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CHAPTER 1

Tell me again about the first time the two of you played chess in the park.” Jameson’s face was candlelit, but even in the scant light, I could see the gleam in his dark green eyes.

There was nothing—and no one—that set Jameson Hawthorne’s blood pumping like a mystery.

“It was right after my mother’s funeral,” I said. “A few days, maybe a week.”

The two of us were in the tunnels beneath Hawthorne House—alone, where no one else could hear us. It had been less than a month since I’d first stepped into the palatial Texas mansion and a week since we’d solved the mystery of why I’d been brought there.

If we’d truly solved that mystery.

“My mom and I used to go for walks in the park.” I shut my eyes so that I could concentrate on the facts and not the intensity with which Jameson locked on to my every word. “She called it the Strolling Aimlessly Game.” I steeled myself against the memory, letting my eyelids open. “A few days after her funeral, I went to the park without her for the first time. When I got near the pond, I saw a crowd gathered. A man was lying on the sidewalk, eyes closed, covered in tattered blankets.”

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“Homeless.” Jameson had heard all of this before, but his laser focus on me never wavered.

“People thought he was dead—or passed out drunk. Then he sat up. I saw a police officer making his way through the crowd.”

“But you got to the man first,” Jameson finished, his eyes on mine, his lips crooking upward. “And you asked him to play chess.”

I hadn’t expected Harry to take me up on the offer, let alone win.

“We played every week after that,” I said. “Sometimes twice a week, three times. He never told me more than his name.”

His name wasn’t really Harry. He lied. And that was why I was in these tunnels with Jameson Hawthorne. That was why he’d started looking at me like I was a mystery again, a puzzle that he, and only he, could solve.

It couldn’t be a coincidence that billionaire Tobias Hawthorne had left his fortune to a stranger who knew his “dead” son.

“You’re sure that it was Toby?” Jameson asked, the air between us charged.

These days, I was sure of little else. Three weeks earlier, I’d been a normal girl, scraping by, desperately trying to survive high school, get a scholarship, and get out. Then out of the blue, I’d received word that one of the richest men in the country had died and named me in his will. Tobias Hawthorne had left me billions, very nearly his entire fortune—and I’d had no idea why. Jameson and I had spent two weeks unraveling the puzzles and clues the old man had left behind. *Why me?* Because of my name. Because of the day I was born. Because Tobias Hawthorne had bet everything on the long shot that somehow I could bring his splintered family back together.

Or at least that was what the conclusion of the old man’s last game had led us to believe.

“I’m sure,” I told Jameson, fiercely. “Toby’s alive. And if your

grandfather knew that—and I know that’s a big *if*—but if he did know, then we have to assume that either he chose me because I knew Toby, or he somehow masterminded bringing us together in the first place.”

If there was one thing I’d learned about deceased billionaire Tobias Hawthorne, it was that he was capable of orchestrating nearly anything, manipulating nearly anyone. He’d loved puzzles and riddles and games.

Just like Jameson.

“What if that day in the park wasn’t the first time you met my uncle?” Jameson took a step toward me, an unholy energy rolling off him. “Think about it, Heiress. You said that the one time my grandfather met you, you were six years old, and he saw you in the diner where your mother was a waitress. He heard your full name.”

Avery Kylie Grambs, rearranged, became A Very Risky Gamble. The kind of name a man like Tobias Hawthorne would remember.

“That’s right,” I said. Jameson was close to me now. Too close. Every one of the Hawthorne boys was magnetic. Larger than life. They had an effect on people—and Jameson was very good at using that to get what he wanted. *He wants something from me now.*

“Why was my grandfather, a Texas billionaire with a whole host of private chefs on call, eating at a hole-in-the-wall diner in a small Connecticut town that no one’s ever heard of?”

My mind raced. “You think he was looking for something?”

Jameson smiled deviously. “Or someone. What if the old man went there looking for Toby and found *you*?”

There was something about the way he said the word *you*. Like I was someone. Like I mattered. But Jameson and I had been down that road before. “And everything else is a distraction?” I asked, looking away from him. “My name. The fact that Emily died on my birthday. The puzzle your grandfather left us—it was all just a lie?”

Jameson didn’t react to the sound of Emily’s name. In the throes

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of a mystery, nothing could distract him—not even her. “A lie,” Jameson repeated. “Or misdirection.”

He reached to brush a strand of hair out of my face, and every nerve in my body went on high alert. I jerked back. “Stop looking at me like that,” I told him sternly.

“Like what?” he countered.

I folded my arms and stared him down. “You turn on the charm when you want something.”

“Heiress, you wound me.” Jameson looked better smirking than anyone had a right to look. “All I want is for you to rifle through your memory banks a little. My grandfather was a person who thought in four dimensions. He might have had more than one reason for choosing you. Why kill two birds with one stone, he always said, when you could kill twelve?”

There was something about his voice, about the way he was still looking at me, that would have made it easy to get caught up in it all. The possibilities. The mystery. *Him*.

But I wasn’t the kind of person who made the same mistake twice. “Maybe you’ve got it wrong.” I turned away from him. “What if your grandfather didn’t know that Toby was alive? What if *Toby* was the one who realized that the old man was watching me? Considering leaving the entire fortune to me?”

Harry, as I’d known him, had been one hell of a chess player. Maybe that day in the park wasn’t a coincidence. Maybe he’d sought me out.

“We’re missing something,” Jameson said, coming up to stand close behind me. “Or maybe,” he murmured, directly into the back of my head, “you’re holding something back.”

He wasn’t entirely wrong. I wasn’t built to lay all my cards on the table—and Jameson Winchester Hawthorne didn’t even pretend to be trustworthy.

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"I see how it is, Heiress." I could practically *hear* his crooked little grin. "If that's how you want to play it, why don't we make this interesting?"

I turned back to face him. Eye to eye, it was hard not to remember that when Jameson kissed a girl, it wasn't tentative. It wasn't gentle. *It wasn't real*, I reminded myself. I'd been a part of the puzzle to him, a tool to be used. I was still a part of the puzzle.

"Not everything is a game," I said.

"And maybe," Jameson countered, eyes alight, "that's the problem. Maybe that's why we're spinning our wheels in these tunnels day after day, rehashing this and getting nowhere. Because this isn't a game. *Yet*. A game has rules. A game has a winner. Maybe, Heiress, what you and I need to solve the mystery of Toby Hawthorne is a little motivation."

"What kind of motivation?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"How about a wager?" Jameson arched an eyebrow. "If I figure all of this out first, then you have to forgive and forget my little lapse of judgment after we decoded the Black Wood."

The Black Wood was where we'd figured out that his dead ex-girlfriend had died on my birthday. That was the moment when it had first become clear that Tobias Hawthorne hadn't chosen me because I was special. He'd chosen me for what it would do to them.

Immediately afterward, Jameson had dropped me cold.

"And if I win," I countered, staring into those green eyes of his, "then you have to forget that we ever kissed—and never try to charm me into kissing you again."

I didn't trust him, but I also didn't trust myself with him.

"Well then, Heiress." Jameson stepped forward. Standing directly to my side, he brought his lips down to my ear and whispered, "Game on."

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CHAPTER 2

Our wager struck, Jameson took off in one direction in the tunnels, and I went in another. Hawthorne House was massive, sprawling, big enough that, even after three weeks, I still hadn't seen it all. A person could spend years exploring this place and still not know all the ins and outs, all the secret passageways and hidden compartments—and that wasn't even counting the underground tunnels.

Lucky for me, I was a quick learner. I cut from underneath the gymnasium wing to a tunnel that went below the music room. I passed beneath the solarium, then climbed a hidden staircase into the Great Room, where I found Nash Hawthorne leaning casually against a stone fireplace. Waiting.

“Hey, kid.” Nash didn't bat an eye at the fact that I'd just appeared seemingly out of nowhere. In fact, the oldest Hawthorne brother gave the impression that the whole mansion could come crashing down around him and he'd just keep leaning against that fireplace. Nash Hawthorne would probably tip his cowboy hat to Death herself.

“Hey,” I replied.

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"I don't suppose you've seen Grayson?" Nash asked, his Texas drawl making the question sound almost lazy.

That did nothing to soften the impact of what he'd just said. "Nope." I kept my answer short and my face blank. Grayson Hawthorne and I had been keeping our distance.

"And I don't suppose you know anything about a chat Gray had with our mother, right before she moved out?"

Skye Hawthorne, Tobias Hawthorne's younger daughter and the mother of all four Hawthorne grandsons, had tried to have me killed. The person who'd actually pulled the trigger was the one in a jail cell, but Skye had been forced to leave Hawthorne House. By Grayson. *I will always protect you*, he'd told me. *But this...us...It can't happen, Avery.*

"No clue," I said flatly.

"Didn't think so." Nash gave me a little wink. "Your sister and your lawyer are looking for you. East Wing." That was a loaded statement if I'd ever heard one. My lawyer was his ex-fiancée, and my sister was...

I didn't know what Libby and Nash Hawthorne were.

"Thanks," I told him, but when I made my way up the winding staircase to the East Wing of Hawthorne House, I didn't go looking for Libby. Or Alisa. I'd made a bet with Jameson, and I intended to win. First stop: Tobias Hawthorne's office.

In the office, there was a mahogany desk, and behind the desk was a wall of trophies and patents and books with the name *Hawthorne* on the spine—a breathtaking visual reminder that there was nothing ordinary whatsoever about the Hawthorne brothers. They had been given every opportunity, and the old man had expected them to be extraordinary. But I hadn't come here to gawk at trophies.

Instead, I took a seat behind the desk and released the hidden compartment I'd discovered not long ago. It held a folder. Inside the folder, there were pictures of me. Countless photographs, stretching back years. After that fateful meeting in the diner, Tobias Hawthorne had kept tabs on me. *All because of my name? Or did he have another motive?*

I thumbed through the photos and pulled out two. Jameson had been right, back in the tunnels. I was holding out on him. I'd been photographed with Toby twice, but both times, all the photographer had captured of the man beside me was the back of his head.

Had Tobias Hawthorne recognized Toby from behind? Had "Harry" realized we were being photographed and turned his head away from the camera on purpose?

As far as clues went, this wasn't much to go on. All the file really proved was that Tobias Hawthorne had been keeping tabs on me for years before "Harry" had shown up. I thumbed past the photographs to a copy of my birth certificate. My mother's signature was neat, my father's an odd mix of cursive and print. Tobias Hawthorne had highlighted my father's signature, as well as my date of birth.

10/18. I knew the significance there. Both Grayson and Jameson had loved a girl named Emily Laughlin. Her death—on October 18—had torn them apart. Somehow, the old man had intended for me to bring them back together. But why would Tobias Hawthorne have highlighted my father's signature? Ricky Grambs was a deadbeat. He hadn't even cared enough to pick up the phone when my mother died. If it had been left up to him, I would have gone into foster care. Staring at Ricky's signature, I willed Tobias Hawthorne's reasoning in highlighting it to become clear.

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In the back of my mind, I heard my mother's voice. *I have a secret*, she'd told me, long before Tobias Hawthorne had written me into his will, *about the day you were born*.

Whatever she'd been referring to, I was never going to guess it now that she was gone. The one thing I knew for certain was that I wasn't a Hawthorne. If my father's name on that birth certificate weren't proof enough, a DNA test had already confirmed that I had no Hawthorne blood.

Why did Toby seek me out? Did he seek me out? I thought about what Jameson had said about his grandfather killing twelve birds with one stone. Going back through the folder again, I tried to find some shred of meaning. What wasn't I seeing? There had to be *something*—

A rap at the door was the only warning I got before the door-knob began to twist. Moving quickly, I gathered the photographs and slipped the file back into the hidden compartment.

"There you are." Alisa Ortega, attorney-at-law, was a model of professionalism. She arched her brows into what I had mentally termed the Alisa Look. "Would I be correct in assuming you've forgotten about the game?"

"The game," I repeated, unsure *which* game she was talking about. I felt like I'd been playing since the moment I'd first stepped through the door of Hawthorne House.

"The football game," Alisa clarified, with another Alisa Look. "Part two of your debut into Texas society. With Skye's exit from Hawthorne House, appearances are more important than ever. We need to control the narrative. This is a Cinderella story, not a scandal—and that means that *you* need to play Cinderella. In public. As frequently and convincingly as possible, starting with making use of your owner's box tonight."

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Owner's box. That clicked. "The game," I repeated again, comprehension dawning. "As in, an NFL game. Because I own a football team."

That was still so absolutely mind-blowing that I almost succeeded in distracting myself from the other part of what Alisa had said—the bit about Skye. Per the deal I'd struck with Grayson, I couldn't tell anyone about his mother's part in my attempted murder. In exchange, he'd handled it.

Just like he'd promised he would.

"There are forty-eight seats in the owner's suite," Alisa said, going into lecture mode. "A general seat map is created months in advance. VIPs only. This isn't just football; it's a way of buying a seat at a dozen different tables. Invites are highly sought after by just about everyone—politicians, celebrities, CEOs. I've had Oren vet everyone on the list for tonight, and we'll have a professional photographer on hand for some strategic photo opportunities. Landon has crafted a press release that will go out an hour before the game. All that's left to worry about is..."

Alisa trailed off delicately.

I snorted. "Me?"

"This is a Cinderella story," Alisa reminded me. "What do you think Cinderella would wear to her first NFL game?"

That had to be a trick question.

"Something like this?" Libby popped into the doorway. She was wearing a Lone Stars jersey with a matching scarf, matching gloves, and matching boots. Her blue hair was tied into pigtails with a thick bunch of blue and gold ribbons.

Alisa forced a smile. "Yes," she told me. "Something like that—minus the black lipstick, the black nail polish, and the choker." Libby was pretty much the world's most cheerful goth, and Alisa was not a fan of my sister's sense of fashion. "As I was saying," Alisa

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continued emphatically, “tonight is important. While Avery plays Cinderella for the cameras, I’ll circulate among our guests and get a better sense of where they stand.”

“Where they stand on what?” I asked. I’d been told again and again that Tobias Hawthorne’s will was ironclad. As far as I knew, the Hawthorne family had given up on trying to challenge it.

“It never hurts to have a few extra power players in your corner,” Alisa said. “And we want our allies breathing easy.”

“Hope I’m not interrupting.” Nash acted like he’d just happened upon the three of us—like he wasn’t the one who’d warned me that Alisa and Libby were looking for me. “Go on, Lee-Lee,” he told my lawyer. “You were sayin’ something about breathing easy?”

“We need people to know that Avery isn’t here to shake things up.” Alisa avoided looking directly at Nash, like a person avoiding looking into the sun. “Your grandfather had investments, business partners, political relationships—these things require a careful balance.”

“What she means when she says that,” Nash told me, “is that she needs people to think that McNamara, Ortega, and Jones has the situation entirely under control.”

The situation? I thought. *Or me?* I didn’t relish the idea of being anyone’s puppet. In theory, at least, the firm was supposed to work for me.

That gave me an idea. “Alisa? Do you remember when I asked you to get money to a friend of mine?”

“Harry, wasn’t it?” Alisa replied, but I got the distinct feeling that her attention was divided three ways: between my question, her grand plans for the night, and the way Nash’s lips ticked upward on the ends when he saw Libby’s outfit.

The last thing I needed my lawyer focused on was the way that her ex was looking at my sister. “Yes. Were you able to get the

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money to him?” I asked. The simplest way to get answers would be to track down Toby—before Jameson did.

Alisa tore her eyes away from Libby and Nash. “Unfortunately,” she said briskly, “my people have been unable to find a trace of your Harry.”

I rolled the implication of that over in my mind. Toby Hawthorne had appeared in the park days after my mother’s death, and less than a month after I left, he was gone.

“Now,” Alisa said, clasping her hands in front of her body, “about your wardrobe . . .”

CHAPTER 3

I had never seen a game of football in my life, but as the new owner of the Texas Lone Stars, I couldn't exactly say that to the crowd of reporters who mobbed the SUV when we pulled up to the stadium, any more than I could have admitted that the off-the-shoulder jersey and metallic-blue cowboy boots I was wearing felt about as authentic as a Halloween costume.

"Lower the window," Alisa told me, "smile, and yell, 'Go, Lone Stars!'"

I didn't want to lower the window. I didn't want to smile. I didn't want to yell anything—but I did it. Because this was a Cinderella story, and I was the star.

"Avery!"

"Avery, look over here!"

"How are you feeling about your first game as the new owner?"

"Do you have any comments about reports that you assaulted Skye Hawthorne?"

I hadn't had much media training, but I'd had enough to know the cardinal rule of having reporters shout questions at you rapid-fire: Don't answer. Pretty much the only thing I was allowed to say

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was that I was excited, grateful, awed, and overwhelmed in the *most incredible* possible way.

So I did my best to channel excitement, gratitude, and awe. Nearly a hundred thousand people would attend the game tonight. Millions would watch it around the world, cheering for the team. *My team.*

“Go, Lone Stars!” I yelled. I went to roll up my window, but just as my finger brushed the button, a figure pulled away from the crowd. Not a reporter.

My father.

Ricky Grambs had spent a lifetime treating me like an afterthought, if that. I hadn’t seen him in more than a year. But now that I’d inherited billions?

There he was.

Turning away from him—and the paparazzi—I rolled my window up.

“Ave?” Libby’s voice was hesitant as our bulletproof SUV disappeared into a private parking garage beneath the stadium. My sister was an optimist. She believed the best of people—including a man who’d never done a damn thing for either one of us.

“Did you know he’d be here?” I asked her, my voice low.

“No!” Libby said. “I swear!” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, smudging her black lipstick. “But he just wants to talk.”

I bet he does.

Up in the driver’s seat, Oren, my head of security, parked the SUV and spoke calmly into his earpiece. “We have a situation near the north entrance. Eyes only, but I want a full report.”

The nice thing about being a billionaire with a security team brimming with retired Special Forces was that the chances of my being ambushed again were next to none. I shoved down the feelings that seeing Ricky had dredged up and stepped out of the car

into the bowels of one of the biggest stadiums in the world. “Let’s do this,” I said.

“For the record,” Alisa told me as she exited the car, “the firm is more than capable of handling your father.”

And *that* was the nice thing about being the sole client of a multi-billion-dollar law firm.

“Are you okay?” Alisa pressed. She wasn’t exactly the touchy-feely type. More likely she was trying to assess whether I would be a liability tonight.

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Why wouldn’t she be?”

That voice—low and smooth—came from an elevator behind me. For the first time in seven days, I turned to look directly at Grayson Hawthorne. He had pale hair and ice-gray eyes and cheekbones sharp enough to count as weapons. Two weeks ago, I would have said that he was the most self-assured, self-righteous, arrogant jerk I’d ever met.

I wasn’t sure what to say about Grayson Hawthorne now.

“Why,” he repeated crisply, stepping out of the elevator, “would Avery be anything other than fine?”

“Deadbeat dad made an appearance outside,” I muttered. “It’s fine.”

Grayson stared at me, his eyes piercing mine, then turned to Oren. “Is he a threat?”

I’ll always protect you, he’d sworn. *But this . . . us . . . It can’t happen, Avery.*

“I don’t need you to protect me,” I told Grayson sharply. “When it comes to Ricky, I’m an expert at protecting myself.” I stalked past Grayson, into the elevator he’d stepped out of a moment earlier.

The trick to being abandoned was to never let yourself long for anyone who left.

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A minute later, when the elevator doors opened into the owner's suite, I stepped out, Alisa to one side and Oren to the other, and I didn't so much as look back at Grayson. Since he'd taken the elevator down to meet me, he'd obviously already been up here, probably schmoozing. Without me.

"Avery. You made it." Zara Hawthorne-Calligaris wore a string of delicate pearls around her neck. There was something about her sharp-edged smile that made me feel like she could probably kill a man with those pearls if she were so inclined. "I wasn't sure you would be putting in an appearance tonight."

And you were ready to hold court in my absence, I concluded. I thought about what Alisa had said—about allies and power players and the influence that could be bought with a ticket to this suite.

As Jameson would say, *Game on*.

CHAPTER 4

The owner's suite had a perfect view of the fifty-yard line, but an hour before kickoff, no one was looking at the field. The suite extended back and widened, and the farther you got from the seats, the more it looked like an upscale bar or club. Tonight, I was the entertainment—an oddity, a curiosity, a paper doll dressed up just so. For what felt like an eternity, I shook hands, posed for photographers, and pretended to understand football jokes. I managed not to gawk at a pop star, a former vice president, and a tech giant who probably made more money in the time it took him to urinate than most people made in a lifetime.

My brain pretty much stopped functioning when I heard the phrase “Her Highness” and realized there was actual royalty in attendance.

Alisa must have sensed that I was reaching my limit. “It’s almost time for kickoff,” she said, laying one hand lightly on my shoulder—probably to keep me from fleeing. “Let’s get you in your seat.”

I made it until halftime, then bolted for real. Grayson intercepted me. Wordlessly, he nodded to one side and then started walking, confident that I would follow.

Despite myself, I did. What I found was a second elevator.

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"This one goes up," he told me. Going anywhere with Grayson Hawthorne was probably a mistake, but given that the alternative was more mingling, I decided to take my chances.

The two of us rode the elevator up in silence. The door opened to a small room with five seats, all empty. The view of the field was even better than it was below.

"My grandfather could only mingle in the suite for so long before he got fed up and came up here," Grayson told me. "My brothers and I were the only ones allowed to join him."

I sat and stared out at the stadium. There were so many people in the crowd. The energy, the chaos, the sheer volume of it was overwhelming. But in here, it was silent.

"I thought you might come to the game with Jameson." Grayson made no move to sit, like he didn't trust himself too close to me. "The two of you have been spending a lot of time together."

That irritated me, for reasons I couldn't even explain. "Your brother and I have a bet going."

"What kind of bet?"

I had no intention of answering, but when I let my eyes travel toward his, I couldn't resist saying the one thing guaranteed to get a reaction. "Toby is alive."

To someone else, Grayson's reaction might not have been noticeable, but I saw the jolt go through him. His gray eyes were glued to me now. "Pardon me?"

"Your uncle is alive and gets his jollies by pretending to be a homeless man in New Castle, Connecticut." I probably could have been a little more delicate.

Grayson came closer. He deigned to sit next to me, tension visible in his arms as he folded his hands together between his knees. "What, precisely, are you talking about, Avery?"

I wasn't used to hearing him call me by my first name. It was

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too late to take back what I'd said. "I saw a picture of Toby in your nan's locket." I closed my eyes, flashing back to that moment. "I recognized him. He told me that his name was Harry. We played chess in the park every week for more than a year." I opened my eyes again. "Jameson and I aren't sure what the story is there—yet. We have a bet going about who finds out first."

"Who have you told?" Grayson's voice was deadly serious.

"About the bet?"

"About Toby."

"Nan was there when I found out. I was going to tell Alisa, but—"

"Don't," Grayson cut in. "Don't breathe a word of this to anyone. You understand?"

I stared at him. "I'm starting to get the feeling that I don't."

"My mother has no grounds on which to challenge the will. My aunt has no grounds on which to challenge the will. But Toby?" Grayson had grown up as the heir apparent. Of all the Hawthorne brothers, he had taken being disinherited the hardest. "If my uncle is alive, he is the one person on this planet who might be able to break the old man's will."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," I told him. "From my perspective, sure. But from yours..."

"My mother cannot find out. Zara cannot find out." Grayson's expression was intense, everything in him focused on me. "McNamara, Ortega, and Jones cannot find out."

In the week that Jameson and I had been discussing this turn of events, we'd been completely focused on the mystery—not on what might happen if Tobias Hawthorne's lost heir suddenly turned up alive.

"Aren't you even a little bit curious?" I asked Grayson. "About what this means?"

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"I know what this means," Grayson replied tersely. "I am telling you what this means, Avery."

"If your uncle were interested in inheriting, don't you think he would have come forward by now?" I asked. "Unless there's a reason he's in hiding."

"Then let him hide. Do you have any idea how risky—" Grayson didn't get to finish that question.

"What's life without a little risk, brother?"

I turned toward the elevator. I hadn't noticed it going down or coming back up, but there Jameson was. He strolled past Grayson and settled into the seat on the other side of mine. "Made any progress on our bet, Heiress?"

I snorted. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Jameson smirked, then opened his mouth to say something else, but his words were drowned out by an explosion. More than one. *Gunfire*. Panic shot through my veins, and the next thing I knew, I was on the ground. *Where's the shooter?* This was like Black Wood. Just like the Black Wood.

"Heiress."

I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. And then Jameson was on the floor with me. He brought his face level with mine and cupped my head in his hands. "Fireworks," he told me. "It's just fireworks, Heiress, for halftime."

My brain registered his words, but my body was still lost in memory. Jameson had been there in the Black Wood with me. He'd thrown his body over mine.

"You're okay, Avery." Grayson knelt beside Jameson, beside me. "We won't let anything hurt you." For a long, drawn-out moment, there wasn't a sound in the room except our breathing. Grayson's. Jameson's. And mine.

"Just fireworks." I repeated back to Jameson, my chest tight.

Grayson stood, but Jameson stayed exactly where he was. He stared at me, his body against mine. There was something almost tender in his expression. I swallowed—and then his lips twisted into a wicked smile.

“For the record, Heiress, *I* have been making excellent progress on our bet.” He let his thumb trace the outline of my jaw.

I shuddered, then glared at him and climbed to my feet. For the sake of my own sanity, I needed to win this bet. *Fast*.

CHAPTER 5

Monday meant school. Private school. A private school with seemingly endless resources and “modular scheduling,” which left me with random pockets of free time scattered throughout the day. I used that time to dig up everything I could about Toby Hawthorne.

I already knew the basics: He was the youngest of Tobias Hawthorne’s three children and, by most accounts, the favorite. At the age of nineteen, he and some friends had taken a trip to a private island the Hawthorne family owned off the coast of Oregon. There was a deadly fire and a horrible storm, and his body was never recovered.

The tragedy had made the news, and sifting through articles gave me a few more details about what had happened. Four people had gone out to Hawthorne Island. None had made it back alive. Three bodies had been recovered. Toby’s was presumed lost to the ocean storm.

I found out what I could about the other victims. Two of them were basically Toby clones: prep school boys. *Heirs*. The third was a girl, Kaylie Rooney. From what I gathered, she was a local, a troubled teen from a small fishing village on the mainland. Several

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articles mentioned that she had a criminal record—a sealed juvenile record. It took me longer to find a source—though not necessarily a reputable one—that claimed that Kaylie Rooney’s criminal record included drugs, assault, and arson.

She started the fire. That was the story the press ran with, without coming right out and saying the words. *Three promising young men, one troubled young woman. A party that spun out of control. Everything, engulfed in flames.* Kaylie was the one the press blamed—sometimes between the lines, sometimes explicitly. The boys were lionized and eulogized and held up as shining beacons in their communities. *Colin Anders Wright. David Golding. Tobias Hawthorne II.* So much brilliance, so much potential, gone too soon.

But Kaylie Rooney? She was trouble.

My phone buzzed, and I glanced down at the screen. A text—from Jameson: *I have a lead.*

Jameson was a senior at Heights Country Day. He was somewhere on this magnificent campus. *What kind of lead?* I thought, but I resisted giving him the satisfaction of texting back. Eventually, my phone informed me that he was typing.

Tell me what you know, I thought.

Then the text finally came through. *Wanna raise the stakes?*



The Heights Country Day refectory didn’t look like a high school cafeteria. Long wooden tables stretched the length of the room. Portraits hung on the walls. The ceilings were high and arching, and the windows were made of stained glass. As I grabbed my food, I scanned the room reflexively for Jameson—and found another Hawthorne brother instead.

Xander Hawthorne was sitting at a dining table, staring intently at a contraption he’d set on its surface. The gizmo looked a bit

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like a Rubik's Cube, but elongated, with tiles that could swivel and fold out in any direction. I suspected it was a Xander Hawthorne original. He'd told me once that he was the brother most apt to be distracted by complex machinery—and scones.

That got me thinking as I watched him fidget three tiles back and forth in his fingers. When his brothers had been off playing their grandfather's games, Xander had often ended up sharing his scones with the old man. *Did they ever talk about Toby?* There was only one way to find out. I crossed the room to sit next to Xander, but he was so absorbed in thought that he didn't even notice me. Back and forth, back and forth, he twisted the tiles.

"Xander?"

He turned toward me and blinked. "Avery! What a pleasant and not objectively unexpected surprise!" His right hand meandered to the far side of the contraption and a notebook that sat there. He snapped it closed.

I took that to mean Xander Hawthorne was up to something. Then again, so was I. "Can I ask you something?"

"That depends," Xander replied. "Are you planning to share those baked goods?"

I looked down at the croissant and cookie on my tray and slid the latter his way. "What do you know about your uncle Toby?"

"Why do you want to know?" Xander took a bite of the cookie and frowned. "Does this have raisins in it? What kind of monster mixes butterscotch chips and raisins?"

"I was just curious," I said.

"You know what they say about curiosity," Xander warned me happily, taking another gargantuan bite of the cookie. "Curiosity killed the—Bex!" Xander gulped down the bite he'd just taken, his face lighting up.

I followed his gaze to Rebecca Laughlin, who was standing

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behind me, holding a lunch tray and looking the way she always did: like some kind of princess, plucked from a fairy tale. Hair as red as rubies. Impossibly wide-set eyes.

Guilty as sin.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Rebecca quickly averted her eyes. I could feel her trying not to look at me. “I thought you might need help,” she told Xander hesitantly, “with the—”

“The thing!” Xander leaned forward and cut her off.

I narrowed my eyes and turned my head back toward the youngest Hawthorne—and the notebook he’d flipped closed the moment he’d seen me. “What thing?” I asked suspiciously.

“I should go,” Rebecca said behind me.

“You should sit and listen to me complain about craisins,” Xander corrected.

After a long moment, Rebecca sat, leaving a single empty chair between us. Her clear, green eyes drifted toward mine. “Avery.” She looked down again. “I owe you an apology.”

The last time Rebecca and I had spoken, she’d confessed to covering for Skye Hawthorne’s role in my attempted murder.

“I’m not sure I want one,” I said, an edge creeping into my voice. On an intellectual level, I understood that Rebecca had spent her whole life living in her sister’s shadow, that Emily’s death had wrecked her, that she’d felt some kind of sick responsibility to her dead sister to say nothing about Skye’s plot against me. But on a more visceral level: *I could have died.*

“You’re not still holding a little grudge about all of that, are you?” Thea Calligaris asked, claiming the seat that Rebecca had left open.

“Little grudge?” I repeated. The last time I’d been this close to Thea, *she* had admitted to setting me up to attend my debut in Texas society dressed like a dead girl. “You play mind games. And Rebecca almost got me killed.”

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“What can I say?” Thea let her fingertips brush Rebecca’s. “We’re complicated girls.”

There was something deliberate about those words, that brush of skin. Rebecca looked at Thea, looked at their hands—and then curled her fingers toward her palm and placed her hand in her lap.

Thea kept her eyes on Rebecca’s for three long seconds, then turned back to me. “Besides,” she said pertly, “I thought this was supposed to be a *private* lunch.”

Private. Just Rebecca and Thea and Xander, the three of whom—last I’d checked—were barely on speaking terms with one another for complicated reasons involving, as Xander liked to say, star-crossed love, fake dating, and tragedy.

“What am I missing here?” I asked Xander. The notebook. The way he’d dodged my question about Toby. The “thing” Rebecca had come to help him with. And now *Thea*.

Xander saved himself from having to answer by jamming the rest of the cookie into his mouth.

“Well?” I prompted as he chewed.

“Emily’s birthday is on Friday,” Rebecca said suddenly. Her voice was quiet, but what she’d just said sucked the oxygen from the room.

“There’s a memorial fundraiser,” Thea added, staring me down. “Xander, Rebecca, and I scheduled this *private* lunch to iron out some plans.”

I wasn’t sure I believed her, but either way, that was clearly my cue to leave.

CHAPTER 6

Trying to talk to Xander had been a bust. I'd gotten as far as I could reading about the fire. *What next?* I thought, walking down a long corridor toward my locker. *Talk to someone who knew Toby?* Skye was out, for obvious reasons. I didn't trust Zara, either. Who did that leave? *Nash, maybe? He would have been about five when Toby disappeared. Nan. Maybe the Laughlins.* Rebecca's grandparents ran the Hawthorne estate and had for years. *Who is Jameson talking to? What's his lead?*

Frustrated, I pulled out my phone and shot off a text to Max. I didn't really expect a reply, because my best friend had been on technological lockdown ever since my windfall—and the accompanying attention from the press—had ruined her life. But even with the guilt I was carrying about what my instant fame had done to Max, texting her made me feel a little less alone. I tried to imagine what she would tell me if she were here, but all I came up with was a string of fake curse words—and strict orders not to get myself killed.

"Did you see the news?" I heard a girl down the hallway ask in a hushed voice as I stopped in front of my locker. "About her father?"

Gritting my teeth, I tuned out the sounds of the gossip mill. I

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opened my locker—and a picture of Ricky Grambs stared back at me. It must have been cut out of an article, because there was a headline above the photograph: *I Just Want to Talk to My Daughter*.

Rage simmered in the pit of my stomach—rage that my deadbeat of a father would have dared to talk to the press, rage that someone had taped this article to the back of my locker door. I looked around to see if the perpetrator would make themselves known. Heights Country Day lockers were made of wood and didn't have locks. It was a subtle way of saying, *People like us don't steal*. What need was there for security among the elite?

As Max would say, *Bullship*. Anyone could have accessed my locker, but no one in the hallway was watching my reaction now. I turned back to tear the picture down, and that was when I noticed that whoever had taped it up had also papered the bottom of my locker with scraps of bloodred paper.

Not scraps, I realized, picking one up. *Comments*. For the past three weeks, I'd done a good job at staying offline, avoiding what internet commenters were saying about me. *To some people, you'll be Cinderella*, Oren had told me when I first inherited. *To others, Marie Antoinette*.

In all caps, the comment in my hand read, *SOMEONE NEEDS TO TEACH THAT STUCK-UP BITCH A LESSON*. I should have stopped there, but I didn't. My hand shook slightly as I picked up the next comment. *When will this SLUT die?* There were dozens more, some of them graphic.

One commenter had just posted a photo: my face, with a target photoshopped over it, like I'd been caught in the sight of a gun.



"This was almost certainly just a bored teenager pushing boundaries," Oren told me as we arrived back at Hawthorne House that afternoon.

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“But the comments...” I swallowed, some of the threats still emblazoned on my brain. “They’re real?”

“And nothing you need to worry about,” Oren assured me. “My team keeps tabs on these things. All threats are documented and assessed. Of the hundred or so worst offenders, there are only two or three to date that merit watching.”

I tried not to get hung up on the numbers. “What do you mean, *watching*?”

“Unless I’m mistaken,” a cool, even voice said, “he’s referring to the List.”

I looked up to see Grayson standing a few feet away, wearing a dark suit, his expression impossible to read but for a line of tension in his jaw.

“What list?” I said, trying not to pay too much attention to his jawline.

“Do you want to show her?” Grayson asked Oren calmly. “Or should I?”



I’d heard that Hawthorne House was more secure than the White House. I’d seen Oren’s men. I knew that no one got onto the estate without a deep background check and that there was an extensive monitoring system. But there was a difference between knowing that objectively and *seeing* it. The surveillance room was lined with monitors. Most of the security footage was focused on the perimeter and the gates, but there were a handful of monitors that flashed through the corridors of Hawthorne House, one by one.

“Eli.” Oren spoke, and one of the guards who was monitoring the feeds stood. He looked to be in his twenties, with a military-style haircut, several scars, and vibrant blue eyes ringed with amber around the pupil. “Avery,” Oren said, “meet Eli. He’ll be shadowing you at school, at least until I’ve completed a full assessment of the

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locker situation. He's the youngest member of our team, so he'll blend better than the rest of us would."

Eli looked military. He looked like a bodyguard. He did not look like he would *blend* at my high school. "I thought you weren't concerned about my locker," I told Oren.

My head of security met my eyes. "I'm not." But he also wasn't taking any chances.

"What, precisely," Grayson said, coming up behind me, "happened at your locker?"

I had a brief and infuriating urge to tell him, to let him protect me, the way he'd sworn he would. But not everything was Grayson Hawthorne's business. "Where's this list?" I asked, stepping away from him and redirecting the conversation to the reason I was here.

Oren nodded to Eli, and the younger man handed me an actual, literal list. Names. The one at the top was *RICKY GRAMBS*. I scowled but managed to scan the rest of the list. There were maybe thirty names, total. "Who are these people?" I asked, my throat tightening around the words.

"Would-be stalkers," Oren answered. "People who've attempted to break onto the estate. Overly zealous fans." He narrowed his eyes. "Skye Hawthorne."

I took that to mean that my head of security knew why Skye had left Hawthorne House. I'd promised Grayson secrecy, but this was Hawthorne House. Most of the occupants were far too clever for their own good—or anyone else's.

"Could you give me a moment with Avery?" Grayson did Oren the courtesy of pretending that was a request. Unimpressed, Oren glanced toward me and arched a questioning brow. I was tempted to keep Oren there out of spite, but instead, I nodded at my head of security, and he and his men slowly filed out of the room. I half expected Grayson to cross-examine me about what I'd told

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Oren about Skye, but once the two of us were alone, that cross-examination never came.

"Are you okay?" Grayson asked instead. "I can see how this would be a lot to take in."

"I'm fine," I insisted, but this time I couldn't muster the will to tell him that I didn't need his protection. I'd known, objectively, that I would need security for the rest of my life, but seeing the threats laid out on paper felt different.

"My grandfather had a List as well," Grayson said quietly. "It comes with the territory."

With being famous? With being rich?

"Regarding the situation we discussed last night," Grayson continued, his voice low, "do you understand now why you need to leave it alone?" He didn't say Toby's name. "Most of these people on the List would lose interest in you if you lost the fortune. *Most* of them."

But not all. I stared at Grayson for a moment, my eyes lingering on his face. If I were to lose the fortune, I'd lose my security team. That was what he wanted me to understand.

"I understand," I replied, ripping my eyes from Grayson's, because I also understood this: I was a survivor. I took care of myself. And I wouldn't let myself want or expect anything from him.

Turning away, I stared at the security monitors. A flash of movement on one of the feeds caught my eye. *Jameson.* I tried not to be too obvious as I watched him striding with purpose through a corridor I couldn't place. *What are you up to, Jameson Hawthorne?*

Beside me, Grayson's attention was on me, not the monitors. "Avery?" He sounded almost hesitant. I hadn't been sure that Grayson Davenport Hawthorne, former heir apparent, was capable of hesitating.

"I'm fine," I said again, keeping half an eye on the screen. A

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