier.”

“Of course that’s okay,” he said, releasing my hand. “I think it’s a good thing, give you a chance to clear your head. And then when you come back, maybe we can talk about us?”

Talk about us... I liked the sound of that. It made my heart skip a beat and my cheeks prickle with heat. As my fingers ached to intertwine again with his, I fisted them at my side to make them behave. I nodded as I said, “I’d like that. And yes, I’d like to clear my head.” I glanced at him, seeing him watching me with a smirk on his face, and I knew he was seeing right through me. He knew I was crazy about him, was fighting it, and that amused him. I said, “Don’t say it.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he choked past stifled laughter.

“Don’t.” I stood up and walked to the door but paused. I tucked my hair behind my ear as I turned to face him. I said, “I’ll be back soon.”

“If you aren’t, I’ll call you. I’ve got your number, remember?” he said playfully, holding his hand beside his face as if it was a phone.

I just smiled as I turned to leave again, not having the heart to tell him that I still had no idea how to use the phone he’d gifted



me. Perhaps later I'd check his bag for the charging cable that was so elusive that not even the White Palace could provide a spare.

The guard standing outside my door glanced at me as I exited my room. He was a different man from earlier, so I wasn't sure if he knew I had a guest. But he probably did—these guards probably briefed each other between shift changes. I glanced up and down the hallway, unsure which way I was going, and then I remembered how on my first day here, the guard outside my room had been able to lead me to the dining room. "Excuse me," I asked softly.

The guard, a buff man with dark eyes almost as black as his suit, looked at me out of the corner of his eyes without facing me.

"Do you know where the king is at this hour? Could you take me there?" I asked.

The guard grunted before starting to walk down the hallway. After staring at his back for a second, I started to follow him. He didn't bother to turn on any lights as he led me down dark snaking hallways and a staircase, where his black suit was lost entirely in shadows, so I had to follow him mostly by sound until my eyes adjusted or we walked past a window that let in some moonlight.

Finally, we arrived at the doorway, and he turned to face me. My heart started to beat harder in my chest... something was wrong about this scene. I asked, "He's in there?"

"Might be," the guard said, as he opened one of the heavy wooden doors. Windows illuminated the room enough for me to see a circular carpet and a large wooden desk which was unoccupied, as I knew it would be from the lack of security personnel at the door. The man who led me here shrugged. "Guess he isn't working late tonight."



Perhaps this man was just dim... if I knew the way without assistance I would leave now. “I think my grandfather is in his room. Could you take me there?”

He closed the door, and we started to walk back the way we had come, down the dark hallway once more that was silent except for the creaking of the floorboards beneath our feet, and this... this was starting to feel familiar. Not the walk itself, as this massive house had me turned around, but the act of walking late at night through empty rooms. I had done this so many times before at the estate I grew up on, and I could see myself doing it again here. It made me realize why this was so important to me, to find my grandfather to wish him goodnight. While what I had with my mother hadn't been a warm relationship, we did have one meager tradition—every night, she would tell me goodnight, and I would do the same. When she died, that tradition had died with her, but perhaps I could have that again with her father-in-law.

“That's it,” the guard said, gesturing towards a door. Unlike the previous door we'd approached, he didn't open it for me. He hung back, a few paces away from the door.

As I turned my back on the guard, hairs raised on the back of my neck... there was just something about him that didn't make me feel safe. I tried to ignore it though, since the faster I did this, the faster I could get back to my room. I reached for the doorknob before thinking better of it and knocking. No answer. I pressed my ear against the door to be sure. I knocked again. “Grandfather?” I called in a hushed voice by the dark wood of the door. “Grandfather, it's me.”



I bit my bottom lip. There was still no answer. He might be asleep. Or this incompetent guard might have led me to the wrong room again. Just to be sure, I cracked the door slightly. There were no lights on in the room, but the curtains were thrown over and there was enough moonlight for me to make out the form of a man lying in a large, canopied bed. I saw my grandfather's shoulder-length white hair splayed across the pillow and knew it was him in the bed. He was asleep.

Just as I started to close the door slightly to give him his privacy, I noticed that his blanket was only half-covering his body. He was so slight of build, and he wasn't in the best of health... The thought of him getting a chill and catching a cold scared me enough that I boldly opened the door all the way and walked into the room. Quietly so I didn't wake him, I walked across the room to tuck him into bed. As I got closer, I saw that his blankets were kicked off his sock-covered feet and one of his hands was hanging off the side of the bed. His mouth hung open, and I half expected to hear him start snoring, as I drew the blanket higher onto his chest, but he didn't make a sound.

I started to turn away, but something drew my attention back, something I hadn't noticed at first in the dim lighting, or maybe something I just really, really didn't want to notice. Now I saw it, the slightest shimmer of light in the dark. His mouth wasn't the only thing that was open. His eyes were, too. I switched on the bedside lamp to be sure, and there they were. His once beautiful blue eyes were bulging wide and streaked with red veins. He wasn't blinking. He wasn't breathing. He was gone.

# CHAPTER THIRTY



It had been a few hours, but I kept replaying one moment in my mind—standing in the corner of the room watching as my grandfather’s physician performed CPR, administered adrenaline, and checked my grandfather’s pulse over and over... and shook his head. He checked his watch and called time of death, and I wanted to ask him to keep trying, it seemed too early for that. Keep trying a little longer and he will come back. I didn’t ask though. I was frozen.

I was still frozen. I hadn’t cried yet, unlike when my mother died. I didn’t know why. None of this felt real.

Aunt Matilda’s voice felt very far away. She had to crouch before me, putting her face before mine to get my attention. She said, “Ellie, the man is ready for us, honey. Would you like to hear what he has to say?”

I didn’t remember walking into this room, but when I looked up, I was in some sort of office with wires, computers, and little televisions displaying views of the White Palace from all over. I was sitting at a table, and Matilda took the seat beside me.



Her son Edward was standing nearby, but he seemed to prefer to stand with his boyfriend, so he didn't have to leave James' embrace. Across the table from me was a man in a green bathrobe, though at any other time of day he probably wore a suit.

"I'm Charles," he said. "For those of you who don't know, I'm the head of security. I've been reviewing the security footage."

I cleared my throat. "Excuse me, I'm sorry, but what does that mean?"

Aunt Matilda put her hand atop mine on the table, as she said to Charles, "Our Ellie is a bit out of touch with technology. Please, explain to her."

Charles stared at me for a second, seeming unsure how to start, but finally he said, "There are cameras all over the White Palace. You might see them in the corner of the ceiling of some rooms, the little black spheres. But they don't take pictures, they record videos. I have that video saved on my computer here, so we can review it."

I nodded, resisting the urge to look up at the ceiling of this room for a camera.

"As you all know, the king's physician is currently examining his body, as there were some suspicious findings. The conjunctival and facial petechiae..." He pointed to his own face, seeming disturbed by the thought. Charles swallowed heavily before continuing, "The doctor seems to think that this bruising and the blood vessels broken in his eyes could be an indication of suffocation, so I've been reviewing the video taken in his room."

While I had been ignoring Aunt Matilda's hand on the back of mine, I rolled my hand to clasp hers now. I needed something to ground me. I asked, "Are you saying you might have recorded the person who killed him, entering and exiting his room?"



“More than that.” Charles turned his head to make eye contact with all four of us as he spoke, trying to impress what he was saying to us, “I need to make you understand, this is going to be very disturbing. I’m showing this to you, in case you can help us to identify this man. But the video is graphic. If you don’t feel up to watching this, please leave the room.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Edward’s boyfriend James whispered into his ear.

Edward sniffled loudly before standing a bit firmer. “I do though. I do. I must watch this for him. I can do this.”

“I’m proud of you,” James said as he kissed his neck, before wrapping his arms tighter around Edward’s chest.

I was suddenly very aware that my great-aunt was here, holding my hand instead of the man I’d been kissing tonight. That was something I didn’t want to think about, so I just clutched her hand harder and tried not to think about the fact that he wasn’t here for me. There was probably an explanation for that... but even if he was here, I’d be too guilty to accept his support. While I was kissing him... no, I didn’t want to think about that.

“Are you all ready?” Charles asked slowly, making eye contact with each of us, before he nodded. Then he turned the computer around to face us. He said, “This was taken in his room. The assailant has his back turned at the start of the recording, but he turns in profile at the end.”

Despite being warned this would be difficult to watch, I didn’t fully understand what he meant until the video was loaded, and I saw my grandfather lying in bed and I knew what would be coming. I exhaled slowly as I rationalized that nothing about this was shocking—I’d already seen the body, I knew that the sheets



tucked neatly around his feet would soon be kicked off as he fought for his life, so nothing about this should rattle me. I could watch this. I could stay focused.

The picture was a grainy black and white, lit by the moonlight coming in the window, but I was able to make out his face as he rested against his pillows. He had about three behind his head, propping him high on the bed, and one of his hands was resting on his stomach, which rose up and then down as he breathed evenly. Nothing happened for a minute, and I'd think it was a still photo if he weren't breathing, but then the light shifted in the room, like someone had opened the door to the bright hallway. A shadow shifted along the wall until a man stepped into the frame, his back facing the camera. As the unknown man pulled a pillow from under my grandfather's head, he blinked up at his attacker in confusion. His eyes got wide just before the pillow came down.

I held my breath as I watched my grandfather fight in vain for his life, clawing at the arms of the man suffocating him and trying to buck to escape the pillow, legs kicking but failing to shift more than the sheet over them. The clawing became scratching, then slapping, and finally he was just holding onto the arm of his assailant, and it was a strangely intimate scene, like he was clutching onto the arm of someone he hoped would pull him from the water as he drowned. Except the person he held onto wished him nothing but harm, so he got weaker and weaker until his hand went slack, and his arm flopped onto the bed.

Black spots swam over my vision, making me breathe as I continued to watch. I was vaguely aware that Edward was sobbing nearby, and his boyfriend was muttering soothing things to him,



as he told him it was okay to look away. Aunt Matilda was silent beside me, seeming as transfixed by the scene as I now was... It was nearly over. The murderer was still holding down the pillow, though my grandfather had stopped moving, but he'd be turning to face the camera soon, at least in profile if Charles was correct.

As I stared, I was having trouble breathing again because certain details were becoming undeniable... clothes, which I'd noticed wrinkles on earlier tonight. And hair, which I could imagine would be brown with highlights if it weren't in black and white. Finally, the man suffocating my grandfather accepted that he was dead, and he lifted the pillow hesitantly to check. There was no movement, so he turned to the door that was just out of view on the left, eyeing his pathway to escape. He was in profile now.

My eyes followed the sharp angle of his nose, which I'd become so familiar with during our long drive here. Below his nose were the full lips I'd kissed just hours ago. And I... seeing Harrison there, standing above the body of my grandfather, I accepted the truth, but felt nothing. I didn't know if I'd ever feel anything ever again. He walked out of frame after only a few seconds, but I'd wanted to see his expression. I wanted to know what Harrison was feeling in the moment when he made me feel empty.

Looking at Charles who was sitting beside the computer, I asked, "Could you go back?"

"Of course," Charles said, as he hit a key on the computer. The video feed went back a little, to the moment when my grandfather's hand went slack, sliding down the arm of his attacker to lay limp on the bed. After holding down the pillow for a little bit, Harrison turned so face was in profile.



I stared into his visible eye, but I was bad at this under the best of circumstances. If he were sitting before me facing me in full color, I'd struggle to know what this man was thinking or feeling. After all, hadn't he kissed me minutes before doing this, and I believed he felt the same for me as I did for him? Why did I think I could divine his feelings on a grainy video feed as he murdered someone I love. Someone I loved... before he took him away from me.

Harrison walked out of frame again, before I'd made any sense out of him. And before I knew why I wanted to make sense of him. Surely this didn't matter. He was a murderer. This video didn't tell me why he did it or what he was thinking and feeling as he did it, but it undoubtedly showed me that he was the one who committed the act.

"Can you make it go back again?" I asked.

Charles hit the keys that made the video go back again, this time to the moment when my grandfather was clawing at Harrison's arms and bucking in a futile attempt to escape the pillow.

"Stop it, stop it!" James shouted, and we all turned to see him holding up Edward who was sobbing against his shoulder. He said, "Please, stop playing that video. Can't you see what this is doing to him?"

"That's enough," Matilda said with a nod. She cleared her throat before saying, "The killer looked a bit familiar. I feel like I saw him somewhere recently. Do any of you know him?"

"Never seen him," James said. "I don't think Edward has either. We're together all the time, so we know the same people."

I inhaled deeply, which drew the eyes of everyone in the room to me. Aunt Matilda looked expectant, and I didn't expect her to



see me as a niece anymore after I admitted this. My entire family will be gone again. I said, “His name is Harrison Smyth.”

As they turned to look at me, I told them everything. I laid the facts bare, with no shame to hold me back, from the time I started traveling with him, to when I brought Harrison back to my room to kiss him. When I saw the horror on my cousin’s face, I knew that it was time to be done with Harrison. I didn’t need answers. I didn’t need closure. It didn’t matter why he had done it—he killed my grandfather. I saw it three times. There was nothing he could say that would make that horrible act make sense. He had taken my family from me. He had taken him from all of us.

Looking around at the faces gathered at the table, I said what Harrison would never say. “I’m sorry.”

\*

Not everything in the bedroom my parents designed was yellow and gilded. In the corner of the room beside the curtains was a small desk with a chair. The desk was empty of papers and pens, so it was currently closed, and I found the hard wooden chair more hospitable than anything else in the room right now. I sat in it while I stared at the sofa that had been so cozy hours ago, and I worked very hard not to think about who I was sitting on that sofa with, and what we had done. As I sat, the shadows shifted across the room as the room slowly filled, first with an orange tint and then with bright light.

I didn’t snap out of this daze until my bedroom door opened abruptly, and I looked to see my aunt standing in the doorway. I blinked at her, shaking off the last of the stupor before standing. I said, “I was expecting you to come.”



Matilda gestured at the guard standing by the door to close it, giving us some privacy. Or as private as this room would get, now that I knew the black sphere by the ceiling was a camera. I noticed she had a manila folder in her hand as she crossed the room. She asked, “You were?”

I nodded. “I’ve changed back into the clothes I arrived in. Everything has been returned to the closet, and I can leave as soon as you like.”

“And why would we want that?” Matilda said, as she sat on one of the yellow-gold sofas. She gestured for me to sit across from her, and I reluctantly took my place on the opposing sofa. “You’re family. The DNA results have confirmed that. This is your home.”

I bit my lip, holding back the insistence that I’d brought a murderer into the house, so I didn’t deserve to stay here. She knew all of that already. Focusing instead on what she said, I tried to feel happy about the DNA test... but no, I felt nothing. There was no joy in the news that should have been spoken by my grandfather this morning. Looking at the manila folder that she placed on the marble-topped table between us, I asked, “Are the DNA results in there?”

“No, this is...” Matilda placed her hand on the folder like she wanted to open it, but she hesitated. Finally, she continued, “These are the preliminary results of the investigation that our security staff has conducted overnight. While they have only had hours to work, the evidence that has come back is overwhelming.”

I nodded, though I couldn’t imagine anything more overwhelming than that video.



“First of all, Mr. Smyth has been captured. He never left the grounds. Perhaps he didn’t realize that there were security cameras and that we would be looking for him.”

“He’s cocky,” I agreed, thinking of when he stood unmoving just a few blocks away from the police as they impounded his car while he was wanted. I could see him boldly wandering around the castle after committing murder. I shouldn’t even be surprised.

“Secondly, his co-conspirators have been captured.” Matilda finally flipped open the folder and withdrew several photographs that she slid across the table towards me. “Do any of these men look familiar?”

The photographs looked to have been taken from the upper corner of a room, looking down at a bare concrete room furnished only by a basic wooden table and two chairs. A police interrogation room perhaps? That is, if the descriptions in Perry Mason books were accurate. Focusing on the men in the photos, I noticed that one was bald with a stoic expression, and just looking at him I could smell smoke. Tony. And the armed man, whose name I didn’t catch, but I’d seen up close when I tripped him by the car. And in the last photo, I saw a man with greasy, stringy hair... the boss. The man who killed my mother. Bile rose in my throat, and I had to look away. In a scratchy voice, I said, “Yes, I know them.”

“They attacked the house where you lived, correct? These are the men who killed the Doolittle family?” she asked.

I looked up to meet her eyes, and for once the direct contact with her didn’t make me feel uncomfortable. It’s easier to meet the eyes of someone when you feel like you have nothing to hide, and right now I was feeling hollowed out. I said, “Yes, they killed them. Among other people.”



“They’re being held by the police right now,” Matilda said, as if that would be comforting. “They have confessed, and in their statement, they revealed who hired them. Apparently, it was their plan that the man who hired them would pose as a fellow hostage, so that if he managed to leave with the person they were looking for, he would have her full trust. I’m sorry if this is hard to hear, given your relationship with him, but Harrison Smyth is the man who hired them.”

“No,” I said in a clipped voice, as it all fell into place. “This isn’t hard to hear. It’s the most logical thing in the world.”

She stared at me for a moment before continuing, “It seems as though his goal was to obtain the throne. After seducing you, he killed the king to elevate your status, furthering his path to become the royal consort.”

“Like I said, the most logical thing in the world,” I said in deadpan, wishing she would stop talking. I knew what he did and didn’t need it spelled out like this.

Aunt Matilda closed the folder. She said, “Then, it is time to discuss Mr. Smyth’s punishment.”

“Punishment?” I asked, having assumed his future lay in courtrooms, trials, and jail.

She nodded. “Per our law, there is only one punishment for regicide. It is servitude. Did your grandfather show you where the Grail is? It is time to take his killer’s soul.”

For a moment, I just stared at the folder on the table that was filled with overwhelming evidence. Every time I blinked, I saw the scene in the bedroom as my grandfather fought for his life. I felt my lips move as I started to speak without having decided to say this, “I will show you where the Grail is. If I get to take his soul.”



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“You don’t have to do this,” my aunt said, reaching for me as I paced in front of the doorway my grandfather had once led me to, although she didn’t close the distance to take my arm and halt me.

“I’m fine,” I insisted. And I was fine. I was focused on the task before me. As soon as the guards arrived with Harrison, I would do this. I would take his soul as punishment for what he had taken from me. Although doing so wouldn’t bring back what I’d lost... but my mind was clear and I could see this path laid before me, like cobblestones down a garden path, each clearly a defined stepping stone. There was no detour in this path, no fork ahead. Everything was clear, so there was no reason to think any further about it.

“You don’t have to,” Matilda said, her hand now grasping in the air even closer to me on the next lap of my pacing. “Just, open the door. Give the Grail to me or to Edward, and we will enforce the punishment. That would be easier.”

As her hand had nearly touched me that time and I didn’t want to be touched, I paused with my arms crossed over my chest as I faced her. Edward was standing silently behind her, staring at the floor, and I didn’t get the sense that he was as eager as her to use the Grail to take Harrison’s soul. I said, “I must do this. My grandfather did this before. When my father was murdered and he thought my mother and I were gone, he did this for us. He took the soul of a guard named Rufus to punish him for not protecting us. Now my grandfather is dead and it’s my turn to do for him what he did for us.”



“But...” Matilda tried once more to reach for me, and though I was close enough for her to touch, her hand paused in the air between us as something about my face made her think better of it.

I didn’t know enough about expressions to even guess what my own was right now, and I was just glad that my face was making her give me space. I said, “This isn’t open for discussion. I’m doing it.”

At the sound of footsteps approaching down the hallway, the three of us looked up to see two guards approaching, dragging Harrison between them. One of the guards looked a bit familiar, but before I could place him my attention shifted to Harrison as he got closer. He was struggling between the guards, trying to break their hold on his arms, which were bent at the elbows as his arms were tied behind his back. Then he stopped struggling when he saw me. His eyes got wide, and he started to lean forward. It was like he was trying to speak without words, impressing something on my mind with direct eye contact. But I didn’t want to hear anything he had to say.

Looking away, I said to Matilda, “I’m going to open the door now.” I held my breath as I inserted my finger into the device that pricked my finger and then analyzed my blood; the finger jab didn’t hurt, only the memory of the smile I’d shared with my grandfather as the computer confirmed what we already knew, that we were family. We were family... I took a breath to steady myself, reminding myself of why I was opening this door. I turned to the guards holding Harrison, and this time I was able to place the guard who looked familiar. He was the tall ginger man who had spoken to me in the garden after I’d baked a pie.



He was friends with my father. I said to him, “You can take him into the room. Just him.”

The unlocked door clicked open, and the guard I’d indicated dragged Harrison through it. He wasn’t fighting to escape anymore, though I couldn’t guess why and didn’t care to try.

As the other guard and my aunt and her son started to walk to the unlocked door, I said, “Wait, not you.”

Edward shrugged and turned to lean against the wall, but Matilda arched her eyebrows. The second guard was staring into the room, and there was something about him... some instinct that told me I shouldn’t let him inside. He wasn’t the man who had taken me to my grandfather’s office rather than his bedroom when he was being murdered, but I couldn’t keep trusting strangers, not when I was surrounded by enemies.

Matilda opened her mouth to protest, but I halted her words with a raised hand. I said, “I need to do this. Alone. That’s all I ask. This is all I need the Grail for. After I use it on Harrison, you and Edward can have it.”

My aunt closed her mouth, and her lips turned up slightly at the corners. Her heavy-lidded eyes and slight smile made her look like a contented cat who had a mouse’s tail trapped under her paw. She nodded, indicating she wouldn’t follow me, though like the second guard her eyes kept flicking to the room and the treasures glimmering inside it.

I stepped through the doorway and shut the heavy door, triggering the lock that could only be opened by my blood. Taking a deep breath, I walked across the room, intentionally not looking at Harrison and the guard behind him, where they were standing beside the tiaras. There would be time to look at Harrison



in his eyes, but for now I was focused on my task, as I went to the wooden chest in the far corner of the room that my grandfather had shown me. I knelt on the floor, as I had just days ago to bring my eyes level with his eyes, though today his chair was empty. It would always be empty now, because of Harrison. I lifted the lid of the ancient chest that housed the Grail, and I saw that not only was the Grail inside, but a small flask rested on a velvet cushion beside the Grail, both laying on their sides in the chest so long that the cushion had conformed to shape them. I ran my fingers across the soft cushion, thinking about other things that this Grail had impressed itself on for so long, so that any other way of being was forgotten. It appeared that there were instructions scratched into the inside of the box's lid, faintly in a long-lost language, but luckily also with a couple accompanying drawings.

Thinking I had gotten the gist of it, I uncorked the flask and poured a splash of the liquid into the Grail. The liquid was a bit cloudy with black particles floating in it, but it had no scent and by all appearances seemed to just be dirty water. I didn't know if it was the liquid or the vessel that had the effect of taking a soul, or a combination of the two, but I was going to carefully follow the instructions until I figured it out.

Standing carefully to not slosh the liquid, I approached the men locked in the room with me. Sean, who was slightly taller than Harrison, was standing behind him with his hand on Harrison's shoulder to keep him in place. Yet, Harrison didn't look like he would run even if a guard weren't there. As I crossed the room, his eyes tracked me. I looked back at him, expecting to see wariness, like the way a person would watch a big cat stalking them on a safari. Yet... there was something else there.



Standing before Harrison and looking into his eyes, this should be so different from when we sat on the sofa in my room. The familiarity should be gone, as he had proven himself a deceptive stranger. The calm companionship too, as I was now his executioner. While it felt gone to me—any feeling I'd had for him had died with my family—it didn't seem like it was gone for him.

I had never been good at reading people or their expressions, their eyes, especially since as a servant I had always dropped my gaze submissively when faced with free people, yet almost the entire time I knew Harrison, I had looked in his eyes. I knew those eyes. And he was looking at me without fear. He trusted me. I knew the look of someone who had faith in me—Mary had looked at me like that, other servants, too. Now Harrison was looking at me in the same way, like he believed in me.

For the first time since I'd known him, I looked away. He was just desperate for someone to save him of course, but I couldn't rescue him from the consequences of his actions. As I breathed for a moment, clearing my head, my gaze focused once more on the keypad of the door, which was locked once more as I'd shut it between us and Matilda and her son. Once again the memory stirred of the conversation I'd had with my grandfather the night he'd brought me here, intent on using the Grail to return my soul which had never been lost.

His words wouldn't stop echoing in my mind for some reason... *I never had any doubt.* When the technology of the door confirmed my identity, it meant nothing to either of us, as the scientific process of the door hadn't told us who I was; it didn't show us anything we couldn't already see with our own eyes. Why should I have any faith in a technology I don't understand?



Why should it make me blind to the things in front of me? Why should I let it think for me, when I have a mind of my own?

This wasn't getting any easier, the longer I dragged it out. Two decades ago, my grandfather had stood in this room with a man named Rufus, who I suspected was the same Rufus I knew. My grandfather had done this, despite knowing that Rufus wasn't guilty of a crime. He was just feeling guilty in their mutual loss, and someone had to pay. So, my grandfather had made him pay.

I took a deep breath as I finally raised my eyes to meet Harrison's, and this time it wasn't hard anymore. I said to Sean, "Lower his gag." I raised the Grail in my hands higher between us, making my intent to lift it to his lips clear. To Harrison, I said, "Don't speak. Don't say anything until I ask you a question. Is that clear?"

He nodded, and Sean then tugged the gag tied around his face from his mouth, so the cloth dropped down around his neck. Harrison didn't speak. He just watched me, waiting either for the question or for me to take his soul.

"Did you kill my grandfather?"

"No," he said the word clearly and calmly while maintaining eye contact, allowing the single syllable to have an impact.

I looked at Sean next, asking, "Can video be manipulated to display anything other than the truth?"

"Yes," the guard said, as if he had been thinking about the same thing. "Especially low-resolution black-and-white video. There's no evidence but the video currently linking this man to the room. No fingerprints or DNA. And none of us have been able to read the alleged witness reports tying him to the late princess's death. Everything about this seemed rushed to me. I'm sor-



ry, Miss. I didn't want to voice my opinion unless you felt the same. I loved your grandfather, too."

I nodded. "Rushed is exactly how I would describe this situation. The investigation and the murder itself. But when I think more about it, what appears to have escalated things is that my DNA test results were due to come back this morning. My grandfather was going to publicly name me as one of his heirs this morning, but instead he was murdered the night before." I glanced at Harrison, though I continued to speak to Sean. And to myself as it all came together in my mind. "Even if we were to argue that he would profit more from being involved with a queen than a princess, Harrison had no motive to kill the king immediately before the announcement that I was the king's confirmed relative. But others did."

Harrison looked surprised by my statement, but Sean didn't. He could just be as skilled at hiding his emotions as a servant, but I didn't think so. Rather than widening in shock, his eyes hardened.

I said to Sean, "That idea had occurred to you as well, I think."

The guard nodded. "More than once. One of the first things I thought when your grandfather was killed was that it's happening again. Just like it did all those years ago."

"You mean when my father was murdered?" I asked, just to make sure we were on the same page. I glanced out of the corner of my eye at Harrison, as he shifted his stance so he could see both of us; he seemed to have calmed enough to realize that the focus of our revenge was no longer on him.

Sean nodded and said, "When you spoke about suspicious timing... it was the same back then." He looked around, as if



feeling the need to confirm that the room was still empty, before continuing. “The king’s brother was visiting. His new young wife was with him. They announced their pregnancy. And then, not long after that dinner party, it happened. Your father was murdered, and you and your mother went missing. All of this happened before the king’s brother and his pregnant wife left... I’d always found the timing odd. A lot of us have always found that odd, even the king himself I suspect.”

As I absorbed this, Harrison’s eyes darted between our faces. Finally, he asked, “I’m not following... Ellie, what’s going on?”

I took a deep breath before explaining. “We’re talking about my great-aunt, Matilda. It’s possible, if not likely, that about nineteen years ago, when she was pregnant, she was behind the plot to kill my father, so that her child would be in the direct line for the throne. I’m remembering something strange she said to me. She was so curious about how my mother and I had lived, and she seemed annoyed when I said our would-be killer was compassionate towards us. It was like she was disappointed that we lived...” Taking another breath, I tried to slow my spinning thoughts. It was important that I presented this knowledge in a way that made sense. Sean seemed convinced, but I needed to state this case convincingly. I needed more than him on my side. I said, “Matilda doesn’t seem like a woman who likes loose threads. I suspect that since that night, she’s wanted confirmation of our deaths. Perhaps occasionally, rumors popped up that we were out there. She wanted to lay our bodies at my grandfather’s feet, so he’d finally officially name her son as his heir. So, she hired the men who went looking for us, and perhaps someone spotted my mother at the market, noticing her resemblance to the missing princess.”



“So, those thugs who attacked us... who killed your mother...” Harrison said, his eyes growing wide. “She hired them?”

“She told me you did,” I said in a softer voice. “She said the men are in custody and they confessed it was you.”

He shook his head. “I promise it wasn’t me. I didn’t hire anyone.”

“I know that now,” I said. “I was just adding a detail. I wouldn’t be surprised if those men were dead now, if they can directly tie her back to any of this.”

“Either that or she’d kill them for the job they did,” Harrison said. When I raised my eyebrows, he smiled and gestured to me. “You must admit, they didn’t do the job she wanted. Rather than providing confirmation of your death, their actions directly brought you to the palace and jeopardized her son’s claim. Which was the exact opposite of what she wanted.”

“That’s true. Although my arrival helped her in one way.” Lifting the Grail a little higher, I said, “My grandfather showed me this. I don’t believe he’d ever shown it to Matilda or her son. And when he showed it to me, he said he didn’t think he’d live much longer.” I had to close my eyes and take a deep breath before I could continue. “I wish I’d known what he meant at the time. It’s like he saw his role in a system, and he’d accepted it completely. And he believed I had a role to play in that system, too.”

“There was nothing you could have done to change that,” Harrison said, nudging me gently with his shoulder. His hands were still bound behind his back. If they weren’t, I thought he might have reached for my hand instead. “You couldn’t have changed his view of the world, and you couldn’t have prevented this. I know old people like him; they’re stubborn and set in



their ways.” His eyes widened and he hastily added, “No offense intended to your late grandfather.”

“No offense taken,” I said. This was the Harrison I knew, the man who was brutally honest, as he’d spent a lifetime not caring about what others felt, so he was unpracticed in navigating the feelings of others. I’d always liked that about him. I’d always understood that about him. In an odd way, it was something we had in common. Returning my attention to Sean, who appeared to be waiting for further explanation of what was going on, I said, “I realize now that I accidentally showed a weakness to Matilda. I asked for her help with a phone, and the questions seemed obvious to her. I know nothing about technology. I told her this. So after the murder, the one piece of evidence is on a computer. She thought I wouldn’t question the video, as I don’t understand it. But really, that is the point. Why should I doubt everything I know about a person I’ve traveled with, while trusting wholeheartedly a technology that I know nothing about? It’s illogical.”

“The video can be tested,” Sean said. “That’s another thing that struck me as odd about this. No expert has reviewed the video yet, to confirm its validity. To make sure it wasn’t tampered with. Why rush to punish the perpetrator, without double checking the evidence first?”

We all knew that answer—because the video was fabricated. I looked at Harrison, and his shoulders were relaxing as much as they could, with his hands still bound behind his back. His name was going to be cleared. That is, if he left this room alive. Then I realized that he might not be the only one in danger, and I said to Sean, “I’m starting to think that if I left this room as I’d told Matilda I would... if I handed her the Grail to give to Edward,



then I wouldn't live much longer. Perhaps she would even have me killed then."

Sean nodded and said, "I fear the same thing. Your grandfather confided in me that he was worried about that. That the past would be repeated. He feared that you would be killed, more than he feared for his own life." Then he surprised me by kneeling before me, in a gesture that made me picture him in armor with a velvet cape draped over his shoulders, rather than the suit he was wearing, and a sword at his hip instead of a gun. He bowed his head slightly as he said, "You are my lady. You are my queen, not Matilda and her son is not my king. You are the one that my late king wanted to inherit his throne. You are the one I want to follow—and I am not the only one."

"How many?" I asked, as I stared into his eyes.

The guard knew what I was asking, and he said, "About half of the palace guards are loyal to you, maybe two thirds. I'm not sure. But if I use the radio, I can signal them. We can take the White Palace for you. Maybe capture your aunt and cousin as well, although the guard with them in the hall now is not one of my men. Allow me to do this for you, my queen."

Looking around the room, I didn't see the people or physical objects before me, but the paths that lay before me. I could see my future on the run if I tried to flee this room—pursued if I stole the Grail, or even if I left it, as Matilda would never let me live. If I handed the Grail to her, I was dead. Perhaps I could live in obscurity on an estate as a servant again... but no, I didn't want that. Maybe Sean and his allies could guard me, but they wanted to guard a queen not a coward. If I chose the clearest option before me, it could mean war, and that should be the hardest



option to pick, not the most obvious. Yet I was tired of watching people suffer and having my loved ones taken from me. If I had to fight back, then that is what I would do.

I walked to approach the door, knowing that those I would be fighting soon were just on the other side of that steel. There was the sound of approaching footsteps, and then Harrison spoke at my shoulder. He said, “That button looks like there’s a speaker beside it. I think if you press it, you can talk to them. If you want to.”

For a moment, I just stared at the button as I imagined all the things I wanted to say to them. I wanted a confession that Matilda had arranged to have my grandfather, father, and mother killed, though I knew she’d never give one. All I’d have were hunches. I wanted to try to work out a peace deal, though I knew that was futile. It only felt like that was something I should try to do, not something that was possible. And I wanted my family back... Matilda and her son were all that was left, but they were about to be my enemies, and this felt like losing the last bit of my family.

Harrison nudged me with his shoulder, jarring me out of my thoughts. He said, “I’m with you, no matter what you decide. Do you want to talk to them?”

I shook my head and turned back to face Sean, who had stood up and was awaiting my decision. I said, “There are things I want to say to them, but that will have to wait. If I talk to them, they might alert the guards who are loyal to them. We need every advantage if we want to keep the White Palace. Radio your men. It’s time to start this fight.”

# EPILOGUE



Less than a week went by before I was notified that our much-expected guests had arrived at the White Palace—the place that was now my home, since those loyal to me had won that night. As soon as I was notified, I hurried down the hallway to the rooms I'd had prepared for them, close enough to the royal physician's office that he could see them if needed. As I turned the corner though, I saw someone I hadn't expected. He was standing outside of one of the rooms, leaning back against the wall. His eyes were on his trainers as they scuffed the carpet idly. He hadn't seen me yet, and my eyes moved across his profile for a moment, just taking pleasure in the sight of his shiny dark hair falling across his forehead, the straight line of his nose with his glasses perched on the bridge, and his lips which he was worrying between his teeth.

For so much of the past week, I had wished he was here. Now he finally was, and the sight of him made the breath catch in my chest. Just for a moment though. As I exhaled slowly, he heard the sound and looked up. I said, "Hello, Raymond."



He blinked, perhaps because he was more accustomed to my insistence on using his last name. Yet he didn't question why I finally felt comfortable using his first name. Raymond smiled at me and said, "Hello, Ellie."

I stopped before him, opening my mouth to say more, but paused when I glanced at the closed door beside him. Either Rufus or Dorothea might be in there, and they needed their rest to heal. Nodding my head in indication, I said, "Would you like to talk down there?"

Raymond followed me down the hall, until we stopped before a window at the end. The afternoon light streamed through the window, bathing him in gold light. Raymond smiled wider as he watched me standing before him. He said, "I can't believe you're here. I mean, I'd heard a little about what was going on. But to see you here in the palace, as the queen... It's just so good to see that you're alright. I've been so worried about you all this time."

"I'd been worried about you, too," I said. "The article in the paper about what happened at the Doolittle estate didn't mention your name. I had no idea if you were dead or alive, until now."

"I was at the hospital," he said. When my eyes widened, he hastily added, "I wasn't hurt. I was at the hospital with Doro. After what happened with her family, I couldn't stand the thought of my student being there all alone, waking up without anyone there at her side. So, I've been at the hospital the entire time, up until someone from the palace arrived, saying the royal physician had offered a transfer here. I came along for Dorothea... and hoped I'd get to see you."



“Thank you, Raymond. For looking after her,” I said. When he reached for my hand on the windowsill, I pulled back. “Raymond, I...”

He didn’t reach for my hand again, though he took a step closer. “I don’t want you to think I’m saying this because you’re the queen. I’m not. I’ve wanted to be with you long before that. I’ve liked you since I first saw you.”

“I know that,” I said.

“I’ve cared about you since you were a servant. This has nothing to do with money or power. I just want to be with you.”

“I know.”

“I’ve always seen you for the wonderful woman you are, Ellie.” He reached for my hand again, and I didn’t pull back this time, but I didn’t return the squeeze he gave my hand.

“I know, Raymond. You saw me when no one else did. And I loved you for that. Even when I didn’t think I was capable of love, I loved you. You are the kindest man I’ve ever met.” It was getting a little bit hard to breathe, so I paused.

Raymond’s face, which had lit up at my words, clouded over when he thought more about that. He asked, “Past tense? You loved me, don’t you love me now?”

“I’m sorry.” I finally gave his hand a squeeze before extracting mine from his grip. “I loved you when I was Ellie the servant girl. I could have loved you for my whole life. But I’m not the same person you knew.”

“I know, you’re the queen now. But that doesn’t matter!” he said quickly, and I got the sense that he wasn’t listening to me completely.



“It matters, but not in the way you mean. Not in the sense of rank and class, which has never stopped us before. I’m saying that I am not the girl you once knew, and I’d be deceiving you if I pretended otherwise.”

Raymond paused, as his green eyes behind the glasses finally focused on me, and I stood still to allow him to assess me. I still wasn’t the best at reading expressions outside of Harrison’s, but I saw it when he noticed it. The change in me. I wasn’t sure exactly what he saw—darkness, loss, strength, or determination—but he didn’t see the same girl he’d once kissed. So little time had passed, but I was a stranger now, on an entirely different path that was leading me away from him. He said, “If you’d never left the estate, we would have probably had a life together.”

This time, I did reach for his hand, now that he wouldn’t misunderstand what the gesture meant. I squeezed his hand once, knowing it would be the last time I held it. I said, “Thank you, for everything you did for me. You were one of the few good things about being there.”

Raymond smiled and gave my hand a squeeze too before releasing it. He said, “I’m happy for you. That you’re not trapped anymore. I wouldn’t have wanted things to be different, if that meant you were still a servant for your entire life.”

For the first time, I returned his smile without feeling the pressure to suppress it. Even if I wasn’t entirely free yet, I couldn’t deny that I was in a better place than before. And it felt good.

\*

After the doctor left Dorothea’s room, I knocked on the door before entering. She was sitting up in bed, with her dog Sandy



at her side, and her eyes widened upon seeing me. I asked, “Is it okay if I come in?”

“Ellie, is that you?” she asked, and her eyes didn’t get any smaller as she took in the brightly colored dress I was wearing. Even if I wasn’t entirely comfortable yet in bright colors, it wouldn’t do for a queen to be seen in less. Doro said, “Mr. Raymond told me that we are in your house, but I didn’t quite believe it yet.”

I wasn’t sure how much else Raymond had told her, but that didn’t matter now. I was here for Dorothea, not to talk about myself. As I settled into the chair, I asked, “How are you doing?”

“How do you think I’m doing?” she snapped testily, sounding like her old self. Then she sighed heavily as all the fight left her, and she answered honestly, “I was just in the hospital for bruises and broken ribs. Nothing too serious. I think they were more worried about me being in shock and having nowhere to go... they burned down my house. Those men... they burned down my house.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said hollowly, and our eyes met. Something passed between us at that glance. A shared loss of the house, which was all either of us had ever known. I said, “I’m sorry.”

“Mother and Althea were in the house. I would have burned with them, if that man hadn’t gotten us out.”

“Raymond?” I asked.

“No, the servant. Rufus. I thought he was dead until he carried me out. Before he could go back in for the others, the roof collapsed. Only Sandy and Mr. Raymond survived,” she said, clutching at the fur of the dog beside her. “My mother and my sister are dead,” she said in an empty voice, like she didn’t quite believe it yet.



“I’m sorry,” I said again, this time reaching for her hand on the bed. It was cold and small, and her fingers didn’t curl around mine, like she didn’t realize my hand was there. “I lost my mother, too. On the same night. They killed her, too.”

“Why did this happen?” Dorothea asked, her wide eyes fixed on my face.

“There were people looking for me, and they hurt everyone in the way. Your mother and sister did nothing to deserve that. You either. If I had known I was endangering the people around me, I wouldn’t have stayed. I’m sorry this happened.”

Dorothea nodded in acceptance of this, and I was surprised to see no hostility in her eyes—at least none that I noticed. Having gotten used to seeing her throw a fit over nothing, it seemed odd that she had no fury in her right now. Her face crumpled as she said, “I’ve lost everything. I’ve lost everyone. My whole family. My home. Nothing is left. Where am I going to go? Who am I going to be with?”

I squeezed her hand harder, trying to show her with pressure that I was here. I said, “You can stay here, with me.”

She shook her head, and I wasn’t sure if she was declining the offer or confused. Dorothea said, “But I was horrible to you. Our whole lives. Why would you even say such a thing? I never treated you like a human. I don’t deserve this. Why would you even offer?”

“It wasn’t our whole lives. Have you forgotten? When we were children, for a time you treated me like a sister. We played together. You were my only friend.” I looked down at our hands, feeling her finally clasp her hand in mine. Staring at our hands, I said, “We both lost everyone, but we don’t also have to lose each



other. You're one of the few people I have who I've known my whole life. I'd like it if you would stay."

Dorothea smiled softly, and some light returned to her blue eyes. She said softly, "I hadn't forgotten those days either. When we were friends. I'd like to stay. Thank you."

\*

It was night, and yet light was all around me. Much like the last horrible time I had been here, the moon was full and bright in the sky, but also there was a circle of cars around me in this gravel parking area beside the road. Some were my security with their watchful eyes on me, others were here to help with the digging, but all had left their headlights on as if they could hasten the sunrise by bringing artificial daylight here.

As I saw a man emerge from the woods down the hiking trail, I stood up from where I had been leaning against the hood of the hearse that would be bringing my mother's body to her final resting place, in the tomb beside my father.

Harrison grinned in relief as he told me, "We found her. They're going to start digging."

I closed my eyes for a moment, just breathing. Part of me had feared that she would be gone, removed by animals or people that discovered her. Or that we'd never be able to find the grave again in this massive forest. Looking at Harrison again, I said, "Thank you. For finding her. For burying her in the first place. For everything."

"It was nothing." He looked away and cleared his throat into his hand.



“Would you like some water? There’s a bottle in the car I came in,” I offered.

“Not sure I should accept that... given the last drink you offered me,” he said, alluding to the Grail.

I froze, until he shot me a wink and chuckled. “Oh, shut up! Now you can’t have any water.”

“That’s cold,” he said with a mock shake of his head. “And here I was running around in a forest for you at night. But you won’t give me a drink?”

“I didn’t see you running. It was just a short walk down the trail. And if you wanted water, you should have been nicer.” I started to walk away, down the slope of gravel that led back to the actual road. When I turned back to face Harrison, I spoke in a more serious tone, “Would you walk with me?”

“Of course,” he said, although he glanced around as he followed me, no doubt knowing that anywhere we went, we’d be observed from afar—or not so afar—by my security lurking in the shadows. When we were a few paces down the road, he asked, “What’s up, buttercup?”

I raised my eyebrows at the nickname but shrugged at the question. A chill breeze whipped past, making me cross my arms over my chest. If I were walking with Raymond, he’d notice and drape his jacket across my shoulders, or pull me close to his side to warm me. Harrison didn’t notice... and yet, I was happy I was walking with Harrison instead. He wasn’t overly chivalrous, like some character that had come to life from a storybook. Instead, he was real. A flawed man. A real person. And I was ready to walk in the real world now, rather than live vicariously through a storybook, and it was nice to have someone real walking beside me.



“You okay?” he asked, as several seconds had gone by without a response. “Stupid question, sorry... we’re digging your mom up tonight.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” I said. “I hated leaving her here all alone. Tonight, we’re making that right by bringing her home. That’s a good thing, and I’m happy we’re digging her up.” I smiled, feeling the truth of those words. It was getting easier with practice to recognize the emotions coursing through me—at least, the easier ones—and to put a name to them. Although it didn’t always feel natural to speak the emotions I was feeling, after a lifetime of having my feelings explained away, I found it was a little easier to do around Harrison. Wanting to open up more to him, I said, “I knew it would be hard to come here, though. The worst thing that has ever happened to me happened here. Yet, I was hoping that if I came here with you, it would be a little bit better.”

“With me? Really? Why?” he asked. “I thought you just wanted me here, to show them where I buried your mother.”

“I’d have wanted you here even if you weren’t the one who buried her, Harrison,” I said, giving a breathy laugh. How could he not see that he was the person who had gotten me through so much? As a shape took form on the side of the road, just a few feet from where we’d started walking at the next gravel parking lot down, I smiled and pointed. “There. Do you see it?”

“What?” he asked, blinking as he turned his head to see where I was pointing. He stared for a moment before speaking in a voice I expected to be much more enthusiastic. “Oh, that looks like my car.”



It took me a few seconds to realize he didn't recognize it. I fished the keys out of the leather pouch I still wore around my neck, and I held them up for him to see. I said, "It is your car."

"What? No... are you serious?" He took the keys slowly from me, like he didn't believe they were real. Harrison squeezed the keys hard in his palm, in a gesture like a person pinching himself to see if he was dreaming. Turning to look at the car again, he asked, "What is it doing here?"

"This is another thing I had to put right. I made some phone calls to get it out of impound, and then had it brought here. I thought you might like to drive it home." I nudged him with my shoulder, as I said, "I'm kind of surprised you're still standing here, when your car is over there."

Chuckling, he stuck his fingers through the keyring and spun it through the air before clutching them in his palm again. Then he ran over to his car while I strolled over slower, allowing him a moment alone to run his hand over the hood, reacquainting himself with the much-missed Cadillac. Then Harrison unlocked the doors, smiling as he turned to me. "Get in," he said.

I did, smiling almost as wide as him because I had done this. I had fixed something, even if it seemed small, but I had done something to make Harrison happy. Life was a collection of moments, and the feelings we experienced in those moments. While I was still sorting through the feelings, putting the names to each of them, I had come to associate memories with places. Here was a place where I laughed. Here was one where I felt sick. And yet another was a place where I cried.

The bad memories would never go away. Yet, balance could be found. Some things that were lost could be replaced with new



memories to balance out the hurt a little bit. I would never again tell my mother ‘Good night’, and I’d never get the chance to say those words to my grandfather, yet there was a new person beside me who I could begin traditions with.

I turned my head that was leaning against the headrest of the seat to face him, as I said, “Hey, Harrison? I just wanted to say goodnight. I hope you have a very good night.”

Harrison had been looking forward, with his hands on the wheel, though the car was turned off except for the interior light, as if he was imagining the places he would drive. At my words, he turned to face me and smiled. He didn’t mock me for my words this time, sensing the weight with which they were spoken. As he took his hands off the wheel, he shifted in his seat to face me fully, and he reached out to trail his fingers through my hair like he couldn’t resist touching me. He said, “Hey. Ellie. I hope you have a good night, too.”

The way he’d said it, repeating my inflection, made it sound like he was wishing me well rather than offering a goodbye, and I liked it. As I had no intention of saying goodbye to him for a long time. I said, “Remember that conversation we were going to have? About us?”

“Yup,” he said, eyeing my lips.

“I think that conversation is a bit overdue now,” I said.

He kissed me.

\*

“The door of the plane has opened!” an unseen broadcaster reported to any members of his audience who might be listening in rather than watching. “I think we’re about to see the royals



exit the aircraft. In a little bit of trivia for you as we wait, this private jet is known as the Voyager, short for the Royal Air Force Voyager.”

The broadcaster sucked in a breath and started speaking faster as if there was a movement in the doorway. The camera also panned in closer, and the feed got a bit grainy. “And here they are, stepping onto the soil of England for the first time, as England awaits its new sovereign. First onto the step of the aircraft, as expected, we have the heir apparent, Edward. While his coronation has not yet taken place, the king is dead and long live the king. Therefore, for all intents and purposes this is our new king returning to claim his throne. Beside him is his mother Matilda, the Duchess of Norfolk, followed closely by the royal consort, James. The royal family is dressed uniformly in black, which is a traditional garment packed in luggage by royals traveling abroad. Unfortunately, this time, the mourning clothes had to be worn upon their return.”

The camera followed Edward, his mother, and his boyfriend as they walked down the stairs from the plane, but they paused nearby and then looked up. The camera panned out so that the view included the door of the plane again. The broadcaster resumed his narration, as a coffin was carried through the doorway and down the steps. “This is a somber occasion indeed, as a fourth member of the family has made his return to the soil of his home. Our great King Richard the VII has returned to his final resting place. There had been speculation about whether the king would be interred beside his ancestors, or if he would choose to be buried beside his son in the Americas. The late Prince of Wales was buried not far from the White Palace, as the king said his son



felt most at home there. But it appears that our late monarch has decided not to be buried with his son, as many speculated that he would want.”

As the coffin filed past soldiers in red who saluted it before it was loaded into a hearse, the camera focused once more on the royal family. James had his hand on Edward’s shoulder and was whispering words into his ear, which of course could not be heard at this distance or over the roar of the plane. The broadcaster said, “This is certainly a grim day, as always is at the start of a new monarch’s reign, with the heavy loss of the previous king or queen. This is what we always hope to see though, a new king surrounded by support. And we have his mother here. The Duchess of Norfolk appears to be giving King Edward some space. Her eyes are on the media, which was allowed to gather just off the tarmac behind a barricade manned by the police.”

The camera panned out further, showing the paparazzi snapping photos of the royals, while police officers walked the line, making sure they stayed back. As the broadcaster’s voice rose in excitement, he said, “And yes! As we were hoping, it looks like we’re going to get a live statement from the royal family today. Here comes the Duchess of Norfolk, approaching the media. She is wearing a black Hugo Boss cocktail dress, embroidered with white along the seams, and her hair is pulled back in a bun. She is stopping a few feet from the barricade—it appears that security won’t allow her to go any closer—but we should be able to hear her from here. She is pulling a piece of paper from her purse. It appears that she has prepared a statement. Let’s listen in.”

The audio switched from the clean, crisp quiet of the broadcaster’s room, to the sounds of the tarmac as the plane’s turbines



whirred, and the people of the press whispered until a hush fell over them as Matilda prepared to speak. Soon, they would be shouting questions to get a quote for their tabloids, but first they would let her talk for herself. She opened her mouth.

The video feed cut away with a hiss, before Matilda could get a word out. One second, she was on the screen, then there was a burst of static as the video cut away.

It cut away to me.

In place of my aunt, I was sitting behind my grandfather's polished wooden desk in the Oval Office. The positioning of the camera here, in a place recently occupied by my grandfather, had seemed a bit on the nose to me—but my advisors assured me that being on the nose was precisely the statement we were looking to make with this broadcast. I was dressed in mourning black as well, with a white lace embellishment around the neckline.

The desk that had been covered by paperwork, photos, and other sentimental items had now been completely cleared, to symbolize a new beginning. I crossed my hands before myself on the top of the desk as I looked directly into the camera, imagining that I was meeting the eyes of every one of the millions of people who would watch this broadcast, either live or when it was re-aired. I started to speak to them—my people, my enemies, and those who had yet to make up their minds.

“Unfortunately, I had to cut off my Aunt Matilda's statement. You see, she was about to tell you a story. I can predict what that story will be, so allow me to summarize it so you have both sides. A few days ago, a girl arrived at the White Palace claiming to be the missing princess, the lost granddaughter of the king. She earned his trust. He showed her all of his secrets. And then the



man that she had seduced murdered our sovereign for her, so that she could attempt to seize power. The Duchess of Norfolk would have told you that she saw through this girl from the start, uncovered this plot, and now her son Edward has returned to take his rightful place on the throne, as our late king had wanted.”

I took a deep breath and briefly closed my eyes before continuing. Then I said, “I am that girl. Allow me to share my story. I was raised believing I was born a servant, the daughter of a servant. My mother, who I knew as Cecelia, was known to you as Princess Priscilla. When she died recently, she told me that I had a family. A grandfather. And having lost everything, I traveled to him picturing all of these impossible things like out of a book—this warm, loving man who would accept me into his home, protect me, and make me feel like family. Yet somehow, impossibly, my grandfather was everything I had pictured and more.”

Taking another deep breath, I allowed the words to hang in the air for a moment. “King Richard the VII was a wonderful man. He was taken from all of us. I came to him for protection and a family, not his throne as my great-aunt would have you believe, as she tells this story. She is the one who has always wanted to rule through her son, as my grandfather suspected, having never named Edward his heir as this would have only hastened his death. I believe my cousin Edward is innocent in this plot and that my grandfather had nothing but affection for him. Perhaps he didn’t want to believe that Matilda wanted him dead. But he knew he would be killed soon, especially now that I had returned to complicate things.”

Looking down at my hands, I said, “I never wanted any of this to happen. For twenty years of my life, I have labored as a



second-class citizen in society, being told what to do every day of my life. I was allowed no thoughts or dreams of my own, and if I had had a wish, it wouldn't have been to be the granddaughter of the king. I wouldn't have sought power if that power meant losing my entire family. But here I am, and they are gone."

My gaze flicked up again, as I imagined staring directly into the eyes of my audience. "Our king has been murdered by a woman who wanted his throne, but it was not me. For this reason, I cannot let her have it, even by proxy. But more so, I cannot let her have her way if that means our world will remain as it is, stuck in this endless division of classes. I am not a servant, as I was raised to believe in order to hide me from those who murdered my father too—those who I suspect were the same who killed our king. I am not a servant, but now that I have a choice, I chose to be one again. Not in the sense of the word that we are accustomed to; I will keep my soul. But I will serve my people. I will change the lives of those that the Grail has impacted, by serving the public. I will be your queen, even if it means war."

\*

"You called for me, my Queen?" Rufus said with a slight bow, as he entered the family treasure room where I'd requested that he be brought, if he had healed enough to walk.

I had been examining the Grail, thinking about that story that Rufus once told me. It was still unclear if the Grail really was a holy relic, as generations of propaganda had promulgated, or if its powers had any basis in science. The only thing that was clear was that it worked. There were instructions carved into the box it was kept in, and also on the books on shelves nearby as



my grandfather had promised. As soon as I made some sense of them, I asked for Rufus to be brought here.

“Yes. You don’t have to call me that though. I’m still Ellie to you.” I gestured to the box. “I’ve just been looking at this thing and reading about it. It’s hard to believe that this object is the reason why I’m alone right now. My mother, my father, and even my grandfather are all dead because of it. And I don’t entirely understand it now, and I doubt I ever will. It has caused so much suffering over millennia, and we don’t even know for sure where it came from, or how it works.”

Rufus didn’t comment; he just watched me with the impassive face of a servant, though I knew he was so much more.

I picked it up and held it before myself. “This is the cup that took my mother’s soul. This is the reason why she couldn’t love me anymore, when she was raising me. Is my mother’s soul still here, trapped inside this thing? If I toss it into the fire until it melts down, will that release her soul and the souls of everyone else which were taken? What do you think? I’ve been staring at this thing for the past hour, and I can’t make up my mind about that.”

Rufus’s eyes widened and he took a step forward. I couldn’t tell if he wanted it to be true or not. In a halting cadence, he said, “I don’t know...”

I stepped closer to the fireplace, watching the flame as I felt the metal of the Grail warm from my body heat. With one toss, it would be fire warming the thing instead, and all the pretty rubies around the sides of it would be sitting in a puddle soon. I said, “I’ve never been able to do much for my mother. She gave up her soul, so she could look after me. I didn’t ask her to do that,



but now I might have a chance to give it back to her. It would be wrong of me to turn my back on this chance to set her free.” My hands tightened around the metal, and I squeezed my eyes shut. “And yet, I can’t do it. I need to use this cup to change this world for the better. I can’t destroy it yet. I need the power of the Grail for now, since it’s all that’s holding me in my position. Maybe once I’ve accomplished what I have set out to do, I will destroy it. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Mother...”

“You don’t have to apologize to her. She did what she thought she had to do, and she understands you are doing the same.” A warm hand clasped my shoulder, and when I turned around, I saw Rufus. He was kind and comforting, even without his soul telling him how to relate to what I was feeling. It was time to fix that. Curiously, I asked, “Why did you come to the farm, following my mother? After everything... even after my grandfather took your soul? He told me what happened. After he punished you like that, why protect me and my mother?”

Rufus squeezed my shoulder before releasing it. He explained, “Even though your emotions are gone, your loyalty isn’t. Your sense of morality is not taken with your soul, and what happened to your parents was wrong. I had lost my heart and didn’t have that to guide me, but my consciousness remained. I had to do something, anything, and so I came to help you. It was the only thing that made sense to do, in my view of the world. I think that’s what guided your mother as well. She stayed loyal to you. Her worldview remained centered around you, even after everything that happened to her. And so, she protected you.”

I swallowed heavily, and it was a moment before I could speak. Finally, I said, “Rufus, I didn’t just call you here to ask you about



your past. I was reading about the Grail, and I saw something that you should know about. It turns out that it can do more than just steal a soul—it can also give back what it has taken. And I think it's about time that this awful thing right one of the wrongs it has done. Would you like your soul back?"

Rufus gripped the back of a nearby chair to steady himself from the shock of the question. I was glad I asked, as foolish as the question might be, but this object had changed so many people against their will, and I didn't want to take a choice away from him. He thought about it for a minute, and the only sound was the crackling of the fire. Finally, he said, "When my soul was taken by your grandfather, I was on my knees before him, begging for forgiveness after I was unable to protect his only son. He did not forgive me, and I hadn't expected him to—he made me a servant as punishment for failing his son, and at the time I felt I deserved that punishment. I still do."

I reached out to touch his arm, and he met my eyes. I smiled at him, an expression I wanted to see on his face, too. "My grandfather might not have forgiven you for my father's death, but I do. I never met my father, but you were there for me. Your presence in my life made up for the father who wasn't in my life, and I want to do this to thank you for that. Let me do this?"

He stared at the Grail, but he still seemed to hesitate. Rufus said, "My Queen, I want to serve you. I want that more than I want my soul. I could better serve you without my soul. You will have a bodyguard with no fear of death and no regard for pain. I will never let anyone lay a harmful hand on you. I don't want to fail you... like I did your father."



“Rufus, you could never fail me. And I don’t want a servant. I don’t *need* a servant. I need an advisor. I need a general. But more than anything, I need a friend.” I beamed at him, as he met my eyes again. “And what kind of friend would I be, if I let the person who I want to call friend continue to suffer without his soul?”

Rufus swallowed heavily before nodding. “As you wish, my Queen. I will take back my soul and call you a friend.”

I extended the Grail, the thing that had taken so much, now finally ready to restore some small piece of what it had stolen. It would just be the beginning.

In a society where the soulless are condemned to lifelong servitude, 20-year-old Ellie has resigned herself to her fate as a servant. Nearly a thousand years ago, events took place which resulted in the emergence of a servant class. One country, which is in control of the servant class, has risen to power on the global scale. The servant class is immune to pain and feels no fear, making them the ideal soldiers for global conquest, but many more are also owned by the wealthy as servants. It's a large world out there, but all that Ellie thinks she will ever see is the view from the windows of the house she cleans. She has never set foot off the property where she works. She is brilliant, and yet will never have a chance to utilize her mind. Any children she has will be servants like her. She craves a loving relationship with her cold and distant mother, despite being raised with the knowledge that servants like them are incapable of feeling love. Ellie can clearly see how the decades of her life will play out, as she spends every day of the rest of her days trapped in the house she is forced to clean. Yet, there is something she could never have foreseen – a family secret which will alter the course of not just Ellie's life, but the entire world. The girl who was raised feeling trapped in a system might just find that she has the power to bring the entire thing down.



Since graduating from Towson University in 2014 with a BS in English, I have worked as a freelance editor and for Cloudmed Solutions LLC as a Recovery Analyst. My poetry has been published by the WILDsound Writing Festival, Sheepshead Review, and a German poetry anthology by Poet's Choice. My short stories have been published by Grub Street Literary Magazine, Levitate Magazine, OFIC Magazine, Marathon Literary, OxMag, HOW Blog, LIGHT, Nat 1, The Write Launch, and also in several anthologies by Free Spirit. One of my recent short story publications "Coffin Bell" won second place in Commuter Lit's Halloween Week 2024 Contest. Additionally, I have self-published a family history book, Making Port: the History of a Baltimore Family.

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