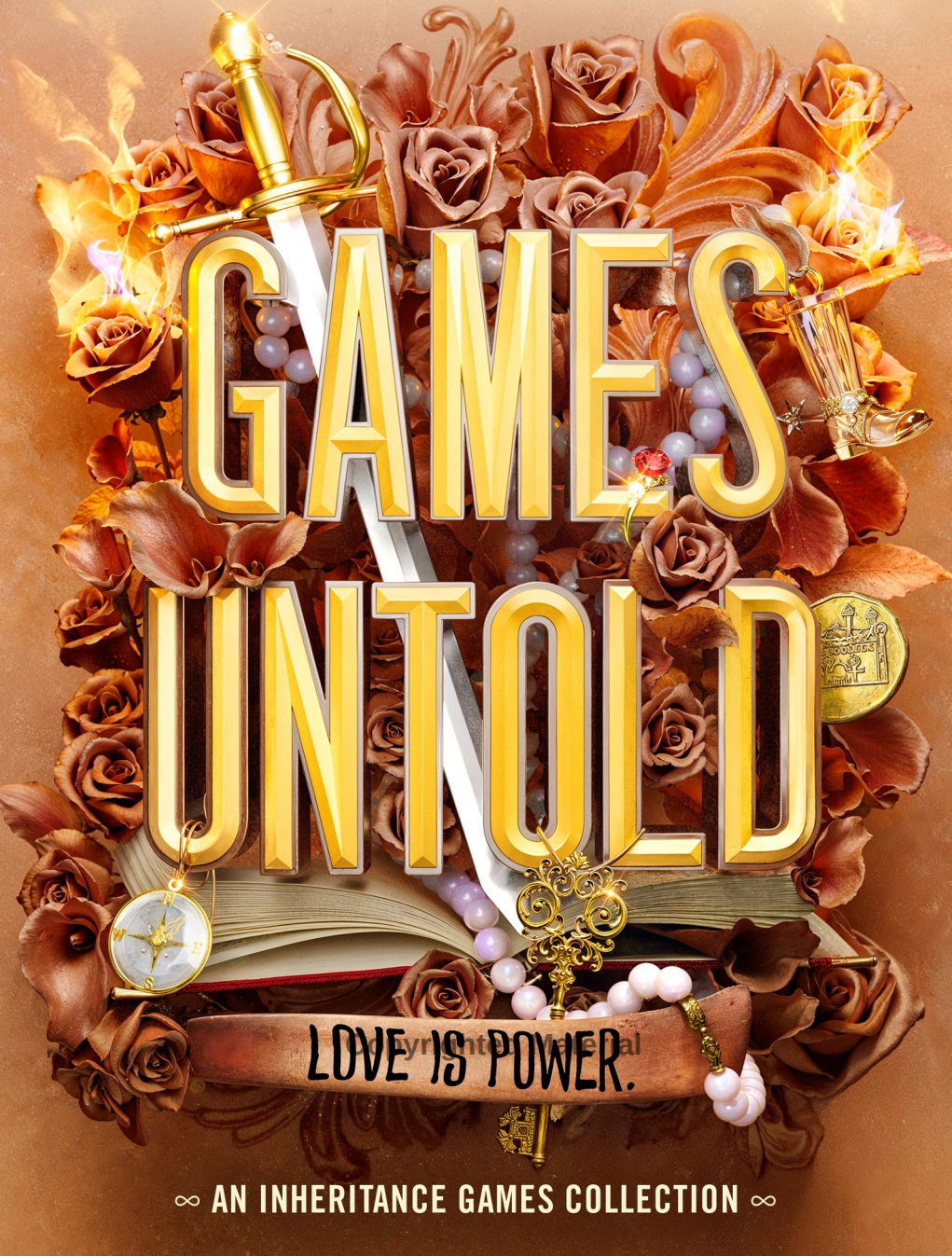
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE INHERITANCE GAMES

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES



∞ AN INHERITANCE GAMES COLLECTION ∞

PENGUIN BOOKS

GAMES UNTOLD

Copyrighted Material

ALSO BY JENNIFER LYNN BARNES

THE INHERITANCE GAMES SAGA

The Inheritance Games

The Inheritance Games
The Hawthorne Legacy
The Final Gambit
The Brothers Hawthorne

The Grandest Game

The Grandest Game
Coming next: *Glorious Rivals*

Games Untold

THE DEBUTANTES

Little White Lies
Deadly Little Scandals

The Lovely and the Lost

Copyrighted Material

GAMES UNTOLD

JENNIFER LYNN BARNES



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

www.penguin.co.uk www.puffin.co.uk www.ladybird.co.uk



First published in the USA by Little, Brown and Company, a division of
Hachette Book Group, Inc., and in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2024

001

Text copyright © Jennifer Lynn Barnes, 2024
"One Hawthorne Night" copyright © Jennifer Lynn Barnes, 2022
"What Happens in the Tree House" copyright © Jennifer Lynn Barnes, 2023
Illustrations copyright © Lucy Truman, 2024
Cover art copyright © Katt Phatt, 2024
Cover copyright © Hachette Book Group, Inc., 2024

The moral right of the author and illustrator has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception

Cover design by Karina Granda. Interior design by Carla Weise.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

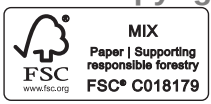
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

HARDBACK
ISBN: 978–0–241–68434–4

INTERNATIONAL PAPERBACK
ISBN: 978–0–241–68432–0

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

Copyrighted Material



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

For Rachel

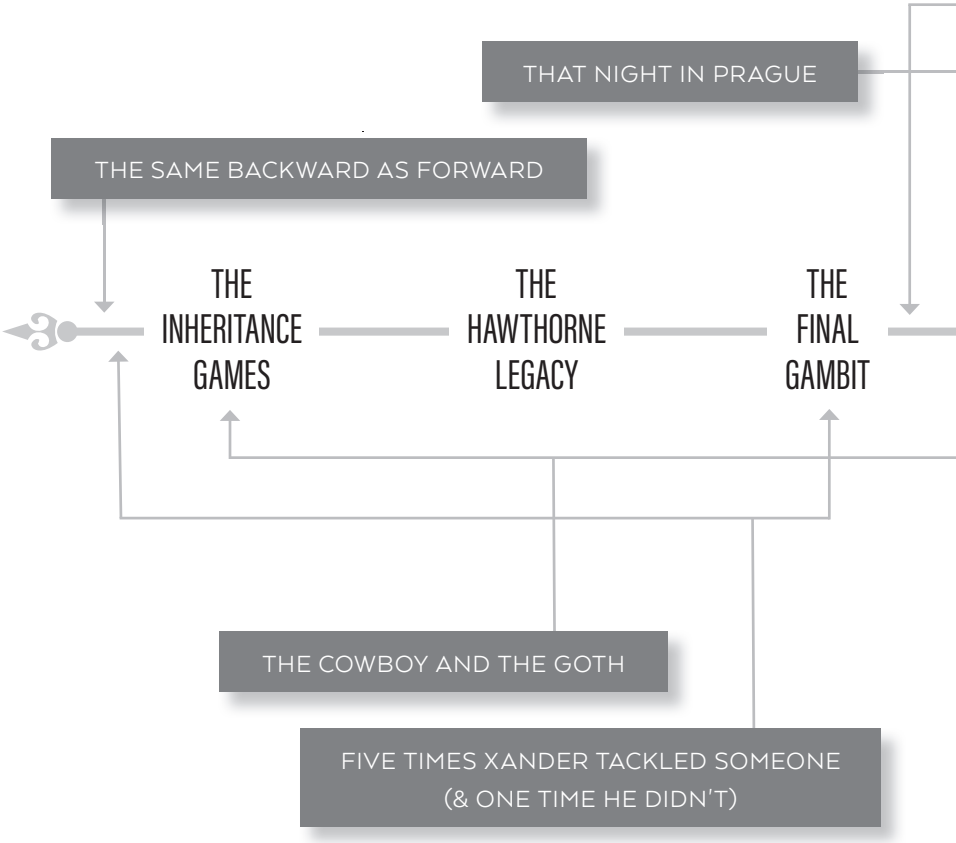


Copyrighted Material

CONTENTS

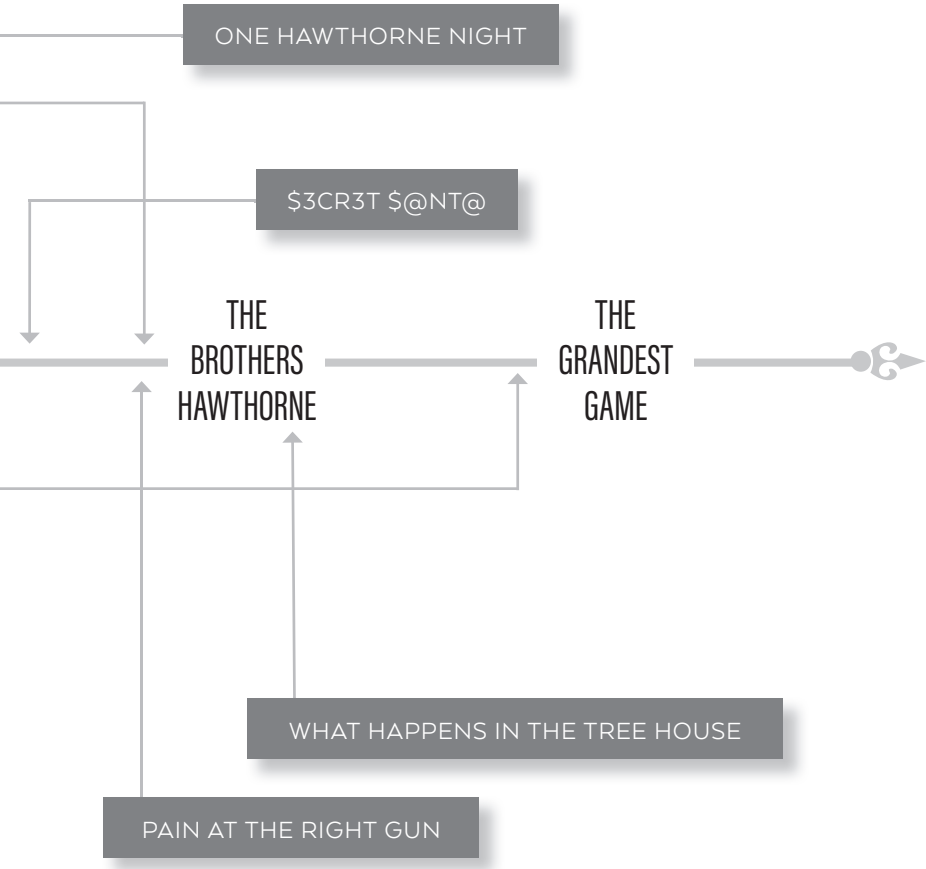
That Night in Prague 1
The Same Backward as Forward 93
The Cowboy and the Goth..... 283
Five Times Xander Tackled Someone (& One Time He Didn't)..... 327

TIMELINE



Copyrighted Material

One Hawthorne Night 355
$3CR3T $@NT@ 373
What Happens in the Tree House 403
Pain at the Right Gun 421



Copyrighted Material



Copyrighted Material

THAT NIGHT IN PRAGUE



Nothing in this place was infinite except for Jameson and me.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material



The Morning After

I wasn't worried about him. Worrying about Jameson Winchester Hawthorne was about as useful as trying to argue with the wind. I was smart enough to know that there was no sense in shouting at hurricanes or worrying about a Hawthorne with a love of Hail Mary passes, semi-calculated risks, and walking right up to the edge of incredible drops.

Jameson had a habit of landing on his feet.

"Avery?" Oren announced his presence, a mere courtesy considering my head of security was never far away. "It's almost dawn. I can have my team take another sweep and—"

"No," I said quietly. I couldn't shake the feeling that Jameson wouldn't want me looking for him. This wasn't Hide and Seek. It wasn't Catch Me If You Can.

Every single one of my instincts said that this was . . . *something*.

"It's been fourteen hours." Oren's voice was a military kind of calm: brisk, matter-of-fact, always prepared for the worst. "He disappeared with no warning. He left no trace behind. It happened in an *instant*. We have to consider the possibility of foul play."

Considering nefarious possibilities was Oren's job. I was the Hawthorne heiress. Jameson was a Hawthorne. We attracted

Copyrighted Material

attention—and sometimes threats. But deep down, my gut was saying the same thing it had been saying from the moment Jameson had disappeared: *I should have seen this coming.*

Something electric had been building in Jameson for days—an unholy energy, a powerful drive. *A secret.* Memories flashed rapid-fire through my head, moment after moment after moment from the day I'd stepped foot in Prague.

The spire.

The knife.

The clock.

The key.

What are you up to, Hawthorne? You have a secret. What is it?

"Give it an hour," I told Oren. "If Jameson's not back, then you can send out a team."

When it was clear that my bodyguard—and sometimes father figure—wasn't going to argue with me, I made my way to the foyer of our luxury hotel suite. *The Royal Suite.* I took a seat in a chair made of crushed red-and-black velvet and stared at a wall that wasn't just a wall, my mind working its way through this puzzle for the hundredth time.

A decadent gold mural stared back at me.

Where are you, Jameson? What am I missing?

My eyes found the well-masked seams in the wall. *A hidden door.* Its existence was a reminder to me that Jameson's deceased grandfather, Tobias Hawthorne, had once owned this hotel, that the Royal Suite had been built to the exacting, puzzle-obsessed billionaire's specifications.

Traps upon traps, I thought. *And riddles upon riddles.* That phrase had been among the first words Jameson had ever spoken to me, back when he'd been fighting grief and chasing the next

Copyrighted Material

puzzle, the next high, determined not to care about anyone or anything.

Back when he'd taken risks in part because he *wanted* to hurt.

As I stared at the wall and the hidden door, I told myself that the Jameson of those early days wasn't the same Jameson Hawthorne who'd pushed my hair back from my face the day before, spreading it out like a halo on the mattress.

My Jameson still took risks—but he always came back.

I know better than to worry about Jameson Hawthorne. And yet…

I willed the hidden door to open. I willed Jameson to be standing on the other side of it.

And finally—*finally*—just before my hour was up, it did, and he was. *Jameson Winchester Hawthorne.*

The first thing I saw, as he crossed into the light, was the blood.

Copyrighted Material



Chapter 1

Three Days Earlier…

The postcard in my hand matched the view out the jet's window. *Prague at dawn.* Centuries of history was silhouetted against a hazy-gold sky, the dark, swirling clouds above the city a deep purple gray.

Jameson had sent me the postcard, a callback to the way his uncle had once sent postcards to my mother. The parallel made me think about what my mom would say if she could see me now: the private plane, the inches-thick stack of documents I'd gone through on the flight, the way I still caught myself holding my breath when the reality of moments like this once hit me with the force of a tidal wave.

Prague at dawn. My mom and I had always talked about traveling the world. It was the one dream I'd allowed myself to hold on to after she'd died, but at fifteen and sixteen and seventeen, I had never let myself daydream for more than a few minutes at a time. I had never let myself want this—or anything—too much.

But now? I ran my thumb over the edge of the postcard. Now I wanted the world. I wanted *everything.* And there was nothing standing in my way.

Copyrighted Material

"One of these days, you'll get used to it," the person sitting across from me on *my* private jet said, then she laid three magazines down on the table between us. My face was on the cover of every single one.

"No," I told Alisa simply. "I won't." I couldn't read any of the words on the covers. I wasn't even sure what language two of the three were in.

"They're calling you *Saint Avery*." Alisa arched a brow at me. "Care to guess what they're calling Jameson?"

Alisa Ortega was my lawyer—and the foundation's—but her expertise went well beyond legal advice. If something needed fixing, she fixed it. At this point, our roles were clearly defined. I was the teenage billionaire heiress philanthropist. She put out the fires.

And Jameson Hawthorne *blazed*.

"Guess," Alisa reiterated, as the jet touched down, "what they're calling him."

I knew exactly where this was going, but I wasn't a saint, and Jameson wasn't a liability. We were two sides of the same coin.

"Are they calling him *Don't Stop*?" I asked Alisa seriously.

Her perfectly sculpted brows pulled together.

"Sorry," I said in a completely deadpan. "I forgot. That's what *I* call him."

Alisa snorted. "It is not."

A borderline Hawthorne grin pulled at the edges of my lips, and I looked out the window again. In the distance, I could still see the spires disappearing into the gold-purple-gray sky.

Alisa was wrong. I would *never* get used to this. This was *everything*—and so was Jameson Hawthorne.

"I'm not Saint Avery," I told Alisa. "You know that."

I'd kept enough of my inheritance that I would literally *never*

Copyrighted Material

be able to spend even a noticeable fraction of it, but all most people saw was the amount I'd given away. By popular opinion, I was either a paragon of virtue or about as intelligent as a sack of rocks.

"You may not be a saint," Alisa told me. "But you *are* discreet."

"And Jameson is . . . not," I said. If Alisa noticed the way my lips ticked upward just saying his name, she chose to ignore it.

"He's a Hawthorne. *Discreet* is not in their vocabulary." Alisa had her own history with the Hawthorne family. "The foundation's work is gaining steam. We don't need a scandal right now. When you see Jameson, you tell him: No puppies this time. No breaking and entering. No rooftops. No dares. Don't let him drink anything that glows. Call me if he so much as *mentions* leather pants. And remember—"

"I'm not Cinderella anymore," I finished. "I'm writing my own story now."

At seventeen, when my life had changed forever, I'd been the lucky girl from the wrong side of the tracks, plucked from obscurity and given the world at the whim of an eccentric billionaire. But now? I *was* the eccentric billionaire.

I'd come into my own. And the world was watching.

Saint Avery. I shook my head at the thought. Whoever had come up with that moniker clearly didn't realize that the biggest difference between Jameson and me, when it came to dares and games and the thrill of the moment, was that I was better at not getting caught.

Within minutes, the plane was ready for us to deboard—security first, then Alisa, then me. The instant I had both feet on the ground, I got a text from Jameson. I doubted the timing was a coincidence.

Very few things with Jameson were.

I read his text, and a surge of energy and awe, reminiscent of

Copyrighted Material

what I'd felt when I'd looked out the window at the ancient city below, came rushing back. A slow smile spread over my face.

Two sentences. That was all it took for Jameson Hawthorne to make my heart start beating a little harder, a little faster.

Welcome to the City of a Hundred Spires, Heiress. Feel like a game of Hide and Seek?

Copyrighted Material



Chapter 2

Our version of Hide and Seek had three rules:

The person hiding couldn't ditch their phone.

GPS tracking had to be enabled.

The person seeking had an hour.

In the past six months, Jameson and I had played in Bali, Kyoto, and Marseille; on the Almafi Coast; and in the labyrinthine markets of Morocco. Following the GPS coordinates was never the hard part, and that held true today. No matter how many times I checked Jameson's location, the pulsing blue marker stayed in the same half-block radius, just outside of Prague Castle.

And *that* was the challenge.

My Achilles' heel in Hide and Seek was always how hard it was for me not to lose myself in my surroundings, in the moment—or in this case, in the view. *The castle.* I'd known before coming to Prague that it was among the largest castles in the world, but knowing was different from seeing was different from *feeling.*

There was a certain magic in standing in the shadows of an ancient, massive structure that made you feel small, something that made the earth and its possibilities feel enormous. I gave myself a full minute to take it all in—not just the sights but the

Copyrighted Material

feel of the morning air on my skin, the people already on the streets all around me.

And then I got to work.

Per the GPS, Jameson's location had varied between several points, all of which seemed to be located in the palace gardens—or sometimes, just outside the garden's walls. I walked those walls, looking for the entry. It didn't take me long to realize that the garden in question was actually multiple gardens, interconnected, all of which were *closed*—or at least, they were closed to the public.

When I approached the entry, the iron gate swung inward for me.

Like magic. I'd meant what I'd said to Alisa on the plane. I would *never* get used to this. I stepped through the gate. Oren followed at a reasonable distance. Once we were both inside, the iron gate swung closed behind us.

I made eye contact with the docent who'd closed it. He smiled.

I had no idea how Jameson had managed this. I wasn't sure that I wanted to know. My body buzzing with the thrill of the game, I made my way inward until I reached a set of stairs, narrow and steep—the kind of stairs that made you feel as if climbing them might take you back in time.

I made it to the top, looked down at my phone, and then looked back up at the surrounding terrace gardens—and up and up and up. My brain automatically started trying to calculate the number of stairs, the number of terraces.

I looked down at my phone again and took a turn off the beaten path, jogging forward, then turning again. The instant my GPS location brushed up against Jameson's, his blinking blue cursor disappeared from the map.

Copyrighted Material

Technically, that made *four* rules for our version of Hide and Seek.

The hunt was on.



"Found you," I said. Once upon a time, I'd been a more gracious winner, but now I relished my victories like a Hawthorne.

"Cutting it close this time, Heiress?" Jameson spoke from behind the tree that stood between us. No part of his body was visible to me, but I could *feel* his presence, the outline of his long, lean form. "Fifty-eight minutes, nineteen seconds," Jameson reported.

"One minute and forty-one seconds to spare," I countered, circling the tree and stopping when my body was directly in front of his. "How did you get them to open this place early?"

Jameson's lips curved. He turned ninety degrees and took three slow steps back toward the garden path. "How *didn't* I get them to open early?"

Three more steps, and he was on the path. He knelt, picking something up off the stone. I knew before he stood back up and brandished his bounty that it was a coin.

Jameson twirled the coin from one finger to the next. "Heads or tails, Heiress?"

My eyes narrowed slightly, but I deeply suspected my pupils were dilating, drinking it all in. This was *us*. Jameson. Me. Our language. Our game.

Head or tails?

"You planted that." I nodded toward the coin. I had a collection of them, at least one from every place we'd visited. And every single one of those coins had a memory attached.

Copyrighted Material

"Now why," Jameson murmured, "would I ever do a thing like that?"

Heads I kiss you, he'd told me once, *tails you kiss me, and either way, it means something.*

I reached out to pluck the coin from his hand, and he let me—not that I wouldn't have prevailed either way. I looked down at the coin: The outer ring was bronze, the inner circle gold, bearing the image of a castle. On the reverse side, there was a golden creature that looked like a lion.

I twirled the coin through my fingers the way Jameson had through his—one by one by one. I caught it between my thumb and the side of my index finger, and then I flipped it into the air.

I caught it in my palm. I spread my fingers and looked from the coin to him. "Heads."

Copyrighted Material



Chapter 3

Forty minutes later, we were on a rooftop. *Sorry, Alisa.* I still had the coin.

"You could make a wish," I told Jameson, twirling the coin between my fingers again, my lips swollen and aching in all the right ways. I cast a glance back over our shoulders at the gardens below. "There's no shortage of fountains down there."

Jameson did not turn to look at the fountains. He leaned into me, the two of us perfectly balanced—on the roof and with each other. "What fun is wishing?" Jameson countered. "No game to play, no challenge to best, just . . . *poof*, here's your heart's desire."

That was a very Hawthorne perspective on wishes, on *life*. Jameson had grown up in a glittering, elite world where nothing was out of reach. He hadn't spent his childhood birthdays blowing out candles. Every year, he'd been given ten thousand dollars to invest, a challenge to fulfill, and the opportunity to pick any talent or skill in the world to cultivate, no expenses spared—and no excuses accepted.

I considered leaving the topic alone, but ultimately decided to push back a bit. In my experience, Jameson Hawthorne liked being pushed.

Copyrighted Material

"You don't know what you would wish for," I said, my tone making it clear that the words were a challenge, not a question.

"Maybe not." Jameson shot me a look that was nothing but trouble. "But I can certainly think of some *fascinating* games I'd like to win."

That statement was every bit as much of an invitation as *heads or tails*. Holding back—*just a bit, just for a moment longer*—I pulled the postcard Jameson had sent me out of my back pocket. It was starting to look a little wrinkled, a little worn.

Real, the way most people's dreams never were.

"I got your postcard," I said. "No message on the back."

"How long did you spend trying to determine if I'd written something in invisible ink?" Jameson asked. *Nothing but trouble.*

I countered his question with my own: "What kind of invisible ink did you use?"

Just because I hadn't been able to reveal it didn't mean it wasn't there.

Beside me, Jameson leaned back on his elbows and looked up at Prague Castle again. "Maybe I just considered writing something, then decided not to." He gave a careless little shrug, a very *Jameson Hawthorne* shrug. "After all, it's been done."

For decades, another Hawthorne had sent postcards just like this one to my mother. Theirs had been a star-crossed kind of love—but *real*.

Like the creases in my postcard.

Like Jameson and me.

"Everything's been done by someone," I pointed out quietly.

Jameson's gap year was three-quarters done. Day by day, I could feel him growing more restless in his own skin. I'd been Hawthorne-adjacent long enough to know that billionaire Tobias Hawthorne's real legacy hadn't been the fortune he'd left me.

Copyrighted Material

It was the marks he'd left on each of his grandsons. Invisible. Enduring.

This was Jameson's: Jameson Winchester Hawthorne was *hungry*. He wanted everything and needed *something*, and because he was a Hawthorne, that elusive something could never be ordinary.

He couldn't be ordinary.

"You should know by now, Heiress, that the words *everything's been done by someone* sound a lot like a challenge to me." Jameson smiled, one of those uneven, edged, wicked Jameson smiles. "Or a dare."

"No dares," I told Jameson, grinning right back.

"You've been talking to Alisa," he said, then he cocked an eyebrow. "Saint Avery."

Jameson could read at least nine languages that I was aware of. He almost certainly knew *exactly* what the world was saying about him.

"Don't call me that," I ordered. "I'm no saint."

Jameson straightened and pushed my hair back from my face, the tips of his fingers banishing tension in every muscle they crossed. My temple. My scalp.

"You act like what you did with your inheritance is nothing," he said. "Like anyone would have done it. But I wouldn't have. Grayson wouldn't have. None of us would. You act like what you're doing with your foundation isn't extraordinary—or like, if it is, it's because the work is so much bigger than you. But, Avery? What you're doing . . . it's *something*."

A Hawthorne kind of something. *Everything.*

"It's not just me," I told Jameson fiercely. "It's all of us." He and his brothers were working with me on the foundation. There were causes Jameson had been championing, people he'd brought in to sit on the board.

Copyrighted Material

"And yet . . ." Jameson dragged the words out. "You're the one with meetings today."

Giving away billions—strategically, equitably, and with an eye to outcomes—was a lot of work. I wasn't naive enough to try to do it all myself, but I also wasn't about to coast on the blood, sweat, and tears of others.

This was my story. I was writing it. This was my chance to change the world.

But for another few minutes . . . I brought my hand to Jameson's jaw. *It's just you and me.* On this rooftop, at the top of the world and the base of a castle, it felt like the two of us were the only people in the universe.

Like Oren wasn't standing guard down below. Like Alisa wasn't waiting outside the gates. Like I was just Avery, and he was just Jameson, and that was enough.

"I don't have meetings for another hour," I pointed out.

Jameson's adrenaline-kissed smile was, in a word, *dangerous*. "In that case," he murmured, "could I interest you in some shapely hedges, a statue of Hercules, and a white peacock?"

I didn't have to look back at the palace gardens below to know that they were still closed. Jameson and I still had this magical, lifted-from-time place to ourselves.

I smiled an adrenaline-kissed smile of my own. "Alisa said to tell you no puppies."

"A peacock is not a puppy," Jameson said innocently, and then he brought his lips to just almost graze mine—an invitation, a gauntlet thrown, an ask.

Yes. With Jameson, my answer was almost always *yes*.

Kissing him set my entire body on fire. Losing myself to it, to *him*, I felt like standing at the base of something much more monumental than a castle.

Copyrighted Material

The world was big, and we were small, and this was *everything*.

"And, Heiress?" Jameson's lips moved down to my jaw, then my neck. "For the record…"

I felt him everywhere. My fingernails dug lightly into the skin of *his* neck.

"I would never," he whispered roughly, "confuse you for a saint."

Copyrighted Material



The Morning After

There was blood on Jameson's neck, on his chest. It took me a moment to realize that most of it was dry and another small eternity, during which time seemed to stand still, to see the source: a deep cut at the point where his collarbone dipped in the front, right at the base of his neck.

I surged forward, and as my hands went to the sides of Jameson's neck, I realized that although the deepest part of the cut was small, longer red lines traced his collarbone on either side, shallow cuts that gave his wound an almost triangular shape.

Someone did this to you. I couldn't speak. The only thing that could make a cut like that was a blade wielded by someone who knew exactly what they were doing.

A knife? The thought of someone holding a *knife* to Jameson's neck—that close to his carotid arteries—sent a chill down my spine. My voice still trapped in my throat, I skimmed my hands gingerly down his neck to just above the cut. I stared at the delicate rivulets of dried blood on his chest, and then I noticed his shirt.

When Jameson had disappeared, he'd been wearing a button-up shirt, but now, the top four buttons were gone—*cut off?*—exposing the skin underneath.

Copyrighted Material

"*Jameson*." I'd never in my life said a word that urgently.

"I know, Heiress." His voice was low and hoarse, but he managed a rakish smile. "Bleeding is a good look for me."

Jameson was Jameson, always.

The pace of my heartbeat evened out. I opened my mouth to ask Jameson where the hell he had been and what the hell had happened to him, but before I could get a single word out, I realized…

He smelled like smoke. *Like fire.* And his shirt was smudged with ash.

Copyrighted Material



Chapter 4

Three Days Earlier…

After working nonstop all day, I had only one thing on my mind. One person. From the moment I saw our hotel, surrounded by centuries-old buildings on all sides, anticipation began to build inside me with every step.

Into the lobby.

Into the elevator.

Out of it.

The Royal Suite was on its own floor. I noted two of Oren's men stationed in the hall. There had been a third in the lobby. As far as I knew, that was the entire team he'd brought to Prague.

Threats against me were at an all-time low.

That didn't stop Oren from putting his body squarely in front of mine as we walked down the hall. He opened the door to the suite and cleared the foyer and adjacent rooms before I was allowed to enter. The moment I did, I realized something: From the hallway, the door I'd just walked through had appeared as just a door, but on this side, as it closed behind us, it disappeared into an ornate, golden mural on the wall, creating the impression that the foyer had no entry and no exit—that the Royal Suite was a world unto itself.

Copyrighted Material

The floor was made of white marble, but just ahead, there was a deep red carpet that looked so soft and lush that I gave in to the urge to kick my shoes off and step on it with bare feet. Nearby, two chairs sat facing the mural. The marble table between them was a work of art—literally. The front of the marble had been chiseled into a sculpture. It took me a moment to recognize its shape from the coin. *The lion. A coat of arms.*

"We're clear," Oren told me—in other words, he'd checked the rest of the suite, which raised a question . . .

"Where's Jameson?" I asked.

"I could answer that question," Oren replied. "But something tells me you would prefer if I did not." He raised a hand to his ear, a signal that someone was talking on his earpiece. "Alisa is on her way up," he reported.

Alisa would want to debrief about my last meeting of the day, which she had been unable to attend. For that matter, Jameson's brother Grayson would want a report on *all* of my meetings—but I suppressed the urge to take out my phone.

I could answer that question, Oren had said. *But something tells me you would prefer that I did not.* Interpreted one way, that sounded ominous. But I knew what it looked like when Oren was coming close to thinking about possibly *almost* smiling.

I walked from the foyer into a dining room complete with crystal chandelier overhead and gold-rimmed china on the table. At each of the twelve place settings, there was a champagne flute. Inside the champagne flutes, there were crystals.

Thousands of them, diamond-like and small. I made my way around the table and stopped when I saw a flash of color inside one of the flutes—green, like Jameson's eyes.

Moving carefully but swiftly, I dumped out the crystals. Among them, I found a larger gem. *An emerald?* It was the width

Copyrighted Material

of my thumbnail, and as I picked it up and turned it back and forth in the light, I realized there was something on its surface.

An arrow.

I turned the gem in my hand, and the arrow moved. *Not a gem*, I realized. I was holding a very small, very delicate compass.

It took me less than three seconds to realize that the "compass" wasn't pointing north.

Jameson. I felt my lips curve. I'd never smiled like this before I'd met him—the kind of smile that tore across my face and sent a ripple of energy surging through my body.

I followed the arrow.

Coming into a living room—complete with *another* crystal chandelier, *another* lush red carpet, and windows that offered a breathtaking view of the river—I scanned my surroundings and saw another work-of-art-level marble coffee table.

On that table, there was a vase.

I let my gaze linger on the flowers. *Roses. Five black. Seven red.* I turned back toward the room, looking for that combination of colors, for something to count, and then I realized that I was falling into a Hawthorne trap.

I was complicating things.

Bending down, I reached into the bouquet. *Victory.* My fingers latched around something cylindrical and metal.

"Do I want to know?" I heard Alisa ask Oren in the room behind me.

"Do you really have to ask?" he replied.

Flashlight. I registered what I held in my hand, gave it a twist, and then corrected myself out loud. "Black light."

Jameson wasn't making this particularly hard, which made me think that the challenge wasn't the point. The anticipation was.

"Can one of you turn off the lights?" I called back to Oren

Copyrighted Material

and Alisa. I didn't look back to see which one of them fulfilled that request.

I was too busy having my way with the black light.

Arrows appeared on the floor. It was just like Jameson to not even bat an eye at the idea of invisibly defacing the single nicest hotel suite I'd ever seen.

"Key word *invisibly*," I murmured under my breath, as I followed the arrows out of the room and into another and another and out onto a balcony. The arrows took me to the edge of the balcony—and *that view* of the river—and then they turned back toward the building . . . and up the closest wall.

The exterior of the hotel was made of stone, not brick—and that meant there were handholds. Footholds. *Possibilities.*

Still barefoot, I began to climb.

"I distinctly remember saying no roofs!" Alisa called after me.

I was too busy climbing to respond, but Oren offered a response of his own: "Threat assessment, low." I stifled a grin, which proved to be a losing endeavor when my head of security continued, "I believe I saw a champagne bottle in the kitchen with your name on it, Alisa. Literally."

Jameson's handiwork, I thought. He had distracting Alisa down to an art form. The last thing I heard as I latched my hand over the edge of the roof was Alisa's response to Oren's thinly veiled amusement.

"Judas."

I might have laughed, if that hadn't been the exact moment that I finished my climb and the rooftop came into view. The tiles were a red-orange color the exact shade of the setting sun. On top of the roof, there was a metal dome that gave way to a spire.

On top of the dome, one hand on the spire, was Jameson Winchester Hawthorne.

Copyrighted Material

Only the gentle angles of the roof and the fact that there was a small stone terrace below the dome could even remotely justify Oren's assessment that there was no danger here. Or maybe he just knew that Jameson and I had a habit of landing on our feet.

Carefully making my way across the rooftop, I arrived at the stone terrace. The railing looked like something an archer might have shot an arrow through, once upon a time. Stepping up onto the terrace, I did a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn, taking it all in.

Jameson stayed up on the dome a moment longer, then swung himself down to join me.

"Found you," I murmured. "Twice in one day."

There was something a little lazy and entirely devilish about the way Jameson's lips curled slowly upward. "I have to admit," he told me, "I am becoming very fond of Prague."

Taking in every single detail about the way he was standing there, I noticed a tension to his muscles, like he was primed and ready. Like he was still standing up on the dome.

"Do I want to know how you spent your day?" I asked.

I was sure of one thing: Jameson hadn't spent it here. I doubted it had taken more than half an hour for him to set all of this up. My gut said that something had driven him to do that. Something had put him in the mood to *play*.

I could feel an energy buzzing, just beneath his skin.

"You most *definitely* do." Jameson smirked. I heard what he was really saying: I definitely *wanted* to know how he'd spent his day, and just as definitely . . .

"You're not going to tell me."

Jameson looked out at the Vltava River, then turned in a circle, the way I had earlier, taking in the rest of the view. *The city.* "I Have A Secret, Heiress."

Copyrighted Material

I Have A Secret had been one of my mom's favorite games, one of the longest-lasting games that we'd played together. One person announced that they had a secret. The other person made their guesses. I'd never guessed my mom's biggest secrets, had only discovered them after she was long gone and I'd been pulled into the world of the Hawthornes, but she'd always had a knack for guessing mine.

I let the full force of my gaze settle on Jameson's vivid green eyes. "You found something," I guessed. "You did something you weren't supposed to. You met someone."

Jameson flashed his teeth in a there-and-gone smile. "Yes."

"To which guess?" I said.

Jameson adopted an innocent expression—far *too* innocent. "How were your meetings?"

I could practically feel the rush of adrenaline through his veins. He was so alive—up here, in this moment, right now—that a low, humming intensity rolled off him in waves.

Jameson definitely had a secret.

"Productive." I answered his question and then took a single step toward him. "I don't have any meetings tomorrow."

"Or the next day. Or the next." Jameson's voice went a little low, a little husky. "Feel like a game?"

I grinned, but I was smart enough—and had enough experience with Hawthornes—to approach that proposition with a certain amount of caution. "What kind of game?"

"Our kind," Jameson told me. "A Hawthorne game. Saturday mornings—clue to clue to clue."

Jameson angled his gaze toward the stone railing behind me. I turned, and sitting on top of it, I saw two objects—one I recognized immediately and one I'd never seen before.

Copyrighted Material

A knife. A key.

The knife was Jameson's, obtained during one of those long-ago Saturday morning games with his billionaire grandfather. The key was old, made of wrought iron.

"Just two objects?" I raised a brow. Usually, in games of this type, there were more. *A fishing hook. A price tag. A glass ballerina.*

"I never said that." Jameson mirrored my expression, raising a brow right back at me.

Once upon a time, he had considered me nothing more than a part of one of his grandfather's games. Now, he'd never dream of treating me as anything other than a player.

"A game," I said, eyeing the knife and the key.

"Technically, I was thinking we'd play *two*: one of my design and one of yours."

Two games. Our kind of games.

"We've got three more days in Prague," I noted.

"Indeed we do, Heiress." He had a good poker face, but not nearly good enough.

"You've already made your game, haven't you?" I demanded.

"This place—this city—practically did it for me." There it was again, the hum of energy in Jameson's voice that told me that he wasn't just *playing*. That something had happened.

I Have A Secret . . .

"One day for my game," the magnetic, adrenaline-drunk, beautiful, *buzzing* boy across from me proposed. "One day for yours. Each game can have no more than five steps. Player with the fastest time sets the itinerary for our final day in Prague."

Jameson's tone made it *very* clear what his itinerary would involve. I had no idea what had come over him in the past few

Copyrighted Material

hours, but whatever it was, I could taste an echo of it on the tip of my own tongue, a light and tantalizing thrill. I could feel Jameson's energy pumping through my veins.

You have a secret, I thought. "All right, Hawthorne," I told him. "Game on."

Copyrighted Material



The Morning After

My fingers stopped just short of touching the ash on Jameson's white shirt. "You smell like smoke," I told him.

"I don't smoke, Heiress."

Jameson Hawthorne, master of deflection. "That's not the kind of smoke I'm talking about," I said, but Jameson knew that, just like I knew from the expression on his face alone that he wasn't going to say a single word about fire or flames or how close he'd come to getting burned.

What happened? I searched his eyes, and then my gaze went back to the cut at the base of his neck—deep at its lowest point, shallower as it went up. *Who did this to you?*

Instead of asking anything out loud, I ran my fingers over the lines of dried blood on his chest—streaks of it, like heavy drops of blood had run down his chest like tears. I could see sweat beaded on his skin even now, and when I brought my gaze back up to his face, there was something guarded about the set of his features.

Jameson was still smiling, but everything in me said that smile was a lie. *Bleeding is a good look for me*, he'd quipped.

"I'm not done asking questions," I warned him.

Jameson reached out and touched me, a light brush against

Copyrighted Material

my cheek, like *I* was the fragile one here. "Never thought that you were, Heiress."

The sound of footsteps alerted me to Oren's approach. My head of security rounded the corner and took in the scene in front of him in a heartbeat: Jameson, me, the blood.

Oren folded his arms over his chest. "I also have questions."

Copyrighted Material



Chapter 5

Two Days Earlier…

On my second day in Prague, I woke with the dawn, Jameson still asleep beside me. *One day for my game*, he'd stipulated the night before. *One day for yours.*

Per the rules we'd agreed to—after a lengthy and not quite G-rated *negotiation* the night before—I had until midnight to make it to the end of his game. As tempting as lingering in bed was, I knew better than to think Jameson might have gone easy on me.

His game was going to be a challenge. I was going to need every minute I had.

Rolling over in bed, I propped myself up and reached across Jameson to the nightstand—and the objects. *The knife. The key.* As I pulled the latter toward the former and closed my fingers around both, Jameson stirred beneath me. For a moment, my gaze was drawn to his bare chest and the jagged scar that ran the length of his torso. I knew every inch of that scar.

Just like I knew that Jameson Winchester Hawthorne played to win.

Copyrighted Material

"Good morning, Heiress." Jameson's eyes were still closed, but a smile pulled at his lips.

I had a split second to make my choice: Did I stay propped up in bed beside him or go for a position that would give me a bit more leverage?

I went for the latter. By the time Jameson's eyes opened, I was straddling him, one hand on his chest, the other firmly holding the objects meant to start off his game.

There were advantages to keeping your opponent pinned down.

Jameson didn't so much as try to prop himself up on his elbows. He just looked up at me with a very particular curve to his lips.

"You are not going to distract me, Hawthorne."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Jameson smirked. "I have scruples, you know."

"*I* know that," I said. "You don't." Jameson had a bone-deep belief that he wasn't the good guy, the one who made the right choices, the hero. On his worst days, he looked at me and thought that I deserved better than him.

This wasn't going to be one of those days.

On top of him, I shifted my weight. Setting the key on his rock-hard abdomen, I turned my attention to the knife. This wasn't my first time seeing the blade—or holding it. I knew for a fact that there was a hidden compartment in the handle.

It didn't take me long to find the trigger.

The moment the compartment opened, I turned the knife over in my hand. A small piece of paper fell out, like a fortune from inside a fortune cookie. I almost rolled off Jameson to read it but decided not to. Keeping his lower body pinned beneath mine, I leaned forward and unrolled the thin strip of paper on his stomach, next to the key.

Copyrighted Material

Jameson's haphazard scrawl stared back at me from the paper. A poem. A *clue*.

"Does finding this count as step one?" I asked Jameson. The night before, he'd said we would each be limited to five steps in our puzzles.

Jameson put his hands behind his head and smiled, like he didn't have a care in the world. Like his body wasn't tense in all the right ways beneath me. "What do you think?" he shot back.

I think that if I don't get off you, I'm never going to make it out of this room.

I rolled off him, off the bed, and to my feet on yet another plush red carpet. "I think," I told Jameson, "that *this* is step one."

I skimmed the words of my first clue—a poem. Once I'd made it to the end, I reread the words slowly, line by line.

Borrow or rob?
Don't nod.
Now, sir, a war is won.
Nine minutes 'til seven
On the second of January, 1561.

I walked over to the window and pulled the massive curtains, staring out at the Vltava River and the city beyond it.

I heard Jameson get out of bed, heard him padding toward me. "What are you searching for?" That wasn't Jameson asking what I was looking at. He was asking what I made of this clue—*his* clue. He was testing me.

I looked back down at the words.

Borrow or rob?
Don't nod.
Now, sir, a war is won.
Nine minutes 'til seven
On the second of January, 1561.

Copyrighted Material

One word jumped off the page, and the gears in my mind began to turn. Maybe I was getting ready to run headfirst down the wrong path, but in a Hawthorne game, sometimes you had to go with your gut.

I stared out at the Vltava for a moment longer, my resolve crystalizing, and then I turned back to Jameson and his question: What was I searching for? What part of this clue did I intend to focus on first?

I met his gaze and threw down the gauntlet. "War."

Copyrighted Material



Chapter 6

An internet search using the terms *Prague* and *war* quickly revealed that most of the search results focused on the same war—World War II. *The Prague uprising. The liberation of Prague.*

Different versions of the same historical account came up over and over again. The dates didn't match the one given in my clue—not the month, not the day, not the year. But I'd played enough Hawthorne games to know that the "date" in my riddle might not be a date. It could very well be a numerical code. And while the Prague uprising hadn't happened in 1561, it *had* coincided with the end of a war.

Now, sir, a war is won.

I looked back down at the clue. If my initial instincts were correct, if I'd zeroed in on the part of the clue meant to start me off, then the meaning of the other lines of the poem might only become clear later, once I was close to the answer.

Physically close.

Jameson had said the city had practically laid out his game for him. I wasn't meant to spend the day in this hotel room. What I was looking for was out there.

The City of a Hundred Spires. The Golden City. Prague. My mind whirring, I refined the search terms on my phone to be

Copyrighted Material

specific to World War II, then added two more words: *monument* and *memorial*.

It didn't take me long to find exactly what I was looking for: Six locations marked on a map.

"And now," Jameson murmured, satisfaction clear in his voice, "she's off and running."



I found nothing at the first three locations, but at the fourth, an elderly woman wearing a burnt-red scarf over her hair struck up a conversation with me. I told her that I was exploring World War II monuments in the city, looking for one in particular—I just wasn't sure which one.

The old woman assessed me, not even bothering to hide the fact that she was doing so. After a long moment, she almost smiled, then parted with a single piece of information. "You might be looking for one of the plaques."

"The plaques?" I queried.

"To mark the fallen heroes." The woman fixed her gaze on the horizon. "Some known. Some unknown. They're everywhere in this city, if only you know to look."

Everywhere? I was already two hours into my search, and though I was falling in love with Prague, block by block and mile by mile, I'd gotten nowhere.

"How many plaques are there?" I asked.

The old woman swiveled her gaze back toward me. "A thousand," she told me. "Or more."



The old woman had been right: Once I knew to look for the plaques, they really were everywhere. Most were small and made of bronze or stone. Some bore specific names. Some were dedi-

Copyrighted Material