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For Judy Eshelman

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TWELVE AND A HALF YEARS AGO

Grayson and Jameson Hawthorne knew the rules. You couldn't get around rules if you didn't know them. *On Christmas morning, you may not step foot outside your rooms before the clock strikes seven.*

Beneath his blanket, Jameson lifted a military-grade walkie-talkie to his mouth. "You set the clocks forward?" He was seven to his brother's eight—both plenty old enough to spot a loophole.

That was the trick. The challenge. The game.

"I did," Grayson confirmed.

Jameson paused. "What if the old man set them back after we went to bed?"

"Then we'll have to go to Plan B."

Hawthornes *always* had a Plan B. But this time, it proved unnecessary. Hawthorne House had five grandfather clocks, and they all struck seven at the exact same time: 6:25.

Success! Jameson flung down his walkie-talkie, threw back the

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covers, and took off—out the door, down the hall, two lefts, a right, across the landing to the grand staircase. Jameson *flew*. But Grayson was a year older, a year taller—and he'd already made it from his wing halfway down the stairs.

Taking the steps two at a time, Jameson made it seventy percent of the way down, then launched himself over the banister. He hurtled toward the ground floor and landed on top of Grayson. They both went down, a mess of limbs and Christmas morning madness, then scrambled to their feet and raced neck and neck, arriving at the Great Room doors at the exact same time—only to find their five-year-old brother had beaten them there.

Xander was curled up on the floor like a puppy. Yawning, he opened his eyes and blinked up at them. “Is it Christmas?”

“What are you doing, Xan?” Grayson frowned. “Did you sleep down here? The rules say . . .”

“*Can't step a foot*,” Xander replied, sitting up. “I didn't. I *rolled*.” At his brothers' unblinking stares, Xander demonstrated.

“You log-rolled all the way from your bedroom?” Jameson was impressed.

“No stepping.” Xander grinned. “I win!”

“Kid's got us there.” Fourteen-year-old Nash sauntered over to join them and hoisted Xander up on his shoulders. “Ready?”

The fifteen-foot-tall doors to the Great Room were closed only once a year, from midnight on Christmas Eve until the boys descended on Christmas morning. Staring at the gold rings on the door, Jameson imagined the marvels that lay on the other side.

Christmas at Hawthorne House was *magic*.

“You get that door, Nash,” Grayson ordered. “Jamie, help me with this one.”

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Grinning, Jameson locked his fingers around the ring, next to Grayson's. "One, two, three . . . pull!"

The majestic doors parted, revealing . . . *nothing*.

"It's gone." Grayson went unnaturally still.

"What is?" Xander asked, craning his neck to see.

"Christmas," Jameson whispered. No stockings. No presents. No marvels or surprises. Even the decorations were gone, all except the tree, and even that had been stripped of ornaments.

Grayson swallowed. "Maybe the old man didn't want us to break the rules this time."

That was the thing about games: Sometimes you lost.

"No Christmas?" Xander's voice quivered. "But I *rolled*."

Nash set Xander down. "I'll fix this," he swore in a low tone. "I promise."

"No." Jameson shook his head, his chest and eyes burning. "We're missing something." He forced himself to take in every detail of the room. "There!" he said, pointing to a spot near the top of the tree where a single ornament hung, hidden among the branches.

That wasn't a coincidence. There were no coincidences in Hawthorne House.

Nash crossed the room and snagged the ornament, then held it out. A sphere made of clear plastic dangled from a red ribbon. The plastic had a visible seam.

There was something inside.

Grayson took the ornament and, with the precision of a neurosurgeon, broke it open. A single white puzzle piece fell out. Jameson pounced. He turned the piece over and saw his grandfather's scrawl on the back. 1/6.

“One out of six,” he said out loud, and then his eyes widened. “The other trees!”



There were six Christmas trees in Hawthorne House. The one in the foyer stretched up twenty feet overhead, its boughs wrapped in sparkling lights. The dining room tree was strung with pearls, the one in the Tea Room bedecked in crystal. Cascading velvet ribbons danced through the branches of an enormous fir on the second-story landing; a white tree decorated solely in gold sat on the third.

Nash, Grayson, Jameson, and Xander scoured them all, obtaining five more ornaments, four with puzzle pieces inside. Opening those four ornaments allowed them to assemble the puzzle: a square. A *blank* square.

Jameson and Grayson reached for the final ornament at the same time. “I’m the one who found the first clue,” Jameson insisted fiercely. “I *knew* there was a game.”

After a long moment, Grayson let go. Jameson had the ornament open in a flash. Inside, he found a small metal key on a little flashlight keychain

“Try the light on the puzzle, Jamie.” Even Nash couldn’t resist the lure of this game.

Jameson turned the flashlight on and angled its beam toward the assembled puzzle. Words appeared. *SOUTHWEST CORNER OF THE ESTATE*.

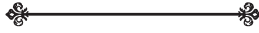
“How long will it take us to walk there?” Xander asked dramatically. “*Hours?*”

The Hawthorne estate, like Hawthorne House, was sizable.

Nash knelt next to Xander. “Wrong question, little man.” He looked up at the other two. “Either of you wanna tell me the right one?”

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Jameson's gaze darted to the keychain, but Grayson beat him to speaking. "What exactly is that a key *to*?"



The answer was a golf cart. Nash drove. As the southwest corner of the estate came into view, an awed hush swept over the brothers as they gaped at the sight before them.

This present *definitely* wouldn't have fit in the Great Room.

A quartet of ancient oak trees, all of them massive, now hosted the most elaborate tree house any of them—and possibly anyone in the world—had ever seen. The multi-level marvel looked like something out of a fairy tale, like it had been called from the oaks by magic, like it *belonged* there. Jameson counted nine walkways stretching between the trees. The house had two towers. Six spiraling slides. Ladders, ropes, steps that seemed to float midair.

This was the tree house to end all tree houses.

Their grandfather stood in front of it all, arms crossed, the barest hint of a smile on his face. "You know, boys," the great Tobias Hawthorne called, as the golf cart came to a stop and the wind whistled through branches, "I thought you'd get here faster."

CHAPTER 1



GRAYSON

Faster. Grayson Hawthorne was power and control. His form was flawless. He'd long ago perfected the art of visualizing his opponent, *feeling* each strike, channeling his body's momentum into every block, every attack.

But you could always be faster.

After his tenth time through the sequence, Grayson stopped, sweat dripping down his bare chest. Keeping his breathing even and controlled, he knelt in front of what remained of their childhood tree house, unrolled his pack, and surveyed his choices: three daggers, two with ornate hilts and one understated and smooth. It was this last blade that Grayson picked up.

Knife in hand, Grayson straightened, his arms by his side. Mind, clear. Body, free of tension. *Begin*. There were many styles of knife fighting, and the year he was thirteen, Grayson had studied them all. Of course, billionaire Tobias Hawthorne's grandsons

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had never merely *studied* anything. Once they'd chosen a focus, they were expected to live it, breathe it, master it.

And this was what Grayson had learned that year: Stance was everything. You didn't move the blade. You moved, and the blade moved. Faster. *Faster*. It had to feel natural. It had to *be* natural. The moment your muscles tensed, the moment you stopped breathing, the moment you broke your stance instead of flowing from one to the next, you lost.

And Hawthornes didn't lose.

"When I told you to get a hobby, this isn't what I meant."

Grayson ignored Xander's presence for as long as it took to finish the sequence—and throw the dagger with exacting precision at a low-hanging branch six feet away. "Hawthornes don't have hobbies," he told his little brother, walking to retrieve the blade. "We have specialties. Expertise."

"*Anything worth doing is worth doing well*," Xander quoted, wiggling his eyebrows—one of which had only just started to grow back after an experiment gone wrong. "*And anything done well can be done better*."

Why would a Hawthorne settle for better, a voice whispered in the back of Grayson's mind, when they could be the best?

Grayson closed his hand around the dagger's hilt and pulled. "I should be getting back to work."

"You are a man obsessed," Xander declared.

Grayson secured the dagger in its holder, then rolled the pack back up, tying it closed. "I have twenty-eight billion reasons to be obsessed."

Avery had set an impossible task for herself—and for them. Five years to give away more than twenty-eight billion dollars. That was the majority of the Hawthorne fortune. They'd spent the past

seven months just assembling the foundation's board and advisory committee.

"We have five more months to nail down the first three billion in donations," Grayson stated crisply, "and I promised Avery I would be there with her every step of the way."

Promises mattered to Grayson Hawthorne—and so did Avery Kylie Grambs. The girl who had inherited their grandfather's fortune. The stranger who had become one of them.

"Speaking as someone with friends, a girlfriend, and a small army of robots, I just think you could do with a little more balance in your life," Xander opined. "An *actual* hobby? Down time?"

Grayson gave him a look. "You've filed at least three patents since school let out for the summer last month, Xan."

Xander shrugged. "They're recreational patents."

Grayson snorted, then assessed his brother. "How *is* Isaiah?" he asked softly.

Growing up, none of the Hawthorne brothers had known their fathers' identities—until Grayson had discovered that his was Sheffield *Grayson*. Nash's was a man named Jake *Nash*. And Xander's was Isaiah *Alexander*. Of the three men, only Isaiah actually deserved to be called a father. He and Xander had filed those "recreational patents" together.

"We're supposed to be talking about you," Xander said stubbornly.

"I should get back to work," Grayson reiterated, adopting a tone that was very effective at putting everyone *except* his brothers in their place. "And despite what Avery and Jameson seem to believe, I don't need a babysitter."

"You don't need a babysitter," Xander agreed cheerfully, "and I am definitely not writing a book entitled *The Care and Feeding of Your Broody Twenty-Year-Old Brother*."

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Grayson's eyes narrowed to slits.

"I can assure you," Xander said with great solemnity, "it doesn't have pictures."

Before Grayson could summon an appropriate threat in response, his phone buzzed. Assuming it was the figures he'd requested, Grayson picked the phone up, only to discover a text from Nash. He looked back at Xander and knew instantly that his youngest brother had received the same message.

Grayson was the one who read the fateful missive out loud: "Nine-one-one."

CHAPTER 2



JAMESON

The roar of the falls. The mist in the air. The feel of the back of Avery's body against the front of his. Jameson Winchester Hawthorne was *hungry*—for this, for her, for everything, all of it, *more*.

Iguazú Falls was the world's largest waterfall system. The walkway they were standing on took them right up to the edge of an incredible drop-off. Staring out at the falls, Jameson felt the lure of *more*. He eyed the railing. "Do you dare me?" he murmured into the back of Avery's head.

She reached back to touch his jaw. "Absolutely not."

Jameson's lips curved—a teasing smile, a wicked one. "You're probably right, Heiress."

She turned her head to the side and met his gaze. "Probably?"

Jameson looked back at the falls. *Unstoppable. Off limits. Deadly.* "Probably."



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They were staying in a villa built on stilts and surrounded by jungle, no one around for miles but the two of them, Avery's security team, and the jaguars roaring in the distance.

Jameson felt Avery's approach before he heard it.

"Heads or tails?" She leaned against the railing, brandishing a bronze-and-silver coin. Her brown hair was falling out of its ponytail, her long-sleeved shirt still damp from the falls.

Jameson brought his hand to her hair tie, then worked it slowly and gently down—and off. *Heads or tails* was an invitation. A challenge. *You kiss me, or I kiss you*. "Dealer's choice, Heiress."

"If I'm the dealer..." Avery placed a palm flat on his chest, her eyes daring him to do something about that wet shirt of hers. "We're going to need cards."

The things we could do, Jameson thought, *with a deck of cards*. But before he could voice some of the more tantalizing possibilities, the satellite phone buzzed. Only five people had the number: his brothers, her sister, and her lawyer. Jameson groaned.

The text was from Nash. Nine seconds later, when the satellite phone rang, Jameson answered. "Delightful timing, as always, Gray."

"I take it you received Nash's message?"

"We've been summoned," Jameson intoned. "You planning to play hooky again?"

Each Hawthorne brother got a single nine-one-one a year. The code didn't mean *emergency* so much as *I want you all here*, but if one brother texted, the others came, no questions asked. Ignoring a nine-one-one led to... consequences.

"If you say *one word* about leather pants," Grayson bit out. "I will—"

"Did you say *leather pants*?" Jameson was enjoying this way too

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much. “You’re breaking up, Gray. Are you asking me to send you a picture of the incredibly tight leather pants you had to wear the one time you ignored a nine-one-one?”

“Do not send me a picture—”

“A video?” Jameson asked loudly. “You want a video of yourself singing karaoke in the leather pants?”

Avery plucked the phone from his hands. She knew as well as Jameson did that there would be no ignoring Nash’s summons, and she had a bad habit of *not* tormenting his brothers.

“It’s me, Grayson.” Avery examined Nash’s text herself. “We’ll see you in London.”

CHAPTER 3



JAMESON

On a private jet in the dead of night, Jameson looked out the window. Avery was asleep on his chest. Near the front of the plane, Oren and the rest of the security team were quiet.

Quiet always got to Jameson, the same way stillness did. Skye had told them once that she wasn't made for inertness, and as much as Jameson hated to see any similarity between himself and his spoiled, sometimes homicidal mother, he knew what she meant.

It had been getting worse these past weeks. *Since Prague*. Jameson pushed down the unwanted reminder, but at night, with nothing to distract him, he could barely resist the urge to remember, to *think*, to give in to the siren call of risk and a mystery that needed to be solved.

"You've got that look on your face."

Jameson ran a hand over Avery's hair. Her head was still on his chest, but her eyes were open. "What look?" he asked softly.

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“*Our* look.”

Avery’s brain was just as wired for puzzles as his was. That was exactly why Jameson couldn’t risk letting the silence and stillness close in, why he *had* to keep himself occupied. Because if he let himself really think about Prague, he’d want to tell her, and if he told her, it would be real. And once it was real, he feared no amount of distraction would be capable of holding him back, no matter how reckless or dangerous pursuing this might be.

Jameson trusted Avery with all that he had and all that he was, but he couldn’t always trust *himself* to do the right thing. The smart thing. The safe thing.

Don’t tell her. Jameson forced his mind down a different path, banishing all thoughts of Prague. “You got me, Heiress.” The only way for him to hide anything from Avery was to show her something else. Something true. *Misdirection.* “My gap year is almost over.”

“You’re restless.” Avery pulled back from his chest. “You have been for months. It wasn’t as noticeable on this trip, but on all the others, when I’m working...”

“*I want...*” Jameson closed his eyes, picturing himself back at the falls, hearing the roar—and eyeing the railing. “I don’t know what I want. *Something.*” He looked back out the window, into blackness. “*To do great things.*”

That was a Hawthorne’s charge, always—and not *great* as in *very good*. *Great* as in vast and lasting and incredible. *Great* like the falls.

“*We are* doing great things,” Avery told him. Giving away his grandfather’s billions was *it* for her. She was going to change the world. *And I’m right here with her. I can hear the roar. I can feel the spray.* But Jameson couldn’t shake the gnawing sense that he was standing behind the ropes.

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He wasn't doing great things. Not in the way she was. Not even in the way Gray was.

"This will be our first time back in Europe," Avery said quietly, leaning forward to look out into the black, same as him, "since Prague."

Very perceptive, Avery Kylie Grambs.

There was an art to the careless smile. "I've told you, Heiress, you don't need to worry about Prague."

"I'm not worried, Hawthorne. I'm curious. Why won't you tell me what happened that night?" Avery knew how to use silence to her advantage, wielding each pause to command his full attention, to make him *feel* her silence like breath on his skin. "You came home at dawn. You smelled like fire and ash. And you had a cut"—she brought her hand to the place where his collarbone dipped, right at the base of his neck—"here."

If Avery had wanted to force him to tell her, she could have. One little word—*Tahiti*—and his secrets would have been hers. But she wouldn't force this, and Jameson knew that, and it killed him. Everything about her *killed him* in the best possible way.

Don't tell her. Don't think about it. Resist.

Jameson brought his lips within a centimeter of hers. "If you want, Mystery Girl," he murmured, heat rising between them, the name a remnant of another time, "you can start calling me Mystery Boy."

CHAPTER 4



GRAYSON

It had been years since Grayson had stepped foot in London, but the flat looked just the same: same historical facade, same modern interior, same twin terraces, same exquisite view.

Same four brothers taking in that view.

Beside Grayson, Jameson cocked an eyebrow at Nash. “What’s the situation, cowboy?” Grayson had been wondering the same thing. Nash almost never used his yearly nine-one-one.

“This.” Their oldest brother plunked a velvet box down on the glass-top table. A *ring* box. Grayson found himself suddenly unable to blink as Nash flipped it open to reveal a remarkable piece: a black opal wrapped in intricate diamond leaves and set in platinum. The flecks of color in the gemstone were electric, the workmanship without peer. “Nan gave it to me,” Nash said. “It was our grandmother’s.”

Nash was the only one of them with memories of Alice Hawthorne, who’d died before the rest of the Hawthorne brothers were even born.

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“It wasn’t her wedding or engagement ring,” Nash drawled. “But Nan thought it would suit Lib.” Nash bowed his head slightly. “For that purpose.”

Lib as in *Libby Grambs*, Nash’s partner, Avery’s sister. Grayson felt a breath catch in his throat.

“Our great-grandmother gave you a family ring for Libby,” Xander summarized, “and that’s a problem?”

“It is,” Nash confirmed.

Grayson expelled the breath. “Because you’re not ready.”

Nash looked up and cracked a slow and devious grin. “Because I already bought her one myself.” He plunked a second ring box down on the table. One by one, the muscles over Grayson’s rib cage tightened, and he wasn’t even sure why.

Jameson, who’d gone unnaturally still the moment he’d seen the first ring, snapped out of it and flicked open the second box. It was empty.

Nash already proposed. He and Libby are already engaged. The realization hit Grayson with startling force. *Everything is changing.* That was a useless thought, obvious and overdue. Their grandfather was dead. They’d all been disinherited. Everything had *already* changed. Nash was already with Libby. Jameson was with Avery. Even Xander had Max.

“Nash Westbrook Hawthorne,” Xander boomed. “Prepare yourself for a bracing, celebratory hug of manly joy!”

Xander did not, in fact, give Nash time to prepare before crashing into him—hugging, grappling, wrestling, attempting to hoist Nash into the air, it was all the same. Jameson joined the melee, and Grayson forced everything else to fade away as he clapped a hand on Nash’s shoulder—then pulled him backward.

Three on one. Nash didn’t stand a chance.

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“Impromptu bachelor party!” Jameson declared when the four of them finally broke apart. “Give me an hour.”

“Stop.” Nash held up a hand, then followed his first *who’s-the-oldest-brother-here* order with a second. “Turn.” Jameson obliged, and Nash fixed him with a look. “You planning on breaking any laws, Jamie? Because you’ve been on quite a kick lately.”

To Grayson’s knowledge, there had been an incident in Monaco, another in Belize . . .

Jameson gave a little shrug. “You know what they say, Nash. No charges filed, no harm done.”

“Is that what they say?” Nash replied, his tone deceptively mild. And then, inexplicably, Grayson found himself on the end of Nash’s *look*.

What did I do? Grayson’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t bring us here for your own sake.”

Nash leaned back. “You accusin’ me of a being a mother hen, Gray?”

“Them’s fighting words,” Xander said happily, altogether too pleased at the prospect.

Nash cast one last look at Grayson, then turned back to Jameson. “Impromptu bachelor party,” he agreed. “But Gray and Xan will help you plan—and tree house rules.”

What happened in the tree house stayed in the tree house.

CHAPTER 5



GRAYSON

Their night ended at three in the morning. “Ice-climbing, skywalk, speedboat, mopeds . . .” To Grayson’s ears, Jameson sounded very satisfied with himself. “Not to mention clubbing.”

“I thought the medieval crypt was a nice touch,” Xander added.

Grayson arched a brow. “I suspect Nash could have gone without being duct-taped.”

The man of the hour took off his cowboy hat and leaned against the wall. “What happens in the tree house stays in the tree house,” he reiterated, his quiet tone reminding Grayson that Avery and Libby were asleep upstairs.

A lump rose in Grayson’s throat. “Congratulations,” he told his brother. He meant it. Life *was* change. People were supposed to move forward, even if he could not.

Jameson and Xander stumbled to bed, but Nash held Grayson back. When it was just the two of them, he placed something in

Grayson's hand. *The ring box.* The one with their grandmother's black opal ring.

"Why don't you hold on to this?" Nash said.

Grayson swallowed, the muscles in his throat tight. "Why me?" Jameson would have been the obvious choice, for obvious reasons.

"Why not you, Gray?" Nash leaned forward, putting his gaze level with Grayson's. "Someday, with someone—why not you?"



The ring was still in its box on his nightstand when Grayson woke up hours later. *Why not you?*

Grayson pushed himself out of bed and briskly tucked the box into a hidden compartment in his luggage. If Nash wanted the heirloom ring kept safe, he'd keep it safe. Protecting things that mattered was what Grayson Hawthorne did, even when he couldn't afford to let them matter too much.

Out on the terrace, Avery was already up, helping herself to an impressive breakfast spread. "I hear last night was the stuff of legends." She handed him a cup of coffee—black, hot, and filled to almost overflowing.

"Jamie has a big mouth," Grayson replied. The mug warmed his hand.

"Trust me," Avery murmured, "Jameson knows how to keep secrets just fine."

Grayson studied her, the way he wouldn't have allowed himself to months earlier. It didn't hurt quite the way it would have then. "Is he spiraling?"

"No." Avery shook her head, and her hair fell into her face. "He's just looking for something—or trying not to look for something. Or both." She paused. "What about you, Gray?"

"I'm fine." The response was automatic, rote, and brooked no

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argument. But he could never quite seem to stop there with her. “And for the record, if Xander shows you a ‘book’ he’s been writing, you *will* destroy it, or there will be consequences.”

“Consequences!” Xander jackrabbited onto the terrace, wriggled between them, and snagged a chocolate croissant. “My favorite!”

“Who among us doesn’t love the taste of consequences in the morning?” Jameson ambled out, helped himself to a croissant, and waved it in Grayson’s general direction. “Avery tell you about her new meeting schedule? London officially knows the Hawthorne heiress is in town.”

“Meetings?” Grayson picked up his phone. “What time?” A call came in before Avery could reply. When Grayson saw who was calling, he abruptly stood. “I need to take this.” He strode back inside, closed the door, and made sure he hadn’t been followed before he answered.

“I assume we have a situation.”

CHAPTER 6



JAMESON

Fascinating.” Jameson stared in the direction Grayson had gone. “Was that a hint of genuine human emotion on his face?” Avery gave him a look. “Worried?” she asked. “Or curious?” “About Grayson?” Jameson replied. *Both*. “Neither. It’s probably his tailor calling to make fun of him for being a twenty-year-old who has a tailor.”

Xander grinned. “Should I creep inside and eavesdrop on that phone call?”

“Are you implying that you’re even remotely capable of stealth?” Jameson retorted.

“I can be stealthy!” Xander insisted. “Clearly, you’re just still bitter at the extent to which my legendary dance moves blew everyone’s mind at the club last night.”

Refusing to take the bait, Jameson glanced at Oren, who’d joined them on the terrace. “Speaking of our little celebration,” Jameson said, “how bad is the paparazzi situation this morning?”

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“British tabloids.” Oren’s eyes narrowed to slits. Avery’s head of security was former military and frighteningly capable. That he’d narrowed his eyes at all told Jameson that the paparazzi situation wasn’t *good*. “I’ve got two of my men patrolling out front.”

“And I have meetings,” Avery replied firmly. Clearly, she wasn’t planning to change her plans because of the paparazzi. Oren was too smart to ask her to.

“I could distract them,” Jameson offered devilishly. Trouble was a specialty of his.

“I appreciate the offer,” Avery murmured, stopping on her way inside to brush her lips lightly and teasingly against his. “But no.”

The kiss was brief. *Too brief*. Jameson watched her go. Oren followed. Eventually, Xander went to take a shower. Jameson stayed on the terrace, taking in the view, letting a decadent, buttery croissant melt on his tongue, bit by bit, as he tried not to think about how *quiet* it was, how *still*.

And then Grayson reappeared, a suitcase in hand. “I have to go.”

“Go where?” Jameson said immediately. Being challenged was good for Grayson’s god complex, and challenging him was rarely boring. “And why?”

“I have some personal business to attend to.”

“Since when do *you* have personal business?” Jameson was officially intrigued.

Grayson didn’t dignify that question with a response. He just turned and began to walk back through the flat. Jameson went to follow, but then his phone buzzed—*Oren*.

He’s with Avery. Jameson came to an immediate standstill and answered. “Problem?” he asked the bodyguard.

“Not on my end. Avery’s fine. But one of my men just intercepted the porter.” As Oren made his report, Grayson’s retreating

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form disappeared from Jameson's view. "It appears the porter has a delivery. For you."



In the hall, the porter held out a silver tray. On the tray sat a single card.

Jameson cocked his head to the side. "What is this?"

The porter's eyes were bright. "It appears to be a card, sir. A calling card."

His curiosity piqued, Jameson reached for the card, grabbing it between his middle and index fingers—a magician's hold, like he might make it disappear. The moment his gaze landed on the words embossed on the card, the rest of the world faded away.

The front of the card bore a name and an address. *Ian Johnstone-Jameson. 9 King's Gate Terrace.* Jameson flipped the card over. In handwritten scrawl, he found no instructions, only a time. 2 PM.

CHAPTER 7



JAMESON

Hours later, Jameson ducked out of the flat, with Nash, Xander, and the security team none the wiser. As for the British paparazzi, they weren't used to tracking Hawthornes. Jameson arrived at 9 King's Gate Terrace fashionably late and alone.

If you want to play, Ian Johnstone-Jameson, I'll play. Not because he needed or wanted or longed for a father, the way he had as a kid, but because these days, doing *something* to keep his mind occupied always felt less dangerous than doing nothing.

The building was white and vast, stretching up five stories and running the length of the block, luxury flat after luxury flat, an embassy or two mixed among them. The area was posh. Exclusive. Before Jameson could press his finger to the call button, security strode down the walk. *One guard for several units.*

"May I help you, sir?" The man's tone suggested that *no, indeed he could not.*

But Jameson wasn't a Hawthorne for nothing. "I was invited. Number nine."

"I was unaware that *he* was in residence." The man's reply was smooth, but his eyes were sharp. Jameson brandished the card. "Ah," the man said, taking it from him. "I see."

Two minutes later, Jameson was standing in the entry of a flat that made the Hawthorne London abode look modest. White marble inlaid with a glistening black *B* marked a foyer that seemed to stretch back forever, cutting all the way through the flat. Glass doors offered an undisturbed view of the impeccable artwork lining the stark-white hall all the way down.

Ian Johnstone-Jameson pushed through one of those glass doors.

This family is prominent enough, Jameson could hear his mother saying mockingly, *that any of the men I slept with would have to live under a rock not to know that they had a son.*

The man striding toward him now was mid-forties with thick brown hair kept just long enough that he couldn't pass for your typical CEO or politician. There was something aching familiar about his features—definitely not his nose or jaw, but the shape and color of his eyes, the curl of his lips. The *amusement*.

"I had heard that there was some resemblance," Ian commented in an accent as posh as his address. He cocked his head slightly to one side in a habitual motion Jameson recognized all too well. "Would you like a tour?"

Jameson raised an eyebrow. "Would you like to give me one?" Nothing mattered unless you let it.

"Tit for tat." Ian's lips twisted into a smile. "That, I can respect. Three questions." The British man turned, strode back the way he'd come, and pushed open the first glass door. "That's what I'll give you in exchange for your answering one of mine."

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Ian Johnstone-Jameson held the glass door open, waiting. Jameson let him wait, then languidly strolled forward.

“You’ll ask your questions first,” Ian said.

Will I? Jameson thought, but he was far too Hawthorne to fall into the trap of saying that out loud. “And if I don’t have any questions for you, I wonder what you’ll offer me next.”

Ian’s eyes glinted, a vivid green. “You didn’t phrase that as a question,” he noted.

Jameson flashed his teeth. “No. I didn’t.” Down the long hall they went, through more glass doors and past a Matisse painting. Jameson waited until they wound their way to the kitchen—all black, from the countertops to the appliances to the granite floors—before giving voice to his first question. “What do you want, Ian Johnstone-Jameson?”

You couldn’t grow up Hawthorne without realizing that everyone wanted something.

“Simple,” Ian replied. “I want to ask you my question. It’s more of a favor, really. But as a show of good faith, I’ll go ahead and offer up an answer to your question in the general sense as well. As a rule in life, I want three things: Pleasure. Challenge.” He smiled. “And to win.”

Jameson hadn’t expected anything this man had to say to hit him hard.

Focus. He could almost hear his grandfather’s admonition. *Lose focus, boys, and lose the game.* For once, Jameson leaned into the memory. He was Jameson Winchester Hawthorne. He didn’t need a damn thing from the man in front of him.

They were nothing alike.

“What does winning look like to you?” Jameson chose a question that was meant to give him the measure of the man. *Know a man and know his weakness.*

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"Different things." Ian seemed to relish his answer. "A lovely night with a beautiful woman. A yes from men who love to say no. And often..." He put special emphasis on that word. "It looks like a winning hand. I'm a bit of a gamesman."

Jameson saw straight through that statement. "You gamble."

"Don't we all?" Ian replied. "But, yes, by profession, I'm a poker player. I met your mother in Las Vegas the year I won a particularly sought-after international title. Frankly, my family would prefer that I'd chosen a more respectable pastime, like chess—or better yet, finance. But I'm good enough at what I do that I generally don't have to drink from the family cup, so their preferences—my father's and eldest brother's in particular—are irrelevant." Ian drummed his fingers lightly on the countertop. "Most of the time."

You have brothers? Jameson thought the question but didn't say it. Instead, he offered up a statement. "They don't know about me." Jameson raked his gaze over Ian's face. "Your family."

Everyone had a tell. It was just a matter of finding it.

"That wasn't a question," Ian replied, his expression never changing. *And that's the tell.* This was a man whose face had a thousand different ways of conveying that life and everyone in it were naught but amusements. A thousand ways—and he'd just locked into one.

"Not a question," Jameson agreed. "But I got my answer."

Ian Johnstone-Jameson liked to win. His family's opinions of him were irrelevant *most of the time*. They didn't know he had an illegitimate son.

"For what it's worth," Ian said, "it was a few years before I realized myself, and at that point, well..." *Why bother?* his little shrug seemed to say.

Jameson refused to let that sting. He had one question left. The smart move was to go for leverage. *What's your eldest brother's cell*

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phone number? Your father's direct line? What is the question you're most hoping I don't ask?

But Jameson wasn't the Hawthorne known for making the *smart* choice. He took risks. He went with his gut. *This might be the only conversation we ever have.* "Do you sleepwalk?"

It was such an inane question—trivial, could be answered in a single word.

"No." For an instant, Ian Johnstone-Jameson looked a little less above it all.

"I did," Jameson said quietly. "When I was a kid." He gave a little shrug, as careless as anything Ian could manage. "Three questions, three answers. Your turn."

"As I said, I find myself in need of a favor, and you..." There was something knowing in the way that Ian said that word. "Well, I think you'll find my offer enticing."

"Hawthornes aren't easily enticed," Jameson replied.

"What I need from you has very little to do with the fact that you're a Hawthorne and a great deal to do with the fact that you're my son."

It was the first time he'd said it, the first time Jameson had ever heard any man say those words to him. *You're my son.*

Point, Ian.

"I find myself in need of a player," the man said. "Someone smart and cunning, merciless but never dull. Someone who can calculate odds, defy them, work people, sell a bluff, and—no matter what—come out on top."

"And yet..." Jameson summoned up a smirk. "You're not playing the game in question yourself."

And there it was again—Ian's tell. Point, Jameson.

"I have been asked not to tread on certain hallowed ground."

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Ian made that confession sound like yet another amusement. “My presence is *temporarily* unwelcome.”

Jameson translated. “You were banned.” *From where?* “Start at the beginning and tell me everything. If I catch you holding anything back—and I will catch you—then my response to your request will be no. Clear?”

“As glass.” Ian braced his elbows against the glittering black countertop. “There’s an establishment in London whose name is never spoken. Speak it and you may find yourself on the end of some very bad luck courtesy of this country’s most powerful men. Aristocrats, politicians, the extraordinarily wealthy...”

Ian studied Jameson just long enough to make sure he *really* had an audience, and then he turned, opened a black cabinet, and removed two lowball glasses made of cut crystal. He set them on the island but didn’t retrieve a bottle.

“The club in question,” Ian said, “is called the Devil’s Mercy.”

The name stuck to Jameson, emblazoned on his brain, beckoning him like a sign declaring that no one was allowed past.

“The Mercy was founded in the Regency period, but while the other elite gambling houses of the day aimed for renown, the Mercy was a different sort of enterprise, as much secret society as gaming hell.” Ian ran a finger lightly over the rim of one of the crystal glasses, his gaze still on Jameson’s. “You won’t find the Devil’s Mercy mentioned in history books. It didn’t rise and fall alongside the likes of Crockfords or compete with famous gentlemen’s clubs like White’s. From the beginning, the Mercy operated in secrecy, founded by someone so high in society that a mere whisper of its existence was enough to guarantee that anyone offered a chance at membership would give nearly anything to obtain it.

“The location of the club moved frequently in those early days,

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but the luxury on offer, the proximity to power, the challenge... there was nothing like the Mercy." Ian's eyes were alight. "There *is* nothing like it."

Jameson didn't know anything about Crockfords or White's or the Regency period, but he recognized the story beneath the story. *Power. Exclusivity. Secrets. Games.*

"There's nothing like it," Jameson said, his mind churning. "And you were banned. The name must never be spoken, but here you are, telling me its entire secret history."

"I lost something on the tables at the Mercy." Ian's eyes went flat. "Vantage—my mother's ancestral home. She left it to me over my brothers, and I need to win it back. Or rather, I need *you* to win it back for me."

"And why would I help you?" Jameson asked, his voice low and silky. This man was a stranger. They were nothing to each other.

"Why indeed?" Ian walked over to a different set of cabinets and pulled out a bottle of scotch. He poured an inch of it in each glass, then slid one across the black granite to Jameson.

Father of the year.

"There are only a handful of people on this planet who *could* do what I'm asking of you," Ian said, his tone electric. "In two hundred years, only one person that I know of has ever set out to gain entrance to the Mercy and succeeded. And getting in is just the beginning of what it will take to win Vantage back. So why would I hold out any hope your answer would be yes?"

Ian picked up his glass and raised it in toast.

"Because you love a challenge. You love to play. You love to win. And no matter what you win"—Ian Johnstone-Jameson lifted the glass to his lips, the unholy intensity in his eyes all too familiar—"you always need more."

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CHAPTER 8



JAMESON

Jameson said no. He left. But hours later, Ian's words still haunted him. *You love to play. You love to win. And no matter what you win, you always need more.*

Jameson stared out into the night. There was something about rooftops. It wasn't just being high up or the way it felt to go right up to the edge. It was seeing everything but being alone.

"I don't own this entire building, you know." Avery spoke from somewhere behind him. "Pretty sure the roof belongs to someone else. We could be arrested for trespassing."

"Says the girl who always manages to slip away *before* the police arrive," Jameson pointed out, turning his head to see her step out of shadow.

"I have survival instincts." Avery came to stand beside him at the roof's edge. "You never learned to want to stay out of trouble."

He'd never had to. He'd grown up with the world as his

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playground—with Hawthorne looks and the Hawthorne name and a grandfather richer than kings.

Jameson took a breath: night air into the lungs, night air out. “I met my father today.”

“You what?” Avery wasn’t an easy person to take off guard. Surprising her always felt like a win, and though Jameson would have denied it, he needed a win right now.

“Ian Johnstone-Jameson.” He let the name roll off his tongue. “Professional poker player. Black sheep of what appears to be an extremely wealthy family.”

“Appears to be?” Avery repeated. “You haven’t searched the name?”

Jameson caught her gaze. “I don’t want you to, either, Heiress.” He let the rooftop go silent. And then, because it was *her*, he said the words he’d thought far too many times since Ian had asked for that favor. “Nothing matters unless you let it.”

“I remember that boy,” Avery said quietly. “Shirtless in the solarium, drunk on bourbon after we saw the Red Will, determined that nothing would hurt him.” She let that penetrate his shields, then continued: “You were angry because we had to ask Skye about your middle names. About your fathers.”

“In retrospect,” Jameson quipped, “I’m impressed Skye didn’t give away the game right then.” They’d asked about middle names—not first.

“Your father mattered to you then.” Avery didn’t pull her punches. Ever. “He matters now. That’s why you’re up here.”

Jameson swallowed. “I told myself after Gray met his asshole father that I never wanted to meet mine.”

He’d known his father’s last name was Jameson, but he hadn’t looked. He hadn’t even let himself wonder—until that card.

“How was it?” Avery asked.

Jameson looked up. *Not a star in the sky*. “He hasn’t had you kidnapped yet or killed anyone so that’s a plus.” Grayson’s father had set the bar low. Making light of that let Jameson really answer Avery’s question. “He wants something from me.”

“Screw him,” Avery said fiercely. “He doesn’t get to ask you for anything.”

“Exactly.”

“But...”

“What makes you think there’s a *but*?” Jameson retorted.

“This.” Avery let her fingertips brush his face just above his jawline. Her other hand went, feather-light, to his brow. “And this.”

Jameson swallowed. “I don’t owe him anything. And I don’t care what he thinks of me. But...” She was right. Of course she was. “I can’t stop thinking about what he said.”

Jameson stepped back from the edge of the roof, and when Avery did the same, he bent to murmur in her ear. “There’s an establishment in London whose name is never spoken...”

Jameson told her everything, and the more he said, the faster the words came, the more his body buzzed with the rush of adrenaline pumping through his veins. Because Ian Johnstone-Jameson had been right.

He liked to play. He liked to win. And now, more than ever, he needed *something*.

“You want to say yes.” Avery read him like a book.

“I said no.”

“You didn’t mean it.”

This didn’t have to be about what Ian Johnstone-Jameson deserved. This didn’t have to be about him at all. “The Devil’s Mercy.” Jameson felt a thrill just saying the name. *A centuries-old*

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secret. An underground gambling house. Money and power and games with stakes.

“You’re going to do it, aren’t you?” Avery asked.

Jameson opened his eyes, stared into hers, then lit the fuse.

“No, Heiress. *We* are.”

CHAPTER 9



GRAYSON

Grayson stepped off the plane to eight voicemails, seven of them from Xander. By the seventh, his youngest brother had taken to singing what appeared to be an opera-style epic about brotherly concern and cheesesteak.

The one remaining message was from Zabrowski, only minutes old. “I did some digging. The girl is still in custody, but nothing’s been filed yet. No arrest paperwork. No charges. You ask me, someone else already has a finger on the scales. Let me know how you want to proceed.”

Grayson deleted the message. *If they haven’t truly arrested her, they have no legal right to keep her in custody.* That would certainly make things simpler.

Per the arrangements Grayson had made on his way to the airport in London, a car was waiting for him in long-term parking, the key under the mat. Grayson hadn’t inherited the Hawthorne billions, but the Hawthorne name was still worth something, and he

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wasn't without financial resources—the same resources he'd been using to pay Zabrowski's retainer.

It was because of the private investigator that Grayson knew that Juliet went, inexplicably, by Gigi, that she was the younger twin by seven minutes, and that her sister, Savannah, was far less likely to find herself in a situation in need of interference.

His interference.

Grayson started up the Ferrari 488 Spider his contact had provided. As far as vehicles went, it was more Jameson's style than his, but some situations required making an entrance. Turning his mind to strategy kept Grayson from thinking too hard about the fact that Juliet and Savannah Grayson didn't even know he existed.

Just like they didn't know that the father the three of them shared was dead.

Sheffield Grayson had made the mistake of attacking Avery. It hadn't ended well for him. As far as the rest of the world knew, the wealthy Phoenix businessman had simply disappeared. Popular theory seemed to be that he'd taken off for some tropical tax haven with a much younger woman. Grayson had been keeping an eye on Juliet and Savannah ever since.

In and out, he reminded himself. He wasn't in Phoenix to forge relationships or tell the twins who he was. There was a situation to be handled. Grayson would handle it.

When he walked into the Phoenix Police Department, he let one and only one thought rise to the surface of his mind. *Never question your own authority and no one else will, either.*

"Anyone see that Ferrari out front?" A twentysomething patrol officer rushed in. "Holy sh—" He cut off and stared at Grayson, who, like the car, had a way of making an impression.

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Grayson didn't let a hint of amusement show on his face. "You have Juliet Grayson in your custody." That was not a question, but Grayson's demeanor demanded a response.

"Gigi?" Another officer joined the two of them, craning his neck, like he somehow expected to be able to see Grayson's Ferrari through the walls. "Oh yeah. We have her."

"You'll want to rectify that." There was a difference between telling people what you wanted and making it clear that it was in their best interest to give it to you. Explicit threats were for people who needed to assert their power. *Never assert what you can assume, Grayson.*

"Who the hell are you?"

Grayson knew without turning that the person who had just spoken was older than the other two officers—and higher ranked. A sergeant, perhaps, or a lieutenant. That, in combination with the way that the name *Juliet Grayson* had gotten his attention, told Grayson all he needed to know: This man was the reason that arrest paperwork hadn't been filed.

"Do you really have to ask?" Grayson replied. He knew the power of certain facial expressions: the kind without a hint of aggression, the kind that made a promise nonetheless.

The lieutenant—Grayson could see his badge now—took measure of Grayson, the cut of his very expensive suit, his absolute lack of nerves. It was easy enough to see the man debating: Had Grayson been sent by the same person who'd called in a favor with him?

"I can call our mutual friend, if you like." Grayson, like all Hawthornes, was an excellent bluffer. He slipped his phone from his pocket. "Or you can have one of these officers take me to the girl."

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CHAPTER 10



GRAYSON

They were keeping Juliet Grayson in an interrogation room. She sat cross-legged on top of the table, her wrists resting on her knees, palms up. Her hair was chocolate brown to Grayson's light blond, wavy where his was straight. She wore it cut just below her chin, the waves buoyant, gravity-defying, and a little wild.

She was staring at an empty coffee cup, her eyes—brighter and bluer than his—unblinking.

"Still no telekinesis?" the cop who'd led Grayson back here asked.

The prisoner grinned. "Maybe I need more coffee?"

"You definitely do not need more coffee," the cop said.

The girl—Grayson's flesh and blood, though she couldn't know that and he wouldn't dwell on it—hopped off the table, her hair bouncing. "*Matilda* by Roald Dahl," she told him by way of explanation. "It's a children's book in which a neglected kid genius develops the ability to move objects with her mind. The first thing she

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ever knocks over is a glass of water. I read it when I was seven, and it ruined me for life.”

Grayson found himself almost wanting to smile, perhaps because the girl across from him was beaming like it was her default state. Without turning back toward the police officer, he spoke. “Leave us.”

The trick to making people do what you wanted was absolute certainty that they would.

“Wow!” the human ray of sunshine across from him said once the cop was gone. “That was great!” She adopted a deep and serious voice. “*Leave us*. I’m Gigi, by the way, and I bet *you* never have to break into bank vaults. You just look at them, and boom, they’re open!”

Break into bank vaults? Grayson had known the location where she had been taken into police custody, but the details had been vague.

“Impressive eyebrow arch,” Gigi told him cheerfully. “But can you do this?” She let her blue eyes go very round, her lower lip trembling. Then she grinned and jerked a thumb toward the table, where the empty coffee cup she’d been trying to knock over was surrounded by five others. “Read ’em and weep. I make that face, and they just keep bringing me coffee! And chocolate, but I don’t like chocolate.” Out of nowhere, she produced a candy bar and held it out to him. “Twix?”

Grayson had an urge to tell her that this wasn’t a game. That she was in police custody. That this was *serious*. Instead, he tamped down on the protective instincts and opted for: “You haven’t asked who I am.”

“I mean, I did say *I’m Gigi*,” she said with a winning smile, “so the lack of introduction here is kind of on you, buddy.” She lowered

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her voice. “Did Mr. Trowbridge send you? It’s about time. I called him last night as soon as they brought me in.”

Trowbridge. Grayson filed the name away and decided the most prudent course of action was to leave the premises before someone realized that no one had, in fact, sent him. “Let’s go.”



Gigi practically vibrated out of her skin when she saw the Spider. “You know, full disclosure, I have not historically been the best driver, but blue really is my color and—”

“No,” Grayson said. By the time he made it to the driver’s side, Gigi was already making herself comfortable in the passenger seat. *Never get in a car with a stranger,* he wanted to tell her, but he stopped himself. *In and out.* He was here to deliver her home, make sure the legal situation was fully taken care of, and that was it.

“You don’t work for Mr. Trowbridge, do you?” Gigi said, after they’d been on the road for a few minutes.

“Does Mr. Trowbridge have a first name?” Grayson asked.

“Kent,” Gigi supplied helpfully. “He’s a family friend. And our lawyer. Lawyer-friend. I used my phone call to call him instead of my mom because she isn’t a lawyer and also there’s a slight chance she’s under the impression that I spent last night and today at a friend’s house, where I committed no crimes and wholesome fun was had by all.”

The more Gigi talked, the faster she talked. Grayson was beginning to develop the sense that she should not be given caffeine. At all.

“If Mr. Trowbridge didn’t send you...” Gigi’s voice went quiet. “Was it my dad?”

Grayson had been raised to push down his emotions. Control was not and had never been optional. He kept his mind in the present. He didn’t think about Sheffield Grayson at all.

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