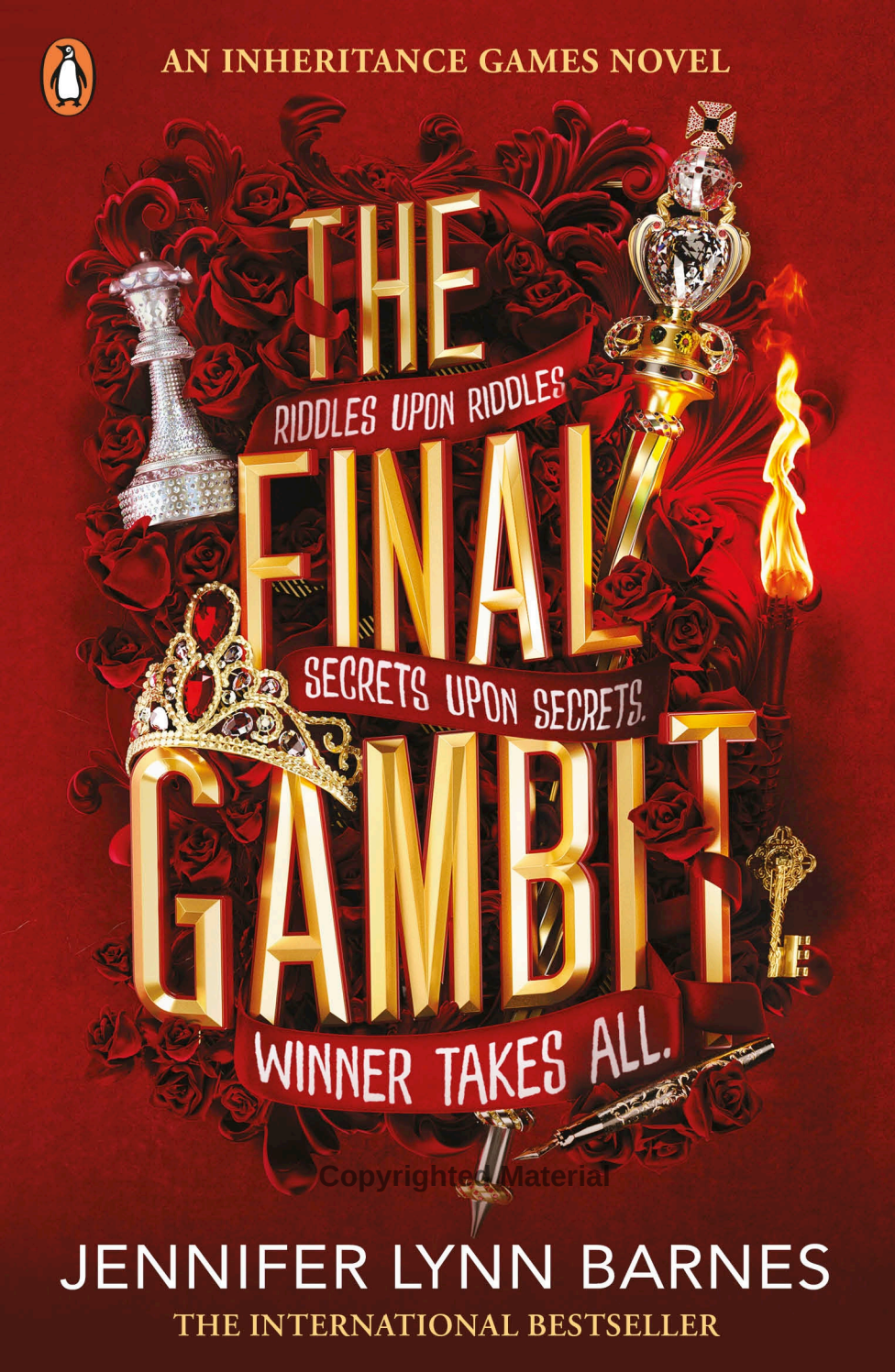
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# THE FINAL GAMBIT

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*For William*

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# CHAPTER 1

"We need to talk about your eighteenth birthday." Alisa's words echoed through the largest of Hawthorne House's five libraries. Floor-to-ceiling shelves stretched up two stories, encircling us with hardcover and leather-bound tomes, many of them priceless, every single one a reminder of the man who had built this room.

This house.

This dynasty.

I could almost imagine the ghost of Tobias Hawthorne watching me as I knelt and ran my hand over the mahogany floorboards, my fingers searching for irregularities in the seams.

Finding none, I stood and replied to Alisa's statement. "Do we?" I said. "Do we *really*?"

"Legally?" The formidable Alisa Ortega arched an eyebrow at me. "Yes. You may already be emancipated, but when it comes to the terms of your inheritance—"

"Nothing changes when I turn eighteen," I said, scanning the room for my next move. "I won't inherit until I've lived in Hawthorne House for a year."

I knew my lawyer well enough to know *that* was what she really

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wanted to talk about. My birthday was October eighteenth. I would hit the year mark the first week in November and instantly become the richest teenager on the planet. Until then, I had other things to focus on.

A bet to win. A Hawthorne to best.

"Be that as it may…" Alisa was about as easily deterred as a high-speed train. "As your birthday approaches, there are some things we should discuss."

I snorted. "Forty-six billion of them?"

As Alisa gave me an exasperated look, I concentrated on my mission. Hawthorne House was filled with secret passages. Jameson had bet me that I couldn't find them all. Eyeing the massive tree trunk that served as a desk, I reached for the sheath fixed to the inside of my boot and pulled out my knife to test a natural crack in the desk's surface.

I'd learned the hard way I couldn't afford to go anywhere unarmed.

"Moping check!" Xander "I'm a Living, Breathing Rube Goldberg Machine" Hawthorne poked his head into the library. "Avery, on a scale of one to ten, how much do you need a distraction right now, and how attached are you to your eyebrows?"

Jameson was on the other side of the world. Grayson hadn't called once since he'd left for Harvard. Xander, my self-appointed BHFF—*Best Hawthorne Friend Forever*—considered it his sacred duty to keep my spirits high in his brothers' absence.

"One," I answered. "And ten."

Xander gave a little bow. "Then I bid you adieu." In a flash, he was gone.

Something was definitely exploding in the next ten minutes. Turning back toward Alisa, I drank in the rest of the room: the

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seemingly endless shelves, the wrought-iron staircases spiraling upward. "Just say what you came here to say, Alisa."

"Yes, Lee-Lee," a deep, honeyed voice drawled from the hall. "Enlighten us." Nash Hawthorne took up position in the doorway, his trademark cowboy hat tipped down.

"Nash." Alisa wore her power suit like armor. "This doesn't concern you."

Nash leaned against the doorframe and lazily crossed his right foot over his left ankle. "Kid tells me to leave, I'll leave." Nash didn't trust Alisa with me. He hadn't for months.

"I'm fine, Nash," I said. "You can go."

"I reckon I can." Nash made no move to push off the doorframe. He was the oldest of the four Hawthorne brothers and used to riding herd on the other three. Over the past year, he'd extended that to me. He and my sister had been "not dating" for months.

"Isn't it not-date night?" I asked. "And doesn't that mean you have somewhere to be?"

Nash removed his cowboy hat and let his steady eyes settle on mine. "Dollars to doughnuts," he said, turning to amble out of the room, "she wants to talk to you about establishing a trust."

I waited until Nash was out of earshot before I turned back to Alisa. "A trust?"

"I merely want you to be aware of your options." Alisa avoided specifics with lawyerly ease. "I'll put together a dossier for you to look over. Now, regarding your birthday, there's also the matter of a party."

"No party," I said immediately. The last thing I wanted was to turn my birthday into a headline-grabbing, hashtag-exploding event.

"Do you have a favorite band? Or singer? We'll need entertainment."

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I could feel my eyes narrowing. "No party, Alisa."

"Is there anyone you'd like to see on the guest list?" When Alisa said *anyone*, she wasn't talking about people I knew. She was talking about celebrities, billionaires, socialites, royals. . . .

"No guest list," I said, "because I'm not having a party."

"You really should consider the optics—" Alisa began, and I tuned out. I knew what she was going to say. She'd been saying it for nearly eleven months. *Everyone loves a Cinderella story.*

Well, *this* Cinderella had a bet to win. I studied the wrought-iron staircases. Three spiraled counterclockwise. But the fourth . . . I walked toward it, then scaled the steps. On the second-story landing, I ran my fingers along the underside of the shelf opposite the stairs. *A release.* I triggered it, and the entire curved shelf arced backward.

*Number twelve.* I smiled wickedly. *Take that, Jameson Winchester Hawthorne.*

"No party," I called down to Alisa again. And then I disappeared into the wall.

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# CHAPTER 2

That night, I slid into bed, Egyptian cotton sheets cool and smooth against my skin. As I waited for Jameson's call, my hand drifted toward the nightstand, to a small bronze pin in the shape of a key.

*"Pick a hand." Jameson holds out two fists. I tap his right hand, and he uncurls his fingers, presenting me with an empty palm. I try the left—the same. Then he curls my fingers into a fist. I open them, and there, in my palm, sits the pin.*

*"You solved the keys faster than any of us," Xander reminds me. "It's past time for this!"*

*"Sorry, kid," Nash drawls. "It's been six months. You're one of us now."*

*Grayson says nothing, but when I fumble to put the pin on and it drops from my fingers, he catches it before it hits the ground.*

That memory wanted to loop into another—*Grayson, me, the wine cellar*—but I wouldn't let it. In the past few months, I'd developed my own methods of distraction. Grabbing my phone, I navigated to a crowd-funding site and did a search for *medical bills* and *rent*. The Hawthorne fortune wasn't mine for another six weeks,

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but the partners at McNamara, Ortega, and Jones had already seen to it that I had a credit card with virtually no limit.

*Keep gift anonymous.* I clicked that box again and again. When my phone finally rang, I leaned back and answered. "Hello."

"I need an anagram of the word *naked*." There was a hum of energy to Jameson's voice.

"No, you don't." I rolled over onto my side. "How's Tuscany?"

"The birthplace of the Italian Renaissance? Full of winding roads, hills and valleys, where a morning mist rolls out in the distance, and the forests are littered with leaves so golden red that the entire world feels like it's on fire in the very best way? That Tuscany?"

"Yes," I murmured. "That Tuscany."

"I've seen better."

"Jameson!"

"What do you want to hear about first, Heiress: Siena, Florence, or the vineyards?"

I wanted *all of it*, but there was a reason Jameson was using the standard Hawthorne gap year to travel. "Tell me about the villa." *Did you find anything?*

"Your Tuscan villa was built in the seventeenth century. It's supposedly a farmhouse but looks more like a castle, and it's surrounded by more than a hundred acres of olive orchard. There's a pool, a wood-fired pizza oven, and a massive stone fireplace original to the house."

I could picture it. Vividly—and not just because I had a binder of photos. "And when you checked the fireplace?" I didn't have to ask if he *had* checked the fireplace.

"I found something."

I sat up, my hair falling down my back. "A clue?"

"Probably," Jameson replied. "But to what puzzle?"

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My entire body felt electric. "If you don't tell me, I will *end* you, Hawthorne."

"And I," Jameson replied, "would very much enjoy being ended." My traitorous lips threatened a smile. Tasting victory, Jameson gave me my answer. "I found a triangular mirror."

Just like that, my brain was off to the races. Tobias Hawthorne had raised his grandsons on puzzles, riddles, and games. The mirror was probably a clue, but Jameson had been right: There was no telling what game it was meant to be a part of. In any case, it wasn't what he was traveling the world looking for.

"We'll figure out what the disk was." Jameson as good as read my mind. "The world is the board, Heiress. We just have to keep rolling the dice."

Maybe, but this time we weren't following a trail or playing one of the old man's games. We were feeling around in the dark, hoping that there might be answers out there—answers that would tell us why a small coinlike disk engraved with concentric circles was worth a fortune.

Why Tobias Hawthorne's namesake and only son had left that disk for my mother.

Why Toby had snatched it back from me before he'd disappeared, off to play dead again.

Toby and that disk were my last connections to my mother, and they were gone. It hurt to think about that for too long. "I found another entry to the passageways today," I said abruptly.

"Oh, really?" Jameson replied, the verbal equivalent of holding out a hand at the beginning of a waltz. "Which one did you find?"

"Circular library."

On the other end of the phone line, there was a brief but unmistakable silence.

Realization dawned on me. "You didn't know about that one."

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Victory was so very sweet. "Would you like me to tell you where it is?" I crooned.

"When I get back," Jameson murmured, "I'll find it myself."

I had no idea when he was coming back, but soon my year at Hawthorne House would be up. I would be free. I could go anywhere, do anything—and *everything*.

"Where are you headed next?" I asked Jameson. If I let myself think too much about *everything*, I would drown in it—in wanting, in longing, in believing we could have it all.

"Santorini," Jameson replied. "But say the word, Heiress, and—"

"Keep going. Keep looking." My voice went hoarse. "Keep telling me everything."

"Everything?" Jameson repeated in a rough, low tone that made me think of what the two of us could be doing if I were there with him.

I rolled over onto my stomach. "The anagram you were looking for? It's *knead*."

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# CHAPTER 3

Weeks passed in a blur of charity galas and prep school exams, nights talking to Jameson and too much time spent wondering whether Grayson would ever pick up a damn phone.

*Focus.* Pushing everything from my mind, I took aim. Looking down the barrel of the gun, I breathed in and out and took the shot—then another and another.

The Hawthorne estate had everything, including its own shooting range. I wasn't a gun person. This wasn't my idea of fun. But neither was being defenseless. Forcing my jaw to unclench, I lowered my weapon and took off my ear protection.

Nash surveyed my target. "Nice grouping, kid."

Theoretically, I'd never need a gun—or the knife in my boot. In theory, the Hawthorne estate was impenetrable, and when I went out into the world, I would always have armed security with me. But since being named in Tobias Hawthorne's will, I'd been shot at, nearly blown up, and kidnapped. *Theory* hadn't kept the nightmares away.

Nash teaching me to fight back had. "Your lawyer bring you that trust paperwork yet?" he asked casually.

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My lawyer was his ex, and he knew her far too well. "Maybe," I replied, Alisa's explanation ringing in my ears. *Typically, with an heir your age, there would be certain safeguards in place. Since Mr. Hawthorne didn't see fit to erect them, it's an option you should consider yourself.* Per Alisa, if I put the money in a trust, there would be a trustee in charge of safeguarding and growing the fortune on my behalf. Alisa and the partners at McNamara, Ortega, and Jones would, of course, be willing to serve as trustees, with the understanding that I would be denied nothing I requested. *A revocable trust will simply minimize the pressure on you until you're ready to fully take the reins.*

"Remind me again," Nash told me, bending to capture my gaze with his. "What's our rule about fightin' dirty?"

He wasn't nearly as subtle as he thought he was when it came to Alisa Ortega, but I still answered the question. "There's no such thing as fighting dirty," I told Nash, "if you win."

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# CHAPTER 4

The morning of my eighteenth birthday—and the first day of fall break at the vaunted Heights Country Day School—I woke up to see an unspeakably gorgeous ball gown hanging in my doorway. It was a deep midnight green, floor-length, with a bodice marked by tens of thousands of tiny black jewels in a dark, delicate, mesmerizing pattern.

It was a stop-and-stare dress. A gasp-and-stare-again dress.

The kind one would wear to a headline-grabbing, hashtag-exploding black-tie event. *Damn it, Alisa.* I stalked toward the gown, feeling mutinous—then saw the note dangling from the hanger: *WEAR ME IF YOU DARE.*

That wasn't Alisa's handwriting.



I found Jameson at the edge of the Black Wood. He was wearing a white tuxedo that fit his body far too well and standing next to an honest-to-God hot-air balloon.

*Jameson Winchester Hawthorne.* I ran like the ball gown wasn't weighing me down, like I didn't have a knife strapped to my thigh.

Jameson caught me, our bodies colliding. "Happy birthday, Heiress."

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Some kisses were soft and gentle—and some were like fire.

Eventually, the realization that we had an audience managed to penetrate my brain. Oren was discreet. He wasn't looking *at* us, but my head of security clearly wasn't about to let Jameson Hawthorne fly off with me alone.

Reluctantly, I pulled back. "A hot-air balloon?" I asked Jameson dryly. "Really?"

"I should warn you, Heiress…." Jameson swung himself up onto the edge of the basket, landing in a crouch. "I am dangerously good at birthdays."

Jameson Hawthorne was dangerously good at a lot of things.

He held his hand down to me. I took it, and I didn't even try to pretend that I had grown used to this—all of it, any of it, *him*. In a million years, the life Tobias Hawthorne had left me would still take my breath away.

Oren climbed into the balloon after me and fixed his gaze on the horizon. Jameson cast off the ropes and hit the flame.

We surged upward.

Airborne, with my heart in my throat, I stared down at Hawthorne House. "How do you steer?" I asked Jameson as everything but the two of us and my very discreet bodyguard got smaller and farther away.

"You don't." Jameson's arms curved around my torso. "Sometimes, Heiress, all you can do is recognize which way the wind is blowing and plot a course."

The balloon was just the beginning. Jameson Hawthorne didn't do anything halfway.

A hidden picnic.

A helicopter ride to the Gulf.

Speeding away from the paparazzi.

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Slow dancing, barefoot, on the beach.

The ocean. A cliff. A wager. A race. A dare. *I'm going to remember this.* That was my overwhelming feeling on the helicopter ride home. *I'm going to remember it all.* Years from now, I'd still be able to *feel* it. The weight of the ball gown, the wind in my face. Sun-warmed sand on my skin and chocolate-covered strawberries melting on my tongue.

By sundown, we were almost home. It had been the perfect day. No crowds. No celebrities. No…"Party," I said as the helicopter approached the Hawthorne estate, and I took in the view below. The topiary garden and adjacent lawn were lit by thousands of tiny lights—and that wasn't even the worst of it.

"That had better not be a dance floor," I told Jameson darkly.

Jameson took the helicopter in for a landing, threw his head back, and smiled. "You're not going to comment on the Ferris wheel?"

No wonder he'd needed to get me out of the House. "You're a dead man, Hawthorne."

Jameson cut the engine. "Fortunately, Heiress, Hawthorne men have nine lives."

As we disembarked and walked toward the topiary garden, I glanced at Oren and narrowed my eyes. "You knew about this," I accused.

"I may have been presented with a guest list to vet for entrance onto the estate." My head of security's expression was absolutely unreadable…until the party came into full view. Then he *almost* smiled. "I also may have vetoed a few names on that list."

And by *a few*, I realized a moment later, he meant almost all of them.

The dance floor was scattered with rose petals and lit by strings of delicate lights that crisscrossed overhead, softly glowing like

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fireflies in the night. A string quartet played to the left of the kind of cake I would have expected to see at a royal wedding. The Ferris wheel turned in the distance. Tuxedo-clad waiters carried trays of champagne and hors d'oeuvres.

But there were no guests.

"Do you like?" Libby appeared beside me. She was dressed like something out of a goth fairy tale and grinning from ear to ear. "I wanted black rose petals, but this is nice, too."

"What *is* this?" I breathed.

My sister bumped her shoulder into mine. "We're calling it the introvert's ball."

"There's no one here." I could feel my own smile building.

"Not true," Libby replied cheerfully. "I'm here. Nash turned his nose up at the fancy food and put himself in charge of the grill. Mr. Laughlin's running the Ferris wheel, under Mrs. Laughlin's supervision. Thea and Rebecca are stealing a *super*-stolen moment back behind the ice sculptures. Xander's keeping an eye on your surprise, and here's Zara and Nan!"

I turned just in time to be poked with a cane. Jameson's great-grandmother glowered at me while his aunt looked on, austerely amused.

"You, girl," Nan said, which was basically her version of my name. "The neckline on that dress makes you look like a floozy." She wagged her cane at me, then grunted. "I approve."

"So do I," a voice piped up from my left. "Happy faxing birthday, you beautiful beach."

"Max?" I stared at my best friend, then glanced back at Libby.

"Surprise!"

Beside me, Jameson smirked. "Alisa may have been under the impression that there was going to be a much larger party."

But there wasn't. It was just . . . *us*.

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Max threw an arm around me. "Ask me how college is!"

"How's college?" I asked, still absolutely floored.

Max grinned. "Not nearly as entertaining as Ferris Wheel Leapfrog Death Match."

"Ferris Wheel Leapfrog Death Match?" I repeated. That had Xander written all over it. I knew for a fact the two of them had stayed in touch.

"Who's winning?" Jameson cocked his head to one side.

Max replied, but before I could process what she was saying, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye—or maybe I sensed it. Sensed *him*. Clad entirely in black, wearing a ten-thousand-dollar tuxedo the way other guys wore ratty sweatshirts, Grayson Hawthorne stepped onto the dance floor.

*He came home.* That thought was accompanied by a memory of the last time I'd seen him: *Grayson, broken. Me, beside him.* Back in the present, Grayson Hawthorne let his eyes linger on mine for just a moment, then swept them over the rest of the party. "Ferris Wheel Leapfrog Death Match," he said calmly. "This never ends well."

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# CHAPTER 5

The next morning, I woke to the sight of my ball gown strewn over the end of my bed. Jameson was asleep beside me. I pushed back the urge to trail my fingertips across his jawline, to lightly touch the scar that ran down his chest.

I'd asked him a dozen times how he'd gotten that scar, and he'd given me a dozen different answers. In some versions, the culprit was a jagged rock. A steel rod. A windshield.

Someday, I'd get the real answer.

I allowed myself one more moment beside Jameson, then slipped from my bed, picked up my Hawthorne pin, got dressed, and headed downstairs.



Grayson was in the dining room, alone.

"I didn't think you would make it home," I said, somehow managing to take the seat opposite his.

"Technically, it isn't *my* home anymore." Even at low volume, Grayson's voice washed over the room like a tide coming in. "In a very short time, everything in this place will officially be yours." That wasn't a condemnation or a complaint. It was a fact.

"That doesn't mean anything has to change," I said.

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"Avery." Piercing pale eyes met mine. "It has to. *You* have to." Before I'd come along, Grayson had been the heir apparent. He was practically an expert in what one *had* to do.

And I was the only one who knew: Beneath that invincible, controlled exterior, he was falling apart. I couldn't say that, couldn't let on I was even thinking it, so I stuck to the topic at hand. "What if I can't do this on my own?" I asked.

"You aren't on your own." Grayson let his eyes linger on mine, then carefully and deliberately broke eye contact. "Every year, on our birthdays," he said, after a moment, "the old man would call us into his study."

I'd heard this before. "*Invest. Cultivate. Create*," I said. From the time they were kids, each year on their birthdays, the Hawthorne brothers had been given ten thousand dollars to invest. They'd also been told to choose a talent or an interest to cultivate, and no expense had been spared in that cultivation. Finally, Tobias Hawthorne had issued a birthday challenge: something they were to invent, create, perform, or will into being.

"*Invest*—you'll soon have covered. *Cultivate*—you should pick something you want for yourself. Not an item or an experience but a skill." I waited for Grayson to ask me what I was going to choose, but he didn't. Instead, he removed a leather book from the inside of his suit jacket and slid it across the table. "As for your birthday challenge, you'll need to create a plan."

The leather was a deep, rich brown, soft to the touch. The edges of the pages were slightly uneven, as though the book had been bound by hand.

"You'll want to start with a firm grasp of your financials. From there, think about the future and map out your time and financial commitments for the next five years."

I opened the book. The thick off-white pages were blank.

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"Write it all down," Grayson instructed. "Then tear it apart and rewrite it. Over and over again until you have a plan that works."

"You know what you would do in my position." I would have bet my entire fortune that somewhere, he had a journal—and a plan—of his own.

Grayson's eyes found their way back to mine. "You aren't me."

I wondered if there was anyone at Harvard—a single person—who knew him even a tenth as well as his brothers and I did. "You promised you would help me." The words escaped before I could stop them. "You said you would teach me everything I needed to know."

I knew better than to remind Grayson Hawthorne of a broken promise. I didn't have the right to ask this of him, to ask anything of him. I was with Jameson. I *loved* Jameson. And, Grayson's entire life, everyone had expected too damn much.

"I'm sorry," I said. "This isn't your problem."

"Don't," Grayson ordered roughly, "look at me like I'm broken."

*You are not broken.* I'd said those words to him. He hadn't believed me then. He wouldn't now, either. "Alisa wants me to put the money in a trust," I said, because the least I owed him was a subject change.

Grayson responded with an arch of his brow. "Of course she does."

"I haven't agreed to anything yet."

A slight smile pulled at the edges of his lips. "Of course you haven't."

Oren appeared in the doorway before I could reply. "I just got a call from one of my men," he told me. "There's someone at the gates."

A warning sounded in my mind because Oren was perfectly capable of taking care of unwanted visitors himself. *Skye? Or*

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*Ricky?* Grayson's mother and my deadbeat of a father were no longer in prison for an attempt on my life that, remarkably, they *hadn't* orchestrated. That didn't mean they weren't still threats.

"Who is it?" Grayson's expression went blade-sharp.

Oren held my gaze as he answered the question. "She says her name is Eve."

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# CHAPTER 6

For months, I'd kept the existence of Toby's daughter a secret from everyone but Jameson. Because Toby had asked me to—but not *just* because Toby had asked me to.

"I need to take care of this," I said with a calm that I in no way felt.

"I assume my assistance is not required?" Grayson's tone was cool, but I knew him. I knew he would take my declining help as evidence that I was treating him with kid gloves.

*Hawthornes aren't supposed to break*, his voice whispered in my memory. *Especially me.*

I didn't have the luxury right now of trying to convince Grayson Hawthorne that he wasn't *weak* or *broken* or *damaged* to me. "I appreciate the offer," I told him, "but I'll be fine."

The last thing Grayson needed was to see the girl at the gates.

As Oren drove me out there, my mind raced. *What is she doing here? What does she want?* I tried to prepare myself, but the moment I saw Toby's daughter outside the gates, a wall of emotion crashed into me. Her amber hair blew in a gentle breeze. Even from behind, even wearing a threadbare white dress smudged with stains, this girl was luminescent.

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*She's not supposed to be here.* Toby had been clear: He couldn't save me from the legacy Tobias Hawthorne had left behind, but he *could* save Eve. From the press. From the threats. *From the poisoned tree,* I thought, stepping out of the SUV.

Eve turned. She moved like a dancer, with equal parts grace and abandon, and the moment her eyes met mine, I stopped breathing.

I'd known that Eve was a dead ringer for Emily Laughlin.

I'd known that.

But seeing her was like looking up to see a tsunami bearing down. She had Emily's strawberry-blond hair, Emily's emerald eyes. The same heart-shaped face, the same lips and delicate dusting of freckles.

Seeing her would kill Grayson. It might hurt Jameson, but it would *kill* Grayson.

*I have to get her out of here.* That thought pounded through my head, but as I reached the gates, my instincts sent up another warning. I scanned the road.

"Let her in," I told Oren. I didn't see any paparazzi, but experience had taught me the dangers of telescopic lenses, and the last thing Jameson or Grayson needed was to see this girl's face plastered all over every gossip site on the internet.

The gates opened. Eve took a step toward me. "You're Avery." She took a jagged breath. "I'm—"

"I know who you are." The words came out harsher than I'd meant them to—and that was the exact moment I saw blood crusted on her temple. "Oh, hell." I stepped closer. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Eve's fingers wound tightly around the strap of her beat-up messenger bag. "Toby isn't."

*No.* My mind rebelled. My mom had loved Toby. He'd watched out for me once she was gone. *He has to be okay.* A breath trapped

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in my chest, I let Oren escort the two of us behind the SUV—away from prying eyes and ears.

"What happened to Toby?" I demanded urgently.

Eve pressed her lips together. "He told me that if anything happened to him, I should come to you. And, look, I'm not naive, okay? I know you probably don't want me here." She said those words like a person used to not being wanted. "But I didn't have anywhere else to go."

When I'd found out about Eve, I'd offered to bring her to Hawthorne House. Toby had vetoed that idea. He hadn't wanted anyone to know about her. *So why would he send her to me?* Every muscle in my jaw and stomach tight, I forced myself to concentrate on the only thing that mattered.

"What happened to Toby?" I said again, my voice low and guttural.

The wind caught Eve's hair. Her pink lips parted. "They took him."

Air whooshed out of my lungs, my ears ringing, my sense of gravity distorted. "Who?" I demanded. "Who took him?"

"I don't know." Eve's arms curved protectively around her torso. "Toby found me months ago. He told me who he was. Who *I* was. We were doing fine, just the two of us, but then last week something happened. Toby saw someone."

"Who?" I asked again, the word torn out of me.

"I don't know. Toby wouldn't tell me. He just said that he had to leave."

*Toby does that*, I thought, my eyes stinging. *He leaves.* "You said someone took him."

"I'm getting to that," Eve said tersely. "Toby didn't want to take me with him, but I didn't give him a choice. I told him that if he tried to leave me behind, I would go to the press."

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Despite a leaked photograph and some tabloid rumors, no media outlet had yet been able to substantiate claims that Toby was alive. "You blackmailed him into taking you with him?"

"If you were me," Eve replied, something almost beseeching in her tone, "you would have done the same." She looked down, impossibly long lashes casting shadows on her face. "Toby and I went off the grid, but someone was tracking us, stalking us like prey. Toby wouldn't tell me who we were running from, but on Monday, he said that we had to split up. The plan was for us to meet back up three days later. I waited. I stayed off the grid, just like he'd taught me. Yesterday, I showed up at our meeting place." She shook her head, her green eyes glistening. "Toby didn't."

"Maybe he had second thoughts," I said, wanting that to be true. "Maybe—"

"No," Eve insisted desperately. "Toby never lied to me. He never broke a promise. He wouldn't—" She cut herself off. "Someone took him. You don't believe me? I can prove it."

Eve pulled her hair away from her face. The dried blood I'd seen was just the tip of the iceberg. The skin around the cut was mottled, a sickening mix of black and blue.

"Someone hit you." Until Oren spoke, I'd almost forgotten he was there. "With the butt of a gun, I'm guessing."

Eve didn't even look at him. Her bright green eyes stayed locked on mine. "Toby didn't show up at our meeting place, but someone else did." She let her hair fall back over the bruise. "They grabbed me from behind and told me that if I knew what was good for me, I would forget all about Toby Hawthorne."

"They used his real name?" I managed to form the question.

Eve nodded. "That's the last thing I remember. They knocked me out. I woke up to find they'd stolen everything I had on me. They even went through my pockets." Her voice shook slightly, and

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then she steeled herself. "Toby and I had stashed a bag for emergencies: a change of clothes for each of us, a little cash." I wondered if she realized how tightly she was holding that bag now. "I bought a bus ticket, and I came here. To you."

*You have a daughter,* I'd told Toby when we found out about Eve, and he'd replied, *I have two.* Swallowing back the twisted bramble of emotions inside me, I turned to Oren. "We should call the authorities."

"No." Eve caught my arm. "You can't report a dead man missing, and Toby didn't tell me to go to the police. He told me to come to *you*."

My throat tightened. "Someone attacked you. We can report that."

"And who," Eve bit out, "is going to believe a girl like me?"

I'd grown up poor. I'd been *that girl*—the one nobody expected much from, the one who was treated as less than because I had less.

"Bringing the authorities in could tie our hands," Oren told me. "We should prepare for a ransom demand. In the event that we get no such demand…"

I didn't even want to think about what it meant if the person who'd taken Toby wasn't after money. "If Eve tells you where she was supposed to meet Toby, can you send a team to do recon?" I asked Oren.

"Consider it done," he said—then his gaze shifted abruptly to something or someone behind me. I heard a sound from that direction, a strangled, almost inhuman sound, and I knew, even before I turned around, what I would see there. *Who* I would see there.

"Emily?" Grayson Hawthorne was staring at a ghost.

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# CHAPTER 7

Grayson Davenport Hawthorne was a person who valued control—of every situation, of every emotion. When I took a step toward him, he stepped back.

"Grayson," I said softly.

There were no words for the way he was staring at Eve—like she was a dream, every hope and every torment, *everything.*

Silvery gray eyes closed. "Avery. You should . . ." Grayson forced a breath in, out. He straightened and squared his shoulders. "I'm not safe to be around right now, Avery."

It took me a moment to realize that he thought he was hallucinating. *Again.* Breaking down. *Again.*

*Tell me again that I'm not broken.*

Closing the space between us, I took Grayson by the shoulders. "Hey," I said softly. "*Hey.* Look at me, Gray."

Those light eyes opened.

"That's not Emily." I held his gaze and wouldn't let him look away. "And you aren't hallucinating."

Grayson's eyes flickered over my shoulder. "I see—"

"I know," I said, bringing my hand to the side of his face and forcing his eyes back to mine. "She's real. Her name is Eve." I

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couldn't be sure he was hearing me, let alone processing what I was saying. "She's Toby's daughter."

"She looks . . ."

"I know," I said, my hand still on his jaw. "Emily's mom was Toby's biological mother, remember?" Newborn Toby had been adopted into the Hawthorne family in secret. Alice Hawthorne had faked a pregnancy to hide the adoption, passing him off as her own. "That makes Eve a Laughlin by blood," I continued. "There's a family resemblance."

"I thought—" Grayson cut off the words. A Hawthorne did not admit weakness. "You knew." Grayson looked down at me, and I finally let my hand fall away from his face. "You aren't surprised to see her, Avery. You knew."

I heard what he wasn't saying: *That night in the wine cellar—I knew.*

"Toby wanted her existence kept secret," I said, telling myself *that* was why I hadn't told him. "He didn't want this life for Eve."

"Who else knows?" Grayson demanded in that heir-apparent tone, the one that made questions sound perfunctory, like he was doing the person he was questioning a courtesy by asking instead of wresting the answer from their mind himself.

"Just Jameson," I replied.

After a long, torturous moment, Grayson looked past me to Eve, emotion etched in every muscle of his jaw. I wasn't sure how much of his torment was because he thought I considered him weak and how much of it was her. Either way, Grayson didn't hide from his pain this time. He walked toward Eve, letting it come, like a shirtless man stepping out into freezing rain.

Eve stared at him. She must have felt the intensity of the moment—*of him*—but she shook it off. "Look, I don't know what *this* is." She gestured in the vicinity of Grayson's face. "But it has

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been a really long week. I'm filthy. I'm scared." Her voice broke, and she turned to me. "So are you going to invite me inside and let your security goons figure out what happened to Toby, or are we just going to stand here?"

Grayson blinked, like he was seeing her—*Eve*—for the first time. "You're hurt."

She looked at him again. "I'm pissed."

I swallowed. Eve was right. Every second we spent out here was a second that Oren and his team were focused on safeguarding me instead of finding Toby.

"Come on," I said, the words like rocks in my throat. "Let's go back to the House."

Oren opened the back passenger door of the SUV. Eve climbed in, and as I followed, I wondered if this was what Pandora had felt like the moment she opened the box.

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# CHAPTER 8

I let Eve use my shower. Given the number of bathrooms in Hawthorne House, I recognized that decision for what it was: I wanted her where I could keep an eye on her.

I neglected to consider the fact that Jameson was still in my bed. Eve didn't seem to notice him on her way to my en suite, but Grayson did—and Jameson definitely noticed Eve. The moment the bathroom door closed behind her, he swung his feet over the side of the bed.

*Shirtless.* "Tell me everything, Heiress."

I searched his expression for some hint of what he was feeling, but Jameson Hawthorne was the consummate poker player. Seeing Eve had to have provoked some kind of emotion in him. The fact that he was hiding it hit me every bit as hard as the way that Grayson couldn't tear his eyes from the bathroom door.

"I don't know where to start," I said. I couldn't make myself say the words *It's Toby.*

Jameson crossed to me, his strides long. "Tell me what you need, Heiress."

Grayson finally pried his gaze away from the bathroom door. He bent, snatched an undershirt off the floor, and tossed it at his brother's face. "Put on a shirt."

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Somehow, the comically disgruntled look that Jameson shot Grayson was *exactly* what I needed. I told the two of them everything that Eve had told me. "Eve wasn't able to give Oren a lot of details," I finished. "He's putting together a team to run recon on the abduction site, but—"

"They're unlikely to find much at this point," Grayson finished.

"Convenient, that," Jameson commented. "What?" he said when Grayson's icy eyes narrowed. "I'm just saying that all we have right now is the story of a stranger who showed up on our doorstep and talked her way inside."

He was right. We didn't know Eve.

"You don't believe her?" Grayson wasn't normally the type to ask questions when the answers were already apparent, so this one came with an undercurrent of friction.

"What can I say?" Jameson shrugged again. "I'm a suspicious bastard."

*And Eve looks just like Emily*, I thought. Jameson wasn't unaffected by that. Not by a long shot.

"I don't think she's lying," I said. *That wound.*

"You wouldn't," Jameson told me softly. "And neither," he told Grayson in a very different tone, "would you."

That was clearly a reference to Emily. She'd played them both, manipulated them both, but Grayson had loved her to the end.

"You knew." Grayson stalked toward Jameson. "You knew she was out there, Jamie. You knew that Toby had a daughter, and you didn't say a word."

"Are you really going to lecture *me* about secrets, Gray?"

*What's he talking about?* I'd never said a word to Jameson about the things that his brother had admitted to me in the dark of night.

"At a minimum," Grayson enunciated, his voice soft and deadly, "we owe that girl our protection."

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"Because of the way she looks?" Jameson threw down the gauntlet.

"Because she's Toby's daughter," Grayson replied, "and that makes her one of us."

My fingers went to my pin. *Eve's a Hawthorne.* That shouldn't have hurt. It wasn't news. Eve was Toby's daughter—but it was already clear to me that Grayson didn't see her as a cousin. *She isn't related to them by blood. They didn't grow up together.* So when Grayson said that she was one of them, that they owed her protection, all I could think was that he'd once spoken similar words about me.

*Est unus ex nobis. Nos defendat eius.*

"Can we please just focus on Toby?" I said. Grayson must have heard something in my tone because he stepped back.

Stepped down.

I turned to Jameson. "Pretend for a second that you trust Eve. Pretend she looks nothing like Emily. Pretend she's telling the truth. Other than Oren's search, what's our next move?"

This was what Jameson and I did: questions and answers, looking for what other people missed. If he wouldn't do this with me, if seeing Eve had thrown him off that much . . .

"Motive," Jameson supplied finally. "If we want to find out who took Toby, we need to know *why* they took him."

Logically, I could think of three broad possibilities. "They want something from him. They want to use him as leverage." I swallowed. "Or they want to hurt him."

*They knew his real name. Somehow, they knew how to find him.*

"There has to be something we're missing," I said. I needed this to be a puzzle. I needed there to be clues.

"You mentioned that Eve said the person who knocked her out went through her pockets." Jameson had a way of playing with the facts of a situation, turning them over like a coin spun from finger to finger. "So what were they looking for?"

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What did Toby have that someone else might want badly enough to kidnap him to get it? What could possibly be worth that kind of risk?

*What fits in a pocket?* My heart nearly exploded in my chest.

What mystery had Jameson and I spent the last nine months trying to solve?

"The disk," I breathed.

The door to the bathroom opened. Eve stood there, wrapped in a white towel, wet hair trailing down the sides of her neck. She wore a locket and nothing else except the towel. Grayson tried very hard not to look at her.

Jameson looked at me.

"Did you need something?" I asked Eve. Her hair was darker wet, less remarkable. Without it to distract from her face, her eyes looked bigger, her cheekbones higher.

"Bandage," Eve replied. If she was self-conscious about standing there in a towel, she didn't show it. "My cut split open in the shower."

"I'll help you," I volunteered before Grayson could. The sooner I tended to Eve, the sooner I could get back to Jameson and the possibility I'd just breathed into being.

*What if the person who took Toby was after the disk?* My mind racing, I led Eve back into the bathroom.

"What disk?" she asked behind me. I pulled out a first aid kit and handed it to her. She took it from me, her fingers brushing mine. "When I came into the room, you were talking about what happened to Toby," she said stubbornly. "You mentioned a disk."

I wondered how much else she'd heard and whether she'd meant to eavesdrop. Maybe Jameson was right. Maybe we couldn't trust her.

"It might be nothing," I said, brushing off the question.

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"What might be nothing?" Eve pressed. When I didn't answer, she dropped another question like a bomb. "Who's Emily?"

I swallowed. "A girl." That wasn't a lie, but it was so far from the truth that I couldn't leave it there. "She died. The two of you—you're related."

Eve chose a bandage and pushed her wet hair back from her face. I almost offered to help her, but something held me back. "Toby told me he was adopted," she said, fixing the bandage in place. "But he wouldn't tell me anything about his biological family—or the Hawthornes."

She waited, like she expected me to tell her something. When I didn't, she looked down. "I know that you don't trust me," she said. "I wouldn't trust me, either. You have everything, and I have nothing, and I know how that looks."

So did I. From experience, *so did I.*

"I never wanted to come here," Eve continued. "I never wanted to ask you for anything—or them." Her voice strained. "But I want Toby back. I want my *father* back, Avery." Her emerald eyes locked on mine, radiating an intensity that was nearly Hawthorne. "And I will do anything—*anything*—to get what I want, even if that means begging for your help. So please, Avery, if you know something that could help us find Toby, just tell me."

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# CHAPTER 9

I didn't tell Eve about the disk. I justified it to myself because, for all I knew, there was nothing to tell. Not every mystery was an elaborate puzzle. The answer wasn't always elegant and carefully designed. And even if Toby's abduction did have something to do with the disk, where did that leave us?

Feeling like I owed Eve *something,* I asked Mrs. Laughlin to prepare her a room. Tears overflowed the moment the older woman laid eyes on her great-granddaughter. There was no hiding who Eve was.

No hiding that she belonged here.

Hours later, I was alone in Tobias Hawthorne's study. I told myself that I was doing the right thing, giving Jameson and Grayson space. Seeing Eve had dredged up trauma. They needed to process, and I needed to think.

I triggered the hidden compartment in the old man's desk and reached for the folder that Jameson and I kept inside. Flipping it open, I stared at a drawing I'd made: a small coinlike disk the size of a quarter, engraved with concentric circles. The last time I'd seen this bit of metal, Toby had just snatched it from my hands. I'd

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