

For Samuel

CHAPTER 1

When I was a kid, my mom constantly invented games. The Quiet Game. The Who Can Make Their Cookie Last Longer? Game. A perennial favorite, The Marshmallow Game involved eating marshmallows while wearing puffy Goodwill jackets indoors, to avoid turning on the heat. The Flashlight Game was what we played when the electricity went out. We never walked anywhere—we raced. The floor was nearly always lava. The primary purpose of pillows was building forts.

Our longest-lasting game was called I Have A Secret, because my mom said that everyone should always have at least one. Some days she guessed mine. Some days she didn't. We played every week, right up until I was fifteen and one of her secrets landed her in the hospital.

The next thing I knew, she was gone.

"Your move, princess." A gravelly voice dragged me back to the present. "I don't have all day."

"Not a princess," I retorted, sliding one of my knights into place. "Your move, *old man*."

Harry scowled at me. I didn't know how old he was, really, and

I had no idea how he'd come to be homeless and living in the park where we played chess each morning. I did know that he was a formidable opponent.

"You," he grumbled, eyeing the board, "are a horrible person."

Three moves later, I had him. "Checkmate. You know what that means, Harry."

He gave me a dirty look. "I have to let you buy me breakfast." Those were the terms of our long-standing bet. When I won, he couldn't turn down the free meal.

To my credit, I only gloated a little. "It's good to be queen."



I made it to school on time but barely. I had a habit of cutting things close. I walked the same tightrope with my grades: How little effort could I put in and still get an A? I wasn't lazy. I was practical. Picking up an extra shift was worth trading a 98 for a 92.

I was in the middle of drafting an English paper in Spanish class when I was called to the office. Girls like me were supposed to be invisible. We didn't get summoned for sit-downs with the principal. We made exactly as much trouble as we could afford to make, which in my case was none.

"Avery." Principal Altman's greeting was not what one would call warm. "Have a seat."

I sat.

He folded his hands on the desk between us. "I assume you know why you're here."

Unless this was about the weekly poker game I'd been running in the parking lot to finance Harry's breakfasts—and sometimes my own—I had no idea what I'd done to draw the administration's attention. "Sorry," I said, trying to sound sufficiently meek, "but I don't."

Principal Altman let me sit with my response for a moment,

then presented me with a stapled packet of paper. “This is the physics test you took yesterday.”

“Okay,” I said. That wasn’t the response he was looking for, but it was all I had. For once, I’d actually studied. I couldn’t imagine I’d done badly enough to merit intervention.

“Mr. Yates graded the tests, Avery. Yours was the only perfect score.”

“Great,” I said, in a deliberate effort to keep myself from saying *okay* again.

“Not great, young lady. Mr. Yates intentionally creates exams that challenge the abilities of his students. In twenty years, he’s never given a perfect score. Do you see the problem?”

I couldn’t quite bite back my instinctive reply. “A teacher who designs tests most of his students can’t pass?”

Mr. Altman narrowed his eyes. “You’re a good student, Avery. Quite good, given your circumstances. But you don’t exactly have a history of setting the curve.”

That was fair, so why did I feel like he’d gut-punched me?

“I am not without sympathy for your situation,” Principal Altman continued, “but I need you to be straight with me here.” He locked his eyes onto mine. “Were you aware that Mr. Yates keeps copies of all his exams on the cloud?” He thought I’d cheated. He was sitting there, staring me down, and I’d never felt less seen. “I’d like to help you, Avery. You’ve done extremely well, given the hand life has dealt you. I would hate to see any plans you might have for the future derailed.”

“Any plans I *might* have?” I repeated. If I’d had a different last name, if I’d had a dad who was a dentist and a mom who stayed home, he wouldn’t have acted like the future was something I *might* have thought about. “I’m a junior,” I gritted out. “I’ll graduate next year with at least two semesters’ worth of college credit. My test

scores should put me in scholarship contention at UConn, which has one of the top actuarial science programs in the country.”

Mr. Altman frowned. “Actuarial science?”

“Statistical risk assessment.” It was the closest I could come to double-majoring in poker and math. Besides, it was one of the most employable majors on the planet.

“Are you a fan of calculated risks, Ms. Grambs?”

Like cheating? I couldn’t let myself get any angrier. Instead, I pictured myself playing chess. I marked out the moves in my mind. Girls like me didn’t get to explode. “I didn’t cheat.” I said calmly. “I studied.”

I’d scraped together time—in other classes, between shifts, later at night than I should have stayed up. Knowing that Mr. Yates was infamous for giving impossible tests had made me want to redefine *possible*. For once, instead of seeing how close I could cut it, I’d wanted to see how far I could go.

And *this* was what I got for my effort, because girls like me didn’t ace impossible exams.

“I’ll take the test again,” I said, trying not to sound furious, or worse, wounded. “I’ll get the same grade again.”

“And what would you say if I told you that Mr. Yates had prepared a new exam? All new questions, every bit as difficult as the first.”

I didn’t even hesitate. “I’ll take it.”

“That can be arranged tomorrow during third period, but I have to warn you that this will go significantly better for you if—”

Now.”

Mr. Altman stared at me. “Excuse me?”

Forget sounding meek. Forget being invisible. “I want to take the new exam right here, in your office, right now.”

CHAPTER 2

Rough day?” Libby asked. My sister was seven years older than me and way too empathetic for her own good—or mine.

“I’m fine,” I replied. Recounting my trip to Altman’s office would only have worried her, and until Mr. Yates graded my second test there was nothing anyone could do. I changed the subject. “Tips were good tonight.”

“How good?” Libby’s sense of style resided somewhere between punk and goth, but personality-wise, she was the kind of eternal optimist who believed a hundred-dollar-tip was always just around the corner at a hole-in-the-wall diner where most entrees cost \$6.99.

I pressed a wad of crumpled singles into her hand. “Good enough to help make rent.”

Libby tried to hand the money back, but I moved out of reach before she could. “I will throw this cash at you,” she warned sternly.

I shrugged. “I’d dodge.”

“You’re impossible.” Libby grudgingly put the money away, produced a muffin tin out of nowhere, and fixed me with a look. “You *will* accept this muffin to make it up to me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I went to take it from her outstretched hand, but then I looked past her to the counter and realized she’d baked more than muffins. There were also cupcakes. I felt my stomach plummet. “Oh no, Lib.”

“It’s not what you think,” Libby promised. She was an apology cupcake baker. A guilty cupcake baker. A please-don’t-be-mad-at-me cupcake baker.

“Not what I think?” I repeated softly. “So he’s not moving back in?”

“It’s going to be different this time,” Libby promised. “And the cupcakes are chocolate!”

My favorite.

“It’s never going to be different,” I said, but if I’d been capable of making her believe that, she’d have believed it already.

Right on cue, Libby’s on-again, off-again boyfriend—who had a fondness for punching walls and extolling his own virtues for not punching Libby—strolled in. He snagged a cupcake off the counter and let his gaze rake over me. “Hey, jailbait.”

“Drake,” Libby said.

“I’m kidding.” Drake smiled. “You know I’m kidding, Libby-mine. You and your sister just need to learn how to take a joke.”

One minute in, and he was already making us the problem. “This is not healthy,” I told Libby. He hadn’t wanted her to take me in—and he’d never stopped punishing her for it.

“This is not your apartment,” Drake shot back.

“Avery’s my sister,” Libby insisted.

“Half sister,” Drake corrected, and then he smiled again. “Joking.”

He wasn’t, but he also wasn’t wrong. Libby and I shared an absent father, but had different moms. We’d only seen each other once or twice a year growing up. No one had expected her to take

custody of me two years earlier. She was young. She was barely scraping by. But she was *Libby*. Loving people was what she did.

“If Drake’s staying here,” I told her quietly, “then I’m not.”

Libby picked up a cupcake and cradled it in her hands. “I’m doing the best I can, Avery.”

She was a people pleaser. Drake liked putting her in the middle. He used me to hurt her.

I couldn’t just wait around for the day he stopped punching *walls*.

“If you need me,” I told Libby, “I’ll be living in my car.”

CHAPTER 3

My ancient Pontiac was a piece of junk, but at least the heater worked. Mostly. I parked at the diner, around the back, where no one would see me. Libby texted, but I couldn't bring myself to text back, so I ended up just staring at my phone instead. The screen was cracked. My data plan was practically non-existent, so I couldn't go online, but I did have unlimited texts.

Besides Libby, there was exactly one person in my life worth texting. I kept my message to Max short and sweet: *You-know-who is back.*

There was no immediate response. Max's parents were big on "phone-free" time and confiscated hers frequently. They were also infamous for intermittently monitoring her messages, which was why I hadn't named Drake and wouldn't type a word about where I was spending the night. Neither the Liu family nor my social worker needed to know that I wasn't where I was supposed to be.

Setting my phone down, I glanced at my backpack in the passenger seat, but decided that the rest of my homework could wait for morning. I laid my seat back and closed my eyes but couldn't sleep, so I reached into the glove box and retrieved the only thing

of value that my mother had left me: a stack of postcards. Dozens of them. Dozens of places we'd planned to go together.

Hawaii. New Zealand. Machu Picchu. Staring at each of the pictures in turn, I imagined myself anywhere but here. Tokyo. Bali. Greece. I wasn't sure how long I'd been lost in thought when my phone beeped. I picked it up and was greeted by Max's response to my message about Drake.

That mother-faxer. And then, a moment later: *Are you okay?*

Max had moved away the summer after eighth grade. Most of our communication was written, and she refused to write curse words, lest her parents see them.

So she got creative.

I'm fine, I wrote back, and that was all the impetus she needed to unleash her righteous fury on my behalf.

THAT FAXING CHIPHEAD CAN GO STRAIGHT TO ELF AND EAT A BAG OF DUCKS!!!

A second later, my phone rang. "Are you really okay?" Max asked when I answered.

I looked back down at the postcards in my lap, and the muscles in my throat tightened. I would make it through high school. I'd apply for every scholarship I qualified for. I'd get a marketable degree that allowed me to work remotely and paid me well.

I'd travel the world.

I let out a long, jagged breath, and then answered Max's question. "You know me, Maxine. I always land on my feet."

CHAPTER 4

The next day, I paid a price for sleeping in my car. My whole body ached, and I had to shower after gym, because paper towels in the bathroom at the diner could only go so far. I didn't have time to dry my hair, so I arrived at my next class sopping wet. It wasn't my best look, but I'd gone to school with the same kids my whole life. I was wallpaper.

No one was looking.

"*Romeo and Juliet* is littered with proverbs—small, pithy bits of wisdom that make a statement about the way the world and human nature work." My English teacher was young and earnest, and I deeply suspected she'd had too much coffee. "Let's take a step back from Shakespeare. Who can give me an example of an everyday proverb?"

Beggars can't be choosers, I thought, my head pounding and water droplets dripping down my back. *Necessity is the mother of invention*. *If wishes were horses, beggars would ride*.

The door to the classroom opened. An office aide waited for the teacher to look at her, then announced loudly enough for the whole class to hear, "Avery Grambs is wanted in the office."

I took that to mean that someone had graded my test.



I knew better than to expect an apology, but I also wasn't expecting Mr. Altman to meet me at his secretary's desk, beaming like he'd just had a visit from the Pope. "Avery!"

An alarm went off in the back of my head, because no one was ever that glad to see me.

"Right this way." He opened the door to his office, and I caught sight of a familiar neon-blue ponytail inside.

"Libby?" I said. She was wearing skull-print scrubs and no makeup, both of which suggested she'd come straight from work. In the middle of a shift. Orderlies at assisted living facilities couldn't just walk out in the middle of shifts.

Not unless something was wrong.

"Is Dad..." I couldn't make myself finish the question.

"Your father is fine." The voice that issued that statement didn't belong to Libby or Principal Altman. My head whipped up, and I looked past my sister. The chair behind the principal's desk was occupied—by a guy not much older than me. *What is going on here?*

He was wearing a suit. He looked like the kind of person who should have had an entourage.

"As of yesterday," he continued, his low, rich voice measured and precise, "Ricky Grambs was alive, well, and safely passed out in a motel room in Michigan, an hour outside of Detroit."

I tried not to stare at him—and failed. *Light hair. Pale eyes. Features sharp enough to cut rocks.*

"How could you possibly know that?" I demanded. *I didn't even know where my deadbeat father was. How could he?*

The boy in the suit didn't answer my question. Instead, he

arched an eyebrow. “Principal Altman?” he said. “If you could give us a moment?”

The principal opened his mouth, presumably to object to being removed from his own office, but the boy’s eyebrow lifted higher.

“I believe we had an agreement.”

Altman cleared his throat. “Of course.” And just like that, he turned and walked out the door. It closed behind him, and I resumed openly staring at the boy who’d banished him.

“You asked how I know where you father is.” His eyes were the same color as his suit—gray, bordering on silver. “It would be best, for the moment, for you to just assume that I know everything.”

His voice would have been pleasant to listen to if it weren’t for the words. “A guy who thinks he knows everything,” I muttered. “That’s new.”

“A girl with a razor-sharp tongue,” he returned, silver eyes focused on mine, the ends of his lips ticking upward.

“Who are you?” I asked. “And what do you want?” *With me*, something inside me added. *What do you want with me?*

“All I want,” he said, “is to deliver a message.” For reasons I couldn’t quite pinpoint, my heart started beating faster. “One that has proven rather difficult to send via traditional means.”

“That might be my fault,” Libby volunteered sheepishly beside me.

“What might be your fault?” I turned to look at her, grateful for an excuse to look away from Gray Eyes and fighting the urge to glance back.

“The first thing you need to know,” Libby said, as earnestly as anyone wearing skull-print scrubs had ever said anything, “is that I had *no* idea the letters were real.”

“What letters?” I asked. I was the only person in this room who

didn't know what was going on here, and I couldn't shake the feeling that not knowing was a liability, like standing on train tracks but not knowing which direction the train was coming from.

"The letters," the boy in the suit said, his voice wrapping around me, "that my grandfather's attorneys have been sending, certified mail, to your residence for the better part of three weeks."

"I thought they were a scam," Libby told me.

"I assure you," the boy replied silkily, "they are not."

I knew better than to put any confidence in the assurances of good-looking guys.

"Let me start again." He folded his hands on the desk between us, the thumb of his right hand lightly circling the cuff link on his left wrist. "My name is Grayson Hawthorne. I'm here on behalf of McNamara, Ortega, and Jones, a Dallas-based law firm representing my grandfather's estate." Grayson's pale eyes met mine. "My grandfather passed away earlier this month." A weighty pause. "His name was Tobias Hawthorne." Grayson studied my reaction—or, more accurately, the lack thereof. "Does that name mean anything to you?"

The sensation of standing on train tracks was back. "No," I said. "Should it?"

"My grandfather was a very wealthy man, Ms. Grambs. And it appears that, along with our family and people who worked for him for years, you have been named in his will."

I heard the words but couldn't process them. "His *what*?"

"His will," Grayson repeated, a slight smile crossing his lips. "I don't know what he left you, exactly, but your presence is required at the will's reading. We've been postponing it for weeks."

I was an intelligent person, but Grayson Hawthorne might as well have been speaking Swedish.

“Why would your grandfather leave anything to me?” I asked.

Grayson stood. “That’s the question of the hour, isn’t it?” He stepped out from behind the desk, and suddenly I knew *exactly* what direction the train was coming from.

His.

“I’ve taken the liberty of making travel arrangements on your behalf.”

This wasn’t an invitation. It was a *summons*. “What makes you think—” I started to say, but Libby cut me off. “Great!” she said, giving me a healthy side-eye.

Grayson smirked. “I’ll give you two a moment.” His eyes lingered on mine too long for comfort, and then, without another word, he strode out the door.

Libby and I were silent for a full five seconds after he was gone. “Don’t take this the wrong way,” she whispered finally, “but I think he might be God.”

I snorted. “He certainly thinks so.” It was easier to ignore the effect he’d had on me now that he was gone. What kind of person had self-assurance that absolute? It was there in every aspect of his posture and word choice, in every interaction. Power was as much a fact of life for this guy as gravity. The world bent to the will of Grayson Hawthorne. What money couldn’t buy him, those eyes probably did.

“Start from the beginning,” I told Libby. “And don’t leave anything out.”

She fidgeted with the inky-black tips of her blue ponytail. “A couple of weeks ago, we started getting these letters—addressed to you, care of me. They said that you’d inherited money, gave us a number to call. I thought they were a scam. Like one of those emails that claims to be from a foreign prince.”

“Why would this Tobias Hawthorne—a man I’ve never met, never even heard of—put me in his will?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Libby said, “but *that*”—she gestured in the direction Grayson had gone—“is not a scam. Did you *see* the way he dealt with Principal Altman? What do you think their agreement was? A bribe . . . or a threat?”

Both. Pushing down that response, I pulled out my phone and connected to the school’s Wi-Fi. One internet search for Tobias Hawthorne later, the two of us were reading a news headline: *Noted Philanthropist Dies at 78.*

“Do you know what *philanthropist* means?” Libby asked me seriously. “It means *rich*.”

“It means someone who gives to charity,” I corrected her.

“So . . . *rich*.” Libby gave me a look. “What if *you* are charity? They wouldn’t send this guy’s grandson to get you if he’d just left you a few hundred dollars. We must be talking thousands. You could travel, Avery, or put it toward college, or buy a better car.”

I could feel my heart starting to beat faster again. “Why would a total stranger leave me anything?” I reiterated, resisting the urge to daydream, even for a second, because if I started, I wasn’t sure I could stop.

“Maybe he knew your mom?” Libby suggested. “I don’t know, but I do know that you need to go to the reading of that will.”

“I can’t just take off,” I told her. “Neither can you.” We’d both miss work. I’d miss class. And yet . . . if nothing else, a trip would get Libby away from Drake, at least temporarily.

And if this is real . . . It was already getting harder *not* to think about the possibilities.

“My shifts are covered for the next two days,” Libby informed me. “I made some calls, and so are yours.” She reached for my

hand. "Come on, Ave. Wouldn't it be nice to take a trip, just you and me?"

She squeezed my hand. After a moment, I squeezed back. "Where exactly is the reading of the will?"

"Texas!" Libby grinned. "And they didn't just book our tickets. They booked them *first class*."

CHAPTER 5

I'd never flown before. Looking down from ten thousand feet, I could imagine myself going farther than Texas. Paris. Bali. Machu Picchu. Those had always been *someday* dreams.

But now . . .

Beside me, Libby was in heaven, sipping on a complimentary cocktail. "Picture time," she declared. "Smoosh in and hold up your warm nuts."

On the other side of the aisle, a lady shot Libby a disapproving look. I wasn't sure whether the target of her disapproval was Libby's hair, the camo-print jacket she'd changed into when she'd ditched her scrubs, her metal-studded choker, the selfie she was attempting to take, or the volume with which she'd just said the phrase *warm nuts*.

Adopting my haughtiest look, I leaned toward my sister and raised my warm nuts high.

Libby laid her head on my shoulder and snapped the pic. She turned the phone to show me. "I'll send it to you when we land." The smile on her face wavered, just for a second. "Don't put it online, okay?"

Drake doesn't know where you are, does he? I bit back the

urge to remind her that she was allowed to have a life. I didn't want to argue. "I won't." That wasn't any big sacrifice on my part. I had social media accounts, but I mostly used them to DM Max.

And speaking of... I pulled my phone out. I'd put it in airplane mode, which meant no texting, but first class offered free Wi-Fi. I sent Max a quick update on what had happened, then spent the rest of the flight obsessively reading up on Tobias Hawthorne.

He'd made his money in oil, then diversified. I'd expected, based on the way Grayson had said his grandfather was a "wealthy" man and the newspaper's use of the word *philanthropist*, that he was some kind of millionaire.

I was wrong.

Tobias Hawthorne wasn't just "wealthy" or "well-off." There weren't any polite terms for what Tobias Hawthorne was, other than really insert-expletive-of-your-choice-here filthy rich. Billions, with a *b* and plural. He was the ninth-richest person in the United States and the richest man in the state of Texas.

Forty-six point two billion dollars. That was his net worth. As far as numbers went, it didn't even sound real. Eventually, I stopped wondering why a man I'd never met would have left me something—and started wondering how much.

Max messaged back right before landing: *Are you foxing with me, beach?*

I grinned. *No. I am legit on a plane to Texas right now. Getting ready to land.*

Max's only response was: *Holy ship.*



A dark-haired woman in an all-white power suit met Libby and me the second we stepped past security. "Ms. Grambs." She nodded to

me, then to Libby, as she added on a second identical greeting. “Ms. Grambs.” She turned, expecting us to follow. To my chagrin, we both did. “I’m Alisa Ortega,” she said, “from McNamara, Ortega, and Jones.” Another pause, then she cast a sideways glance at me. “You are a very hard young woman to get ahold of.”

I shrugged. “I live in my car.”

“She doesn’t *live* there,” Libby said quickly. “Tell her you don’t.”

“We’re so glad you could make it.” Alisa Ortega, from McNamara, Ortega, and Jones, didn’t wait for me to tell her anything. I had the sense that my half of this conversation was perfunctory. “During your time in Texas, you’re to consider yourselves guests of the Hawthorne family. I’ll be your liaison to the firm. Anything you need while you’re here, come to me.”

Don’t lawyers bill by the hour? I thought. How much was this personal pickup costing the Hawthorne family? I didn’t even consider the option that this woman might not be a lawyer. She looked to be in her late twenties. Talking to her gave me the same feeling as talking to Grayson Hawthorne. She was *someone*.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Alisa Ortega asked, striding toward an automatic door, her pace not slowing at all when it seemed like the door might not open in time.

I waited until I’d made sure she wasn’t going to run smack into the glass before I replied. “How about some information?”

“You’ll have to be a bit more specific.”

“Do you know what’s in the will?” I asked.

“I do not.” She gestured to a black sedan idling near the curb. She opened the back door for me. I slid in, and Libby followed suit. Alisa sat in the front passenger seat. The driver’s seat was already occupied. I tried to see the driver but couldn’t make out much of his face.

“You’ll find out what’s in the will soon enough,” Alisa said, the words as crisp and neat as that dare-the-devil-to-ruin-it white suit. “We all will. The reading is scheduled for shortly after your arrival at Hawthorne House.”

Not *the Hawthornes’ house*. Just *Hawthorne House*, like it was some kind of English manor, complete with a name.

“Is that where we’ll be staying?” Libby asked. “Hawthorne House?”

Our return tickets had been booked for tomorrow. We’d packed for an overnight.

“You’ll have your pick of bedrooms,” Alisa assured us. “Mr. Hawthorne bought the land the House is built on more than fifty years ago and spent every one of those years adding onto the architectural marvel he built there. I’ve lost track of the total number of bedrooms, but it’s upward of thirty. Hawthorne House is... quite something.”

That was the most information we’d gotten out of her yet. I pressed my luck. “I’m guessing Mr. Hawthorne was *quite something*, too?”

“Good guess,” Alisa said. She glanced back at me. “Mr. Hawthorne was fond of good guessers.”

An eerie feeling washed over me then, almost like a premonition. *Is that why he chose me?*

“How well did you know him?” Libby asked beside me.

“My father has been Tobias Hawthorne’s attorney since before I was born.” Alisa Ortega wasn’t power-talking now. Her voice was soft. “I spent a lot of time at Hawthorne House growing up.”

He wasn’t just a client to her, I thought. “Do you have any idea why I’m here?” I asked. “Why he’d leave me anything at all?”

“Are you the world-saving type?” Alisa asked, like that was a perfectly ordinary question.

“No?” I guessed.

“Ever had your life ruined by someone with the last name Hawthorne?” Alisa continued.

I stared at her, then managed to answer more confidently this time. “No.”

Alisa smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. “Lucky you.”

CHAPTER 6

Hawthorne House sat on a hill. Massive. Sprawling. It looked like a castle—more suited to royalty than ranch country. There were a half dozen cars parked out front and one beat-up motorcycle that looked like it should be dismantled and sold for parts.

Alisa eyed the bike. “Looks like Nash made it home.”

“Nash?” Libby asked.

“The oldest Hawthorne grandson,” Alisa replied, tearing her gaze from the motorcycle and staring up at the castle. “There are four of them total.”

Four grandsons. I couldn't keep my mind from going back to the one Hawthorne I'd already met. *Grayson.* The perfectly tailored suit. The silvery gray eyes. The arrogance in the way he'd told me to assume he knew everything.

Alisa gave me a knowing look. “Take it from someone who's both been there and done that—never lose your heart to a Hawthorne.”

“Don't worry,” I told her, as annoyed with her assumption as I was with the fact that she'd been able to see any trace of my thoughts on my face. “I keep mine under lock and key.”



The foyer was bigger than some houses—easily a thousand square feet, like the person who had built it was afraid that the entryway might have to double as a place to host balls. Stone archways lined the foyer on either side, and the room stretched up two stories to an ornate ceiling, elaborately carved from wood. Even just looking up took my breath away.

“You’ve arrived.” A familiar voice drew my attention back down to earth. “And right on time. I trust there were no problems with your flight?”

Grayson Hawthorne was wearing a different suit now. This one was black—and so were his shirt and his tie.

“You.” Alisa greeted him with a steely-eyed look.

“I take it I’m not forgiven for interfering?” Grayson asked.

“You’re nineteen,” Alisa retorted. “Would it kill you to act like it?”

“It might.” Grayson flashed his teeth in a smile. “And you’re welcome.” It took me a second to realize that by *interfering*, Grayson meant coming to fetch me. “Ladies,” he said, “may I take your coats?”

“I’ll keep mine,” I replied, feeling contrary—and like an extra layer between me and the rest of the world couldn’t hurt.

“And yours?” Grayson asked Libby smoothly.

Still agog at the foyer, Libby shed her coat and handed it to him. Grayson walked underneath one of the stone arches. On the other side, there was a corridor. Small square panels lined the wall. Grayson laid a hand on one panel and pushed. He turned his hand ninety degrees, pushed in the next panel, and then, in a motion too fast for me to decode, hit at least two others. I heard a *pop*, and a door appeared, separating itself from the rest of the wall as it swung open.

“What the . . .” I started to say.

Grayson reached in and pulled out a hanger. “Coat closet.” That wasn’t an explanation. It was a label, like this was any old coat closet in any old house.

Alisa took that as her cue to leave us in Grayson’s capable hands, and I tried to summon up a response that wasn’t just standing there with my mouth open like a fish. Grayson went to close the closet, but a sound from deep within stopped him.

I heard a *creak*, then a *bam*. There was a shuffling sound back behind the coats, and then a figure in shadow pushed through them and stepped out into the light. A boy, maybe my age, maybe a little younger. He was wearing a suit, but that was where the similarities with Grayson ended. This boy’s suit was rumpled, like he’d taken a nap in it—or twenty. The jacket wasn’t buttoned. The tie lying around his neck wasn’t tied. He was tall but had a baby face—and a mop of dark, curly hair. His eyes were light brown and so was his skin.

“Am I late?” he asked Grayson.

“One might suggest that you direct that query toward your watch.”

“Is Jameson here yet?” the dark-haired boy amended his question.

Grayson stiffened. “No.”

The other boy grinned. “Then I’m not late!” He looked past Grayson, to Libby and me. “And these must be our guests! How rude of Grayson not to introduce us.”

A muscle in Grayson’s jaw twitched. “Avery Grambs,” he said formally, “and her sister, Libby. Ladies, this is my brother, Alexander.” For a moment, it seemed like Grayson might leave it there, but then came the eyebrow arch. “Xander is the baby of the family.”

“I’m the handsome one,” Xander corrected. “I know what you’re thinking. This serious bugger beside me can really fill out an

Armani suit. But, I ask you, can he jolt the universe on and up to ten with his smile, like a young Mary Tyler Moore incarnate in the body of a multiracial James Dean?” Xander seemed to have only one mode of speaking: fast. “No,” he answered his own question. “No, he cannot.”

He finally stopped talking long enough for someone else to speak. “It’s nice to meet you,” Libby managed.

“Spend a lot of time in coat closets?” I asked.

Xander dusted his hands off on his pants. “Secret passage,” he said, then attempted to dust off his pant legs with his hands. “This place is full of them.”

CHAPTER 7

My fingers itched to pull out my phone and start taking pictures, but I resisted. Libby had no such compunctions.

“Mademoiselle . . .” Xander side-stepped to block one of Libby’s shots. “May I ask: What are your feelings on roller coasters?”

I thought Libby’s eyes might actually pop out of her head. “This place has a roller coaster?”

Xander grinned. “Not exactly.” The next thing I knew, the “baby” of the Hawthorne family—who was six foot three if he was an inch—was pulling my sister toward the back of the foyer.

I was dumbfounded. *How can a house “not exactly” have a roller coaster?* Beside me, Grayson snorted. I caught him looking at me and narrowed my eyes. “What?”

“Nothing,” Grayson said, the tilt of his lips suggesting otherwise. “It’s just . . . you have a very expressive face.”

No. I didn’t. Libby was always saying that I was hard to read. My poker face had single-handedly been funding Harry’s breakfasts for months. I wasn’t expressive.

There was nothing remarkable about my face.

“I apologize for Xander,” Grayson commented. “He tends not to

buy into such antiquated notions as thinking before one speaks and sitting still for more than three consecutive seconds.” He looked down. “He’s the best of us, even on his worst days.”

“Ms. Ortega said there were four of you.” I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to know more about this family. About *him*. “Four grandsons, I mean.”

“I have three brothers,” Grayson told me. “Same mother, different fathers. Our aunt Zara doesn’t have any children.” He looked past me. “And on the topic of my relations, I feel as though I should issue a second apology, in advance.”

“Gray, darling!” A woman swept up to us in a swirl of fabric and motion. Once her flowy shirt had settled around her, I tried to peg her age. Older than thirty, younger than fifty. Beyond that, I couldn’t tell. “They’re ready for us in the Great Room,” she told Grayson. “Or they will be shortly. Where’s your brother?”

“Specificity, Mother.”

The woman rolled her eyes. “Don’t you ‘Mother’ me, Grayson Hawthorne.” She turned to me. “You’d think he was born wearing that suit,” she said with the air of someone confiding a great secret, “but Gray was my little streaker. A real free spirit. We couldn’t keep clothes on him at all, really, until he was four. Frankly, I didn’t even try.” She paused and assessed me without bothering to hide what she was doing. “You must be Ava.”

“Avery,” Grayson corrected. If he felt any embarrassment about his purported past as a toddler nudist, he didn’t show it. “Her name is Avery, Mother.”

The woman sighed but also smiled, like it was impossible for her to look at her son and not find herself utterly delighted in his presence. “I always swore my children would call me by my first name,” she told me. “I’d raise them as my equals, you know? But

then, I always imagined having girls. Four boys later..." She gave the world's most elegant shrug.

Objectively, Grayson's mother was over the top. But subjectively? She was infectious.

"Do you mind if I ask, dear, when is your birthday?"

The question took me by surprise. I had a mouth. It was fully functioning. But I couldn't keep up with her enough to reply. She put a hand on my cheek. "Scorpio? Or Capricorn? Not a Pisces, clearly—"

"Mother," Grayson said, and then he corrected himself. "*Skye*."

It took me a moment to realize that must be her first name, and that he'd used it to humor her in an attempt to get her to stop astrologically cross-examining me.

"Grayson's a good boy," Skye told me. "Too good." Then she winked at me. "We'll talk."

"I doubt Ms. Grambs plans to stay long enough for a fireside chat—or a tarot reading." A second woman, Skye's age or a little older, inserted herself into our conversation. If Skye was flowy fabric and oversharing, this woman was pencil-skirts and pearls.

"I'm Zara Hawthorne-Calligaris." She eyed me, the expression on her face as austere as her name. "Do you mind if I ask—how did you know my father?"

Silence descended on the cavernous foyer. I swallowed. "I didn't."

Beside me, I could feel Grayson staring again. After a small eternity, Zara offered me a tight smile. "Well, we appreciate your presence. It's been a trying time these past few weeks, as I'm sure you can imagine."

These past few weeks, I filled in, *when no one could get ahold of me*.

"Zara?" A man with slicked-back hair interrupted us, slipping an arm around her waist. "Mr. Ortega would like a word." The man,

who I took to be Zara's husband, didn't spare so much as a glance for me.

Skye made up for it—and then some. “My sister ‘has words’ with people,” she commented. “I have conversations. Lovely conversations. Quite frankly, that's how I ended up with four sons. Wonderful, *intimate* conversations with four fascinating men . . .”

“I will pay you to stop right there,” Grayson said, a pained expression on his face.

Skye patted her son's cheek. “Bribe. Threaten. Buy out. You couldn't be more Hawthorne, darling, if you tried.” She gave me a knowing smile. “That's why we call him the heir apparent.”

There was something in Skye's voice, something about Grayson's expression when his mother said the phrase *heir apparent*, that made me think I had greatly underestimated just how much the Hawthorne family wanted that will read.

They don't know what's in the will, either. I suddenly felt like I'd stepped into an arena, utterly unaware of the rules of the game.

“Now,” Skye said, looping one arm around me and one around Grayson, “why don't we make our way to the Great Room?”

CHAPTER 8

The Great Room was two-thirds the size of the foyer. An enormous stone fireplace stood at the front. There were gargoyles carved into the sides of the fireplace. Literal gargoyles.

Grayson deposited Libby and me into wingback chairs and then excused himself to the front of the room, where three older gentlemen in suits stood, talking to Zara and her husband.

The lawyers, I realized. After another few minutes, Alisa joined them, and I took stock of the other occupants of the room. A White couple, older, in their sixties at least. A Black man, forties, with a military bearing, who stood with his back to a wall and maintained a clear line of sight to both exits. Xander, with what was clearly another Hawthorne brother by his side. This one was older—midtwenties. He needed a haircut and had paired his suit with cowboy boots that, like the motorcycle outside, had seen better days.

Nash, I thought, recalling the name that Alisa had provided.

Finally, an ancient woman joined the fray. Nash offered her an arm, but she took Xander's instead. He led her straight to Libby and me. "This is Nan," he told us. "The woman. The legend."

“Get on with you.” She swatted his arm. “I’m this rascal’s great-grandmother.” Nan settled, with no small difficulty, into the open seat beside me. “Older than dirt and twice as mean.”

“She’s a softy,” Xander assured me cheerfully. “And I’m her favorite.”

“You are *not* my favorite,” Nan grumbled.

“I’m everyone’s favorite!” Xander grinned.

“Far too much like that incorrigible grandfather of yours,” Nan grunted. She closed her eyes, and I saw her hands shake slightly. “Awful man.” There was a tenderness there.

“Was Mr. Hawthorne your son?” Libby asked gently. She worked with the elderly, and she was a good listener.

Nan welcomed the opportunity to snort again. “Son-in-law.”

“He was also her favorite,” Xander clarified. There was something poignant in the way he said it. This wasn’t a funeral. They must have laid the man to rest weeks earlier, but I knew grief, could feel it—could practically *smell* it.

“Are you all right, Ave?” Libby asked beside me. I thought back to Grayson telling me how expressive my face was.

Better to think about Grayson Hawthorne than funerals and grieving.

“I’m fine,” I told Libby. But I wasn’t. Even after two years, missing my mom could hit me like a tsunami. “I’m going to step outside,” I said, forcing a smile. “I just need some air.”

Zara’s husband stopped me on my way out. “Where are you going? We’re about to start.” He locked a hand over my elbow.

I wrenched my arm out of his grasp. I didn’t care who these people were. No one got to lay hands on me. “I was told there are four Hawthorne grandsons,” I said, my voice steely. “By my count, you’re still down by one. I’ll be back in a minute. You won’t even notice I’m gone.”

I ended up in the backyard instead of the front—if you could even call it a yard. The grounds were immaculately kept. There was a fountain. A statue garden. A greenhouse. And stretching into the distance, as far as I could see, *land*. Some of it was treed. Some was open. But it was easy enough, standing there and looking out, to imagine that a person who walked off to the horizon might never make their way back.

“If *yes* is *no* and *once* is *never*, then how many sides does a triangle have?” The question came from above me. I looked up and saw a boy sitting on the edge of a balcony overhead, balanced precariously on a wrought-iron railing. *Drunk*.

“You’re going to fall,” I told him.

He smirked. “An interesting proposition.”

“That wasn’t a proposition,” I said.

He offered me a lazy grin. “There’s no shame in propositioning a Hawthorne.” He had hair darker than Grayson’s and lighter than Xander’s. He wasn’t wearing shirt.

Always a good decision in the middle of winter, I thought acerbically, but I couldn’t keep my gaze from traveling downward from his face. His torso was lean, his stomach defined. He had a long, thin scar that ran from collarbone to hip.

“You must be Mystery Girl,” he said.

“I’m Avery,” I corrected. I’d come out here to get away from the Hawthornes and their grief. There wasn’t a trace of a care on this boy’s face, like life was one grand lark. Like he wasn’t grieving just as much as the people inside were.

“Whatever you say, M.G.,” he retorted. “Can I call you M.G., Mystery Girl?”

I crossed my arms. “No.”

He brought his feet up to the railing and stood. He wobbled, and I had a moment of chilling prescience. *He’s grieving, and he’s*

too high up. I hadn't allowed myself to self-destruct when my mom died. That didn't mean I hadn't felt the call.

He shifted his weight to one foot and held the other out.

"Don't!" Before I could say anything else, the boy twisted and grabbed the railing with his hands, holding himself vertical, feet in the air. I could see the muscles in his back tensing, rippling over his shoulder blades, as he lowered himself . . . and dropped.

He landed right beside me. "You shouldn't be out here, M.G."

I wasn't the shirtless one who'd just jumped off a balcony. "Neither should you."

I wondered if he could tell how fast my heart was beating. I wondered if his was racing at all.

"If I do what I should no more often than I say what I shouldn't"—his lips twisted—"then what does that make me?"

Jameson Hawthorne, I thought. Up close, I could make out the color of his eyes: a dark, fathomless green.

"What," he repeated intently, "does that make me?"

I stopped looking at his eyes. And his abs. And his haphazardly gelled hair. "Drunk," I said, and then, because I could sense an annoying comeback coming, I added two more words. "And two."

"What?" Jameson Hawthorne said.

"The answer to your first riddle," I told him. "If *yes* is *no* and *once* is *never*, then the number of sides a triangle has . . . is . . . *two*." I drew out my reply, not bothering to explain how I'd arrived at my answer.

"Touché, M.G." Jameson ambled past me, brushing his bare arm lightly over mine as he did. "Touché."