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## The Manor House: A Novel

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The Manor House: A Novel

Senior Project submitted to  
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of Bard College

by  
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## Prologue

This is not a love story—or so I once would have supposed.

Andrew Little and Maisy Harlan had a wonderful romance, but I still don't really consider theirs a 'love story.' It isn't one, at least not the kind I used to obsess over—perhaps the way they define those things has changed now. I spent enough time reading in dim candlelight to know a love story when I encounter one. I read of undying vows, endless love, happily-ever-after—those are love stories. I read far into the night, while my sister slept peacefully in the bed beside me, the blankets tucked up to her chin and her eyelids fluttering. The candlelight never bothered her. Sometimes I drew the curtains and let the stars light up the pages. In the summer, the stars were so bright I imagined them to be diamond rings, and when I was older I imagined him holding one out to me, asking me to be his forever. John.

I remember the first time we met. I remember our friendship as children, and how it blossomed so easily into romance. My mind often wanders to that night, so long ago, when his strong fingers first brushed the lace at my throat, deftly undoing fragile buttons. My mind wanders too often these days. I think back to so many different times—most frequently my own, usually, but lately that's changed. Now I think about Andrew and Maisy. Andrew is an old man now, but I remember him so clearly when he was a young man, a boy, just trying to figure out life, doing the best he could, even if it wasn't always enough. I remember Maisy and her freckles and the way she loved Andrew so fiercely. I think about them both a lot. It can feel like my mind is swimming in thoughts, in memories of things that, principally, I was not a part of. Maybe that's why, some of the time, I forget that I'm dead.

I died while I was still in love with a man named John Little, and for some reason the impact of our beautiful, epic romance did not end with my death. Something about our love

stuck me fast to the earth, and I haven't been able to piece together why. All I know is that I have never seen another spirit, not once, not in the hundred-some years since my passing. That was the hardest part, I think, not just having to adjust, but having to do so myself, entirely alone. I did try to pass on, of course, many times. I don't know exactly what I thought I would accomplish by staring hard at dark spaces, looking for a light or a hand reaching out to me. Yet I tried. The first night I saw John with his wife, looking at her the way he once looked at me. Then again, when John died and did not appear before me, as I had so longed for. Eventually, I just stopped trying.

I know that my inability to pass had to do with John, because what I was expecting my existence as a ghost to be was not exactly what it has been. All the ghost stories I grew up with—when I paid any attention to them—were about ghosts haunting *places*. That does make sense, I suppose. Yet I haunt—well, haunt is a strong word—*people*. John's male descendants, more specifically. Through some weird workings of the universe, John had a son, who had a son, who—well, and so on and so forth. Andrew Little is the last one. I suppose I'm lucky, in a way, that I'm not confined to a dingy house somewhere. I don't really feel confined at all. I don't really go where I please, sure, but I didn't have that privilege when I was alive, so it isn't something I'd know what to do with anyways.

I was in love with John Little for as long as I can remember—and my memory spans a very, very long time. His family and mine were close, our fathers partners in some business venture I never bothered to understand. Both of our families were wealthy but the Littles were always one step above. We began spending summers at Little Manor when Father and Mr. Little needed more time to spend together working. So John and I grew up together, and eventually, friendship turned to romance. A forbidden romance, as John was betrothed to a girl named

Emily Grant since before he and I met. The Grant family had more money than the Littles themselves, and so John and I could never marry. Everything was about the money. We kept our love a secret, somehow, even from Emily, despite us all spending that fateful winter at the Manor together. We were all there for the wedding, which would take place after the New Year, the year I would never live to see.

So I was in love with John, perhaps I still am, but I died and he married Emily Grant and they had a beautiful son whom they named Matthew. I will admit to resenting Matthew before he was born, but from the first breath he took I was mesmerized. When I watched Matthew sleeping for the first time, he wrapped in fur blankets and I in my constant cloak of invisibility, I noticed how small and fragile he was. I knew no one could look after him the way I could. It seems silly, I suppose, that I thought I could look after someone when I couldn't even interact with the living. Still, my watch was constant and sharp. It was nice to have purpose, to feel free from my jealousy and sadness. Before Matthew was born, I couldn't understand why I would be made to wander, forced to linger as my John lived happily married with another woman. I tried to forget John entirely, only visiting him occasionally when I knew he would not be near Emily. Eventually, I stopped wondering if he thought of me when he bedded her. Then everything changed—in Matthew's first month, I realized he could see me. I had been invisible for so long that his direct stare frightened me. It passed, eventually, his ability to see me. After the same thing happened with his son years later, I figured that only children had the ability to see ghosts, and when they grew up they lost the sight. It was sad, of course, but not terribly distressing. It was just one more thing that was out of my control.

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My memories of my first days as a ghost are fragmented, but vivid nonetheless. I wish I could forget them the way I sometimes forget what it felt like to be alive. The first time I tried to hold a book—after—when it didn't even slip through my fingers because I couldn't even pick it up, I wanted to scream, I tried to, and nothing came out. I thought I was dreaming. I thought I would wake up under heavy blankets in a room lit by the dying embers of a fire. I thought I would wake up and get dressed and see John and fix everything. But I didn't wake up; I couldn't because I wasn't asleep. How many days did it take for me to accept that? I don't remember. It could've been weeks. Longer. Once John began to warm to Emily, sometime in the year they got married, that's when I most wanted it all to be a dream. I didn't think I could bear it, his moving on from me. Yet I saw them all move on. My parents and Caroline left the Manor not long after I didn't come back. It didn't take them long to find me. John knew exactly where I was, once it was discovered I was missing. He led them right to me. I tried not to see.

It's strange that, when I imagine what I would look like if I were able to see my reflection, I still picture myself looking like the young woman I was when I died. So young, so full of desires and dreams, with large blue eyes and delicate, almost paper-white skin. I would see that spark of rebellion in my eyes, the soft curl of my hair, my manicured fingers tracing invisible lines on my cheeks. It's strange that I would see a girl when I feel ageless, timeless, unbound by anything. I can't explain what it feels like to walk without feeling the ground, to cry without tears, to reach out and touch something that falls through my hands that are no longer there. I don't spend much time dwelling on these impossible things anymore.

I may never know why I didn't pass on, why no one else remained behind with me, but I have a feeling something is going to change. Something is different now—Andrew Little never had a son. There are no more Littles, and the last one is dying. Something is going to change.

**I.**

“It is in vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquility; they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot.” — Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

## Chapter One

*London, September 1927*

Andrew Little sat behind Maisy Harlan the first day of school the year he turned ten years old. On that first day the children were all told where to sit, their small wooden desks lined up and freshly cleaned. Perhaps they were sorted alphabetically, truthfully I did not pay much attention to the arranging but rather making sure Andrew kept his hands politely in his pockets. I wasn't sure what I would have done to correct his behavior—being dead left me without the ability to really affect anything in the living world—but I kept a sharp eye out regardless. There were twenty students all in, and they each trudged quietly to their assigned seats with a nervous shuffle of their small feet. It was like each name called off the teacher's list was a roll call for war, the way the children walked to their desks. Andrew was number sixteen of the twenty little soldiers, and his solitary strut was different from the rest. He walked not fearfully but indignantly; I wondered if his teacher noticed. I saw Andrew glance around as he made his way to his seat, no doubt eyeing his peers and making quick judgments about them all in his head. What were his first thoughts about Maisy?

Thus Andrew was seated behind Maisy, and from the first instant her long hair, braided down the length of her back, swung back and brushed his desk as she reclined, Andrew seemed resolved to yank it as hard as he could. I noticed that look in his eye he often got when playing a prank on his father or leaving a mess of his toys for his mother to clean up back when she was—capable. Andrew was a bright boy, and sweet, but had a penchant for mischief. He was often sidetracked from his schooling, having previously had many years of lessons before this one, by small things such as bugs or an oddly shaped cloud. When he would pay attention, his achievements were as impressive as his teachers' reports. There was always that one persistent

comment, however: “Andrew needs to focus.” This was going to be his year to immerse himself in study, I decided that previous summer, but I had not anticipated Maisy and her hair. I never truly anticipated Maisy at all.

It took Andrew the entirety of five minutes to begin reaching his hands out, his fingertips twitching closer and closer to the ends of her white ribbon, tied in a neat bow at the end of her braid. I realized he was going to try and untie it. I wasn’t sure in that moment if Maisy was aware of the mischievous boy behind her, or if she was too busy concentrating on the teacher’s introductions—either way, the initial tug caught her by surprise. She yelped and stood simultaneously, but with Andrew’s hand still clumsily holding the ribbon, which had not come undone as easily as he seemed to expect, she was pulled back down toward her seat. She fell bottom first with a thud, tears brimming her eyes but not spilling over. Andrew looked thoroughly confused and slightly peeved.

“What in the world—” The teacher, Mrs. Posey, had not expected an interruption so soon into the school day. Andrew quickly removed his hands and shoved them in his pockets, where they were hidden under the lid of the desk. The tips of Maisy’s ears at this point were a purplish-red, the lurking tears had subsided, and she was turned around facing Andrew.

“That hurt!” She was fuming, surely, but she was looking intensely at his dark eyes as if something about him held her back from smacking him clear across the face. Neither of them seemed to have heard Mrs. Posey. They were utterly absorbed by each other now.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Andrew grumbled, sinking further into his seat. His father was intolerant of Andrew’s ‘negative outbursts’, what various teachers had referred to Andrew’s mischievous behavior as, and Andrew was well aware of this. He knew he could not afford to get in trouble this early on. I am not sure what he thought the consequences would be—he most

likely was not thinking at all. His face flushed as he looked back at Maisy. They both seemed mesmerized by each other and hateful of one another at the same time. I assumed that to Andrew, this girl with the long braided hair was another distraction, one that would get him in trouble at school and at home, and despite the fact that he instigated the event I believe in that moment he blamed her entirely. Maisy, on the other hand, seemed to be at a different sort of crossroads. I didn't know her well at the time—I didn't know her at all, and didn't bother to get to know her until years later—but looking back, with all that I know now, I believe she was conflicted between retaliating, either physically or by getting him in trouble as he feared, or kissing him on the cheek. I saw how her eyes darted back and forth between his crimson face to and the desk where she knew his hands were hiding, the hands that had caused her pain and embarrassment. All of this occurred within the amount of time it took Mrs. Posey to compose herself and think of what to say without further disrupting the class. Like many of Andrew's teachers before her, she had a plan for children like him, little boys who caused chaos and picked on little girls with long hair and ribbons.

“Andrew Little, I believe?”

“Yes, Mrs. Posey.” Andrew was sulking, but still not the sort to blatantly ignore someone.

“Did you pull Maisy Harlan's hair?”

“Yes, Mrs. Posey. Sorry, Mrs. Posey.”

I believed Mrs. Posey was then proud of two things, the first being her ability to get Andrew to confess to easily and quickly, and the second being her ability to remember the names of two new students she barely had time to greet before they caused a ruckus. In fact, all Mrs. Posey had time for was to usher her twenty students to their seats and begin writing the day's

lesson plan on the blackboard. I could see where her neat cursive was disrupted by Maisy's cry, where her perfectly crafted letters fell off into a downward sloping zigzag.

"Andrew, you may stand in the corner for the remainder of the hour. Go on, get up now. No, do not face the wall, you will still learn something today."

I watched Andrew shuffle from his desk to the back right corner of the room as she lectured him. Meanwhile, the other children buzzed with a quiet yet palpable energy. Chaos this soon into the day must have been quite exciting for them, not at all what they were expecting. All eyes were on him, especially Maisy's.

"Come class, do not let one rowdy boy ruin the day for you all. Now, where was I? Yes, Maisy?"

"It was my fault, Mrs. Posey. I—I provoked him."

"Provoked? My dear, where did you ever learn such a word?"

"My father tells me that my mother provokes him all the time, that's why he doesn't come home for dinner I think, well he does on some nights but always late, and then my mother—"

"Right, right." Mrs. Posey now had another disruptive student. Maisy's babbling was amusing, and I think Andrew had the same thought, for his left eyebrow arched and his head was slightly cocked to one side.

"It was my fault. My hair was on his desk, maybe. My mother says it's too long anyways."

"Well, Maisy, then you may also go stand in the corner. Yes, facing the room just like your friend here."

Maisy walked over proudly, glad perhaps to have rectified the situation or at least to have proven to Andrew and the rest of the class that she was not a tattler. Over the next hour, Maisy

would look at Andrew, her eyes more often than not finding the back of his head or otherwise his profile. Then she would see him make some small movement, perhaps a bend of the knee, and she would snap to attention, her eyes directly on Mrs. Posey, trying to or maybe just pretending to absorb the lesson as much as possible. Andrew would also look at Maisy, his eyes shifting up and down the length of her hair and occasionally resting on her freckles. His lips would move and I think he was trying to count them. Then she would shift feet and he would avert his eyes. This continued for the entire afternoon—excepting the two times the class had break in which case the two troublemakers were permitted to lunch or play outside with the rest of their class—until the last moment before Mrs. Posey rang the bell, when they somehow managed to lock eyes once more. Maisy held her gaze but Andrew scowled at her and turned away, most likely too proud to admit he was watching her or perhaps embarrassed at being caught. When Mrs. Posey dismissed the class Andrew bolted back to his desk, gathered his books, and sped out of the room faster than I had seen him do anything before. I didn't remain behind to watch Maisy—I don't think it to have been possible at that time—but I wondered for the rest of the day if she watched Andrew as he left, for he did one last turn around before walking home.

I naively thought Andrew learned his lesson and would never pull Maisy's hair again, but she proved herself to be tolerant by taking the blame that first day, so naturally he was led to believe he had free reign over her hair and its accompanying ribbon. Over the course of the first week Mrs. Posey became increasingly less diligent and by Friday she spent most of the lesson muttering at the chalkboard, dropping chalk and accidentally dusting it against her coal-colored skirt. Andrew would take the opportunity then to yank, more gently, the ribbon out of Maisy's hair—back then she always wore it in that long, singular braid. I knew she would never admit it, I could already tell at that point she was a proud little girl, but I believe she let him bother her

and pull her hair because she liked the attention. Her small smile said it all. Because Andrew sat behind her, he never saw that smile. She'd never let him. It was a game they'd play, neither realizing that the other was participating, or even realizing for themselves that they were as well.

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“Hello Andrew.”

It was the third month of that first fateful school year, the year they met, the year she wore pigtails, and it was the first time she spoke to him unprovoked and outside the boundaries of the occasional “ouch” or “you bully!” These outbursts whispered, of course, for it was obvious neither wanted to spend another moment standing in the corner of the classroom, the outcasts and rebels of Room Four. Despite the almost daily interactions, they still had not spoken to each other. I was not sure what provoked Maisy, as she would say, to go up to Andrew. Why that day? Why when he was with friends? Why at all? I wondered if Andrew had the same questions. However, I could not interpret his expression beyond the fact that he was severely pouty and light lipped as the other boys began to snicker. Their giggles held meaning—she had gone up to him, it was his responsibility to get rid of her.

“You can't play with us, Maisy!”

“Why not?”

She was annoyingly patient; Andrew was not good with patience. He once broke the arm off a toy soldier when it didn't obey his commands.

“Well, you're a girl.”

“So?”

His brows furrowed; he obviously had not thought that far ahead. One boy nudged Andrew with his elbow. *Go on, get rid of her, you can do it.*

“I dunno. You just can’t.”

She stood in front of him, almost too close. His answer wasn’t satisfactory, not to me and not to the other boys, this made obvious by their groans and immediate disinterest in the conversation. They all walked off and it was just Andrew and Maisy. She shrugged her shoulders and finally flashed him that smile.

“Okay.”

He watched her turn to walk away.

“Hey, wait, what do you mean okay?”

Maisy stopped walking but didn’t turn back towards him. Andrew had one hand in his pocket and the other tousling his hair nervously.

“You told me I can’t play with you. I never said I wanted to, anyways, but you told me I can’t.”

“Well why did you just walk away?”

Maisy laughed then, and turned around.

“Do you want me to fight you, Andrew?” She put her small, fragile fists up, still laughing.

“No!” he shouted. This drew the attention of his friends, who were not too far off, and they came back. Andrew still had his hands in his hair and pocket and Maisy still had hers poised for action. The boys circled the pair. *Fight! Fight!*

“I don’t fight girls,” Andrew said loudly. Maisy put her fists down and shrugged again, most likely knowing it would annoy him. He squinted at her—she had challenged him, and he had not reacted well.

“Let me know when you do,” she said, and walked away with her head up and shoulders back. There was an air of failure around the boys—Maisy had won something. Andrew had to retaliate, it was palpable.

“Your ribbons are stupid,” he yelled after her. Once she was out of sight, the moment was forgotten and laughed off and Andrew and the boys continued with their game. As they tossed a ball among themselves, I found myself ruminating on the conversation. Maisy quite reminded me of myself. I never really possessed her spark or bravery, but rather her reluctance to give in to how those around her thought she should act. Yes, that was very much the attitude I had. Now, looking back, I think that smile, that conversation, the way his eyes bore into her pale, firm hands—there was no going back for them.

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Over the next few years Maisy managed to worm her way into Andrew’s circle of friends. It was gradual, I don’t think most of them noticed at first, but Andrew did, straight away. He always had his eyes on her, he was suspicious of her. At the onset she would sometimes creep up behind him and try to startle him, to make his friends laugh, and he would chase her away, embarrassed and flustered. The day Andrew told Maisy she couldn’t play with him and his friends was the day Andrew and I both discovered that little Maisy, with her perpetually sunburnt cheeks and long legs, liked a challenge. As they grew older, and Maisy cemented herself in Andrew’s life—whether or not he originally wanted her there—she found new ways to torment him. Her laugh would echo in the corridors of the school as she flirted with Andrew’s friends, which frustrated him. He would walk behind them sullenly, his hands balled up either at his side or in his pockets. I’m not certain if she knew she was making him jealous, if she was doing it purposefully to get his attention or if she simply liked making him mad, but it worked in both

respects. It was all done in jest, of course. She never truly explained that to him, that she was only fooling around, but he seemed to be in on it regardless. He would always walk her home, through the tree-lined streets of Islington, acting the part of disgruntled boy, but the small lift at the corners of his mouth gave him away. By the time they were teenagers he softened to her entirely, and they were fast friends.

They spent summers together, and in time the group that Maisy burrowed her way into disintegrated, and it was just the her and Andrew. Their former friends would tease them, saying that boys and girls couldn't be friends the way Andrew and Maisy were, but Maisy would stick her tongue out at them and Andrew would shake his head and smile as if to say, *we know better*. Though it didn't happen instantly, they were eventually inseparable. They kicked a ball around on the street until the sun went down, or read books and stories aloud to each other, which I loved—Maisy had the right kind of voice for reading stories, and Andrew discovered he had a talent for creating them. It was amazing to hear how her voice changed, subtly but enough that Andrew always leaned in a bit closer, when she read. It was almost lyrical, the way the words came alive on her tongue. John always said he liked the way I read—the way Andrew leaned into Maisy reminded me too much of him. I tried to focus only on Maisy, on her voice, on the words. When Andrew created stories I would get lost in them. He never read from paper; in fact, I don't recall him writing his stories down until much later, maybe not even until he went to university.

“Pirates, Andrew, really?” Maisy asked one afternoon in mid June. They were thirteen.

“Just trust me on this one, it's going to be great.”

“But you did pirates last week.”

“It's a sequel.”

Maisy rolled her eyes at him and lay back on the gingham blanket they had set out in the little garden behind Maisy's home.

"Okay then, I'm listening. Where did you leave off?"

"Ol' RedBeard was just about to duel with Jonathan Black."

"I still think Ol' RedBeard is a ridiculous name for a pirate." Maisy's eyes were shut against the summer sun as Andrew paced in circles at her feet.

"You think all the names I come up with are ridiculous."

"Well, they are."

Andrew kicked a tuft of loose grass onto Maisy's legs, which were bare underneath her white cotton dress, but it didn't bother her. She didn't move an inch. In that moment, she seemed utterly at peace, even while chastising him.

"Then why do you even listen to my stories?"

"Don't be daft, Andrew, I like your stories. So, Ol' RedBeard..."

They always had such an easy banter, something I admired for a long time. It's why it was always so painful in those moments when they could not think of what to say to one another. Those moments were almost worse than their arguments, which they had plenty of. Both of them were so stubborn. They were unique, though; they belonged together somehow. Of course, they didn't know exactly how until years later.

Andrew was always a popular boy and never had trouble making friends, but he never quite had anyone the way he had Maisy. They bickered and pushed each other's buttons, certainly, but it was never malicious, and neither of them ever took it the wrong way. She liked to tease him, and he liked to make her laugh. I like to think he started telling stories just for her, just to see the way she'd become casually engrossed. She rarely let herself seem soft, not at

first—I think she believed the boys would only let her around if she were tough. But there were moments, especially as they got older and other friends began to fade away, that she would let her guard down.

“You know you’re my best friend,” she said to him one summer night, the summer Andrew found himself someone’s boyfriend for the first time. “Don’t tell Emma, I don’t think she’ll like it, but you are.”

“Yeah, Mais, you’re mine too, of course. I don’t think Emma would care.”

“Why do you even go with her?” There was something bitter in her voice, but Andrew only shrugged.

“Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do now?” They were fifteen, so I supposed maybe it was what they were ‘supposed’ to do. I knew a few girls in my time that were married by that age. A few weeks after that, maybe in retaliation or just to fit in, Maisy began seeing someone—though she refused to call him her boyfriend, and she and Andrew rarely spoke about their respective relationships. When they did, though, I sensed that neither of them really wanted to. Andrew would cross his arms and Maisy would roll her eyes and the conversations were short lived. To be fair, John and I never spoke of Emily Grant, at least not until we had to. It would have been an interruption, things might’ve changed. Perhaps it would have made me hesitant, certainly would have made me jealous, maybe he would feel guilty—so we never spoke of it, and nothing interrupted us. Nothing changed. I never loved anyone but John, and Andrew never loved anyone but Maisy. They sanded each other’s rough edges so they could fit together smoothly and comfortably. They made each other better, although it was unconscious, and they fit together. I think Maisy stole a piece of Andrew that first day at school when they were so

young, and she never gave it back. Yet he took from her too—and neither ever asked for their pieces back.

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It's quiet here. Andrew is sleeping—he does quite a lot of that as of late. It's somewhat settling to see him drowsy and dreaming. His wrinkles smooth and the deep crease in between his eyebrows unhinges itself from a static furrow. He looks unequivocally at peace. He deserves to be, after all he has gone through, after all this time. He's eighty years old now. I have spent eighty years watching him, following him, protecting him as best I could—I wonder if he thinks it's enough. I still don't completely understand why I felt more deeply connected to Andrew than to anyone else I have watched over, but it started almost immediately. His dark eyes caught on to mine earlier in his life than anyone before him. I think it may have even been the day after he was born. We had a bond so instantaneously, it was like he was waiting for me. Maybe Andrew felt my connection to his family somewhere within him, enough to let him accept me. He was a serious child, and sickly in his first few years. Even with all the modern medicine available to him in the early part of this awful, war-filled century, I believe it was my presence that soothed him the most. Maybe that's just wishful thinking.

Andrew turned three shortly after the end of that first dreadful war. I remember it well—1920, the year he stopped seeing me, the year his mother died. Sarah Little was a strong-willed woman who was weathered slightly by time and the burden of parenting Andrew on her own while her husband, William, was off fighting a war. I still think it's cruel that William, a man I also diligently watched over when he was a child, survived years of battle only to have his wife die in his arms. She contracted a fever shortly after Andrew had one—she cooled his forehead with damp cloths and hummed lullabies in his ears, and they both got better, and it seemed that

all would be well. Maybe her body was too weakened by that fever, I'm not sure, but only two years after William returned she contracted influenza. A week before Andrew's third birthday, Sarah could no longer get out of bed. William cared for her meticulously, the way she did for Andrew, as she rapidly deteriorated from doting mother and wife to patient. They held Andrew's birthday party at her bedside, her wispy mutterings of 'happy birthday' cut off by the hacking cough she developed early on. It became clear the next day she wouldn't survive the night. William held her in his arms, not caring if he himself got sick, and stroked her hair and kissed her cheeks until she took her final breath. Neither saw Andrew huddled in the corner, his eyes darting from his mother to me until I noticed he no longer focused on my face but rather where he thought I had been. I knew he could no longer see me.

I stopped questioning long before that day why I couldn't see other spirits, yet I waited for Sarah. Some part of me believed she would appear before me, despite the fact that not a single one of the young men I had watched grow old and deteriorate, nor their wives, or even strangers, had. Of course, neither did Sarah. I think even then I felt a stronger pull towards Andrew than I ever had in the past, to others, and maybe that's why I so desperately wanted Sarah by my side. I think from then on I felt more motherly to Andrew than anything else, and I was afraid. I was fearful of the bond, since I knew very well that one day I would have to watch Andrew die, and I felt I couldn't go through it without Sarah. It was selfish, I suppose, wanting his true mother to watch him fall through time with me. It would have been worse for her, maybe, to have to watch her husband deal with her death.

William was entirely dejected after Sarah's death. In the last two years they had together, William would often awake at night screaming, only lulled back to sleep by Sarah's soft, delicate voice. She would speak to him of their future, and Andrew, and all they had been through and

all that was to come. His eyes would grow heavy with sleep as she soothed him with her presence. After she passed, he almost stopped sleeping altogether. I watched him try and force himself to stay awake, and eventually succumb and fall into nightmares just as the sun began to peek out from the horizon. He would then sleep until the late afternoon, leaving Andrew to entertain himself until lunch or sometimes later. I suppose Andrew is the way he is, so headstrong and independent, because of this. Yet watching him, so young and so lonesome, try to cope with both his mother's death and the death of his father's happiness—watching this sent me seeking refuge in my memories, the ones buried artfully in the recesses of my soul and the ones that lived always on the surface, that grazed my fingertips like shadows when I reached for them. Most of the easy memories, the ones I could access without much energy, were of stories. Those memories are like soft light, flickering candles or summer stars. Characters and plots and sprung out at me, protecting my fragile senses from watching William sink deeper into despair and Andrew deeper into isolation. It wasn't until Andrew and Maisy met that I allowed myself to forgo reading my memories like a book and edge back into Andrew's reality, the world I then belonged in.

## Chapter Two

*July 1812*

An eight-year-old girl hides behind her mother's skirts as introductions are made. She grips fabric in her fists and feels a warm hand on the back of her neck—it is her father's, guiding her out from behind her mother. She blinks into the summer sun as she takes in her surroundings. She is standing in front of a castle. Not a castle, but certainly large enough to a petite young girl with big blue eyes to masquerade as one. The carriage ride left her legs shaky and her head dizzy, and she struggles to stand upright. Her sister is introduced, and then it is her turn. Her cheeks turn red and she stares unblinking at the imposing fortress before her. She takes in its dark grey stone, impossibly sturdy doors with the big brass knocker, the scattered pebbles that connect her feet to the Manor in a manicured line. She feels somehow that this path is alive, speaking to her. She resists the urge to sprint away and run through every single room, learning all the secrets she knows the walls must hold.

“This is my daughter, Elisabeth. She is very pleased to meet you, aren't you, Elisabeth?”

The young girl nods her head shyly, and her father clears his throat. Three pairs of brown eyes watch her expectantly.

“Very pleased to make your acquaintances.” She speaks softly but eloquently, the result of a multitude of etiquette lessons her mother had been gracing her with since the little girl was only five. The older man that towers in front of her laughs, the woman to his right smiles, and the young boy in between them looks at her with one eyebrow arched, making him look reservedly curious.

“It is about time, Edward, that our children meet. Margot and I are so pleased you and your family are able to stay the summer,” the tall man says to Elisabeth’s father. “This is my son, John.”

The boy, not much older than Elisabeth, stands forward and bows. The girls both giggle, but the boy is not embarrassed. He stands straight again with a smirk on his face, his black hair sticking to his forehead in the heat. Elisabeth pulls at her sea-green bodice and her mother gently pushes her hand away, silently instructing her to not fidget when in front of people. Elisabeth belligerently shuffles her feet, scuffing the bottoms of her shoes on the pebbles that line the carriageway. She pretends not to notice the look her mother gives her, the one that is full of disappointment and *why can't you be more like your sister*.

“John, why don’t you show Elisabeth and Caroline the gardens?” The boy’s mother nudges him slightly, pressing her fingertips into his right shoulder. He nods, and he walks towards the gardens with a boyish certainty. He knows they will follow him. The girl’s sister prances after him, smiling. Elisabeth looks at her mother, who nods as well and gestures with her chin. *Go with them*. Elisabeth, trying to please her mother, skips after her sister and the boy. When she catches up with them, she links arms with her sister, both of them slowing to a stroll. They walk arm in arm, a few paces behind the boy, whispering to each other.

“Is it not so lovely here?”

“Yes, Caroline.”

“I absolutely cannot wait to spend the summer.”

“Me neither, Caroline.”

“You could be more somber about it,” Caroline, the sister, teases.

“I *am* looking forward to it.”

“If you say so.”

John stops walking and turns around slowly.

“We have arrived at the gardens,” he says in a mock-formal tone. He bows again.

“Thank you.” Caroline curtsies. They are playing a game, Elisabeth thinks. She is not sure if she wants to play.

“How old are you?” Elisabeth’s words tumble out of her mouth like rainwater.

“Ten,” he responds quickly.

“I’m eight.” She is suddenly bold, and she lets her arm fall free from the crook of her sister’s elbow. She steps forward. “Do you enjoy it here?”

“It can get boring with just Mother and Father.”

“Are you glad Caroline and I are here?”

“Yes.”

Neither has anything else to say. They look at each other with a childlike intensity that does not hold any uncomfortable air about it, the way it does when grown ups stare.

“I’m twelve,” Caroline chimes in, feeling left out.

“You are too old to play with us,” Elisabeth says.

She is tall for her age but immature, and often resents the attention Elisabeth is paid by their mother during lessons. *Not my fault I learned etiquette quickly*, Caroline often thinks when extra care is given to Elisabeth to make sure she learns properly. Caroline does not realize Elisabeth wishes she did not have to take lessons at all. It does not occur to Caroline that Elisabeth does not want to be a lady.

The trio walks around the garden, the two girls exploring and the boy following them, watching them. They approach a gazebo, and then Elisabeth gasps.

“I want to run around in *there*,” Elisabeth says, nodding at the looming maze at the bottom of a row of stairs leading from the gazebo. There is a small rose bush on each side of the entrance, and the leafy walls reach at least eight feet high. To her, they look as though they could touch the clouds.

“I can take you. I know my way through it quite well,” John says. “But be warned, there is a wild beast that lives in the heart of the maze, and it likes to devour little girls!”

“Hah! You’re only making up stories, John Little.” Elisabeth looks at the maze, and to her sister. “Let’s go! We can defeat the wild beast.”

“I am going to return to the Manor and help Mother and Father get sorted,” Caroline says. She is afraid of the maze. Elisabeth is not afraid of getting lost, or having her skirts muddied, or of beasts that eat children.

Caroline turns around swiftly and heads back to the house. When she is halfway between the garden and the entrance to the Manor, where her parents and the Littles still stood, Caroline realizes she is too old to play silly games, and decides she will forget about the whole thing and be incredibly ladylike at dinner.

“You are not afraid, are you?” John asks Elisabeth with a gleam in his eyes.

“Not one bit. And wild beasts don’t eat princesses,” she replies.

“You are a princess?”

“Yes. And you are the prince.” Elisabeth wants to play her own game now. John has a princely look about him, she decides, and she stands up a bit straighter and speaks a bit louder. “You must rescue me.” And with that, Elisabeth runs past John and disappears into the maze, laughing. A piece of lace from her dress that she had been picking at during the carriage ride falls away behind her.

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“Catch me, wild beast!” Elisabeth yells. It has been fifteen minutes since she ran into the maze. She is breathless and sweating in the hot mid-afternoon heat. Her hem is dirtied and her cheeks are red, and she is blissfully happy. There is no one to judge her, no one to pinch her arm, no one to tell her to sit straighter. Just she, a princess, waiting in an ivy jungle for her prince, and no one else. Just Elisabeth and John.

“I will save you, princess! The wild beast is coming nearer!” John’s voice travels around corners and through endless corridors of green and moss. Elisabeth giggles and puts her hands over her ears.

“I can’t hear you, prince,” she shouts. Her voice sounds muffled through her obstructed ears. “The beast’s horrible roaring has deafened me!”

There is no answer. Elisabeth is unsure if John heard her, or tired of their game. Her breath begins to even and she sits on the warm ground. She keeps her hands pressed against the sides of her head, blocking out the opportunity for him to call to her and end their adventure. She does not want it to end. She lifts her chin upwards and closes her eyes against the sun, letting it flush her face. Mother always told her that young ladies should have porcelain complexions, but Elisabeth likes the sun. She smiles and she can almost feel the first freckles of the summer spread across her cheeks.

“Got you!” John’s voice startles her and she leaps up.

“You pinched me,” she says. She removes her hands from her ears and rubs her eyes. Miniature bright suns dance against the black backdrop behind her eyelids.

“I was trying to be the beast.”

“Well, it hurt.” Elisabeth places her hands on her hips angrily, her palms covering where John pinched her. “Why did you not try to be the prince?”

John shrugs and tilts his head to one side, reminding Elisabeth of a brown and black spaniel she encountered in London a few years back. She laughs at the comparison.

“Make fun all you like, I can be a great prince!”

“Perhaps.” She is teasing him. He notices.

“I shall prove it to you.” John immediately drops to one knee. He tilts his head again, and she dutifully reaches out her right hand.

“Sir,” she says as royally as she can manage. They both stifle giggles.

“Princess,” he replies, and then he takes her hand in his and kisses it. She immediately grimaces and wipes the back of her hand on her skirts.

“Yes, you make a fine prince,” she says, still wiping his kiss away.

“And you a princess,” he says. They both look at each other for a moment and then fall into fits of laughter. They are too young to understand that they will one day look back on this adventure with fondness and sadness alike, both marking it as the day their lives truly began.

## Chapter Three

*July 1935*

"Maisy, wait! You're running too fast!"

"You're just slow," Maisy said with a smile. She was out of breath, her long hair falling out of its curls as she ran ahead of Andrew. Maisy had strawberry-blonde hair and a sprinkle of freckles that sat delicately on the bridge of her nose as if they were each individually placed with the tip of a needle. Her hair went almost to her waist and held a soft, natural curl, like a ringlet that had been washed and stretched and hung out to dry and fade in the afternoon sun. She still sometimes tied it back with a white ribbon. Most girls in those days wore their hair short or styled or both, but Maisy always told Andrew she liked the way her hair tickled the nape of her neck when she ran, and how she liked the translucent baby hairs that stuck out like a halo around her oval face.

Andrew stopped running and bent over, putting his hands on his knees, breathing heavily. The parts of his dark hair that weren't sticking straight up in the air were stuck to his forehead and he was almost wheezing.

"Jeez, Maisy," he panted. Maisy stopped running and turned around to face him, her cheeks red from exertion and her whole face glowing from pride.

"Giving up so soon, huh?"

He nodded.

"Hah! Maybe next time, kid." She jogged back towards him and extended a hand.

"I don't know why we even have these races anymore," Andrew said grumpily. "We always know that you'll win and besides, we aren't children anymore, and—"

“Oh, you’re just a sore loser,” Maisy said. She retreated her arm, let loose one of her many ribbons that were always tied around her wrists, and pulled her hair up. She reached out once more, and he took her hand this time. He must have pulled too hard, because as he stood straight he inadvertently—or perhaps not—pulled her close to him. They stood silently, their bodies almost touching.

“You’re breathing hard,” she said quietly.

“So are you.”

“You just put up a better fight this time. Almost as good as when you would chase me around the school yard.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve chased you, Mais.” He still held her hand, close to his chest, and stared into her green eyes. She looked at him so intensely, I figure it was all he could do to—

“Kiss me, Andrew Little.”

His eyes widened and he bit his lip nervously. He was not expecting it, and neither was I, although neither of us would ever put it past Maisy to initiate a kiss.

“I—”

“What?”

“What did you just say?”

“You’re seriously going to ask me to repeat that?”

“I—”

“Oh, for crying out loud!” That’s when Maisy leaned in and kissed him. He backed away at first, startled by her abruptness, so she planted her free hand firmly on his left shoulder to keep him still. It was just a peck, a short colliding of lips, and I think it startled them both. I imagined

lightening touching down in both their bodies, from their heads to their knees. That's how it always felt when John kissed me. She pulled away slowly, just enough, so that their foreheads almost touched. Andrew's eyes opened into hers. They were still so close.

"I'm still holding your hand," he said. Maisy laughed at him.

"You're nervous."

"Well, sure, aren't you?"

"I suppose. I think it's been a long time coming, though."

"Well, sure."

I watched Andrew and Maisy struggle to find the words to express how they felt. Andrew relied on 'sure' and Maisy relied on looking at her feet while trying to maintain the general nonchalance she had acquired over the years. They both looked so young then, holding hands but not looking each other in the eyes, and I wonder if they still remember that moment, the moment they realized maybe they belonged together in a different sort of way than before. They were eighteen and naive, so perhaps it took them a while to understand.

"What are we doing, Andrew?"

"How do you mean?"

Maisy pulled her hand away and sat on a nearby rock, nervously twisting the ends of her hair. Andrew did not move. "You're going to Cambridge in autumn."

"I know."

"So what are we doing? You're off to university, I'm going who-knows-where, we've been friends for eight years and suddenly, this..." Her voice trailed off, and she looked at him with a sort of detachment. I think she did not want to open herself up to him in that way, after so many years of friendship. I think she was fearful of being in love with him.

“You kissed me, Maisy.”

She didn't say anything. She lowered her eyes and beads of sweat gathered at the base of her neck.

“I didn't mean it like that—I mean—you think this has been a long time coming, and so do I, and truthfully I—I just really care for you, Mais.” It was the first time Andrew had said something of a romantic nature to Maisy, and they both smiled sheepishly.

“I care for you too, Andrew. Yet I—”

“Are you scared?” His tone shifted from serious to playful. “I thought Maisy Harlan wasn't afraid of anything!”

She laughed and Andrew walked over to her, standing above her as she sat. He looked quite big, and I realized how much he had grown since the two of them met. He used to be a scrawny child, and now he was six-feet tall, almost a man, with strong, serious features and deep brown eyes that looked at Maisy with love and excitement.

“Well, I am afraid. Of you, maybe, or of this. What it would mean. What it would mean if we—”

“It's us, Maisy. Nothing bad will happen. It's us.” Andrew reached out and instinctively touched her cheek. Maisy breathed sharply. “It's us,” she repeated. It was one of the few times I had seen her at a loss for words. Andrew lifted his hand from her cheek and reached around behind her head, finally actually undoing the ribbon and letting her hair loose. He moved so swiftly it was as though he had imagined the scene before. He turned the ribbon over in his hands, and then let it drop to the ground.

“What are you—”

Andrew sat beside Maisy on the rock then, and gently put one hand on the small of her back and tangled the other in the ends of her hair, and kissed her.

“Oh,” Maisy said when he pulled away, smiling. “You’re quite good at that. Did Emma Rosedale teach you that?”

They both laughed and sat there for a while, absorbing each other’s energy, allowing their bodies to settle into a new rhythm. Suddenly, Maisy stood, a look of resolve drawn over her features.

“Let’s race. I bet you can’t beat me.”

Andrew sighed. “We both know I can’t—”

Before he could finish his thought Maisy was off.

“Catch me,” she yelled behind her. “I’ll be in the garden! Catch me and I’ll kiss you again!”

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Maisy was running towards the garden at Little Manor. She had begun spending summers there with Andrew’s family years ago. I watched her run, Andrew flailing clumsily behind, and she looked so young and bright. It took Andrew a while to grow into his legs and torso but Maisy inhabited her slim, long body effortlessly. She reminded me of a gazelle my father once described to me. I don’t know if he actually ever saw a gazelle, or was simply repeating tales his friends told. I never had a clear picture of what the animal would look like until I saw Maisy run.

It didn’t take long for her to reach the garden, and Andrew was far behind, so Maisy made up her mind to hide. I could tell from the way her body shifted slightly. She curled her shoulders in, rounding her back to make herself look smaller, and she darted her eyes around

quickly. Pebbles crunched under her bare feet as she snuck carefully through the garden. It was a somewhat enclosed space, with three high brick walls topped off with white stone and a marble staircase that descended from the back of the Manor. The staircase opened into a garden of various flowers, perfectly manicured shrubs, and the ivy-covered pillars of a green-roofed gazebo. In the heart of the garden was a small fountain that I used to put my toes in to cool off on desperate July days. Yellow poppies grew close to the walls and the entire thing was alive with the humming of bees and gentle trickling of water. Behind the gazebo, down a steep set of wooden stairs built into the dirt, was the maze.

The hollow shrubs only came up to Maisy's hips, so she couldn't hide in them without lying flat, and I could tell she was deterred from doing so after she peered inside and took note of all the insects that writhed in the soil. She looked over her shoulder hastily—she was yet to lose a game with Andrew, and regardless of their newfound attraction I knew she would be entirely satisfied if she could win again, especially in a place Andrew knew so well. As Maisy swiveled her body, surveying the landscape, her gaze landed on a small alcove carved into the east wall. There were four of these recesses, but two held pristine white benches and the third housed a small granite statue. After checking to make sure Andrew was not lurking behind shrubs or pillars, Maisy ran quickly to her new hiding place. She nestled through the tall rose bushes that partially covered the space, so she would be out of sight even though the opening of the alcove directly faced the garden. She pressed her back against the curve of the brick, sucking the tips of her fingers where she pricked herself on thorns. Just as she secured herself, Andrew came rushing down parallel to the marble steps, almost tripping twice in his haste. Maisy held her breath as she watched him pass by her. Suddenly, her right knee buckled and her foot

slipped, shuffling the pebbles loudly. She put her hand over her mouth and stood straight and still, but it was too late. Andrew turned around quickly, a smug smile on his face.

“I know you’re here, Maisy.” He was taunting her, taking his time in revealing her hiding space. He was reveling in his discovery, in her mistake. Maisy remained quiet, perhaps hoping she could salvage the game. He took four slow steps until he was standing directly in front of where she hid. I believe they may have even locked eyes through the bushes.

“Don’t be a sore loser, Mais.” He inched closer. He was enjoying himself, using her own words from earlier in the day against her. He knew exactly how to push her buttons, and which ones to push.

“I’m not a sore loser,” she called out despite herself.

“Hah! Got you!” Andrew pushed apart the tangle of flowers and branches, somehow missing the thorns entirely, and stepped inside. There was just enough room for them to stand facing each other, almost touching.

“I can’t believe it. You won.”

“I believe there was mention of a kiss? If I found you. Which I did.” He was gloating.

“Stop, you’re better than this.”

“No, I really am not. This is fantastic. I’ve finally beaten the unbeatable!” He moved to pump a fist in the air but Maisy caught him before he punched his knuckles right into the brick above them.

“Careful!” She held his clenched fist in her small hand for a moment before releasing it angrily. “You could’ve hurt yourself, all for winning some stupid game.”

“It’s not stupid when *you* win,” Andrew said.

“Just be careful.”

I think Andrew took notice, for the first time, of the delicacy Maisy inhabited behind her mask of bravado. He rolled his wrist, probably warding off the nonexistent pain there from almost hitting the top of the alcove, and looked in her eyes. They stood silently for a moment, looking at each other, Andrew recognizing something new in her and her allowing him to see it. He then shifted forward, forcing Maisy even closer to the back curved wall until he had to press his palms against it to keep himself from falling onto her.

“It’s not a stupid game,” he whispered. Maisy nodded and they both leaned in this time, neither one approaching the other but both simultaneously easing themselves comfortably into a deep kiss.

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“Let’s do this, all right?” She sounded almost as if she were conceding to something. They were sitting on the edge of the fountain, their feet floating in the water. Andrew shook his head.

“You have to mean it.”

“I do mean it.”

“Prove it.”

“Prove it? Andrew, how am I supposed to prove to you that I want to be with you?”

It was the first time it was said out loud, that they were talking about being together. They somehow managed to avoid saying the words all day. Now the sun was close to setting and her eyes flashed with something nervous and hopeful, and she had said the words.

“You want to be with me,” he said, tauntingly.

“Don’t be a child.”

“Ouch.”

“Please. Of course I want to be with you, I just said it, didn’t I?”

“This is true. Well, sure, prove it.”

“You haven’t said it to me.”

“What?” The suave, ambitious Andrew that had reared his head before shrunk away and the befuddled, testy Andrew had reappeared.

“You haven’t said it to me. That you wanted to be with me. You’re acting all petulant but you haven’t said it to me.”

“I want to be with you, Maisy. There, fine, we want to be together.”

“So then what do I have to prove that you don’t? Can’t we just be together and end it there?”

“I thought you were afraid.”

“I am.”

“So what’s changed?”

I didn’t understand why he didn’t just stop asking her all these questions and just let it go. After all, she had already said she wanted them to be together. I think maybe he was testing her.

“I suppose there’s always going to be things I’ll be afraid of. I don’t want you to be one of them. I don’t want—a relationship—to be one of them. I want to just dive in headfirst sometimes, and I think I could dive into this.”

“You’re quite the philosopher.”

“Oh, don’t make fun. You’re asking me to prove it, and I’m trying, I’m trying to prove that I’m not too afraid to be with you.”

Andrew was silent, I don’t think he knew what to say just then. I saw his eyes shift down and to the left, trying to find the words. John had a similar way of avoiding speech when he

found he had nothing to say. Eventually, if one is quiet for long enough, the other will forget what it is they are expecting to hear.

“You know you’re my best friend, Mais.”

“And you’re mine. That doesn’t have to change.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“I don’t—I don’t think so. I don’t believe in that.”

“It’s not a magical creature, Maisy. Relationships aren’t fairies or unicorns, they aren’t something you believe in or not.” “Well I’m saying I don’t believe that we won’t be best friends anymore. I’m saying I believe in us. It’s like you said before. It’s us. Why can’t we have everything? Don’t you want everything?”

“I just want you.” He stretched out his right hand to meet her left, letting his fingertips brush hers until they slowly intertwined their hands together.

“So there’s nothing more to discuss.”

“Well, sure. Yes. Nothing else.” Andrew’s voice was halted and hesitant.

“Something else?”

“Well—I’ve always wanted to tell you how pretty you are.”

There was a moment where Maisy’s expression could have passed for either confused or elated. Her eyes widened, her shoulders tensed and her back straightened.

“Mais? I’m sorry, is that strange?”

“No, I’ve always wanted to hear it, I suppose.”

“You suppose.”

“I believe,” she said, teasing him. He smiled at her and stood, pulling her by the hand up with him.

“I bet I could win another game,” he said. “The maze?”

She looked at the sky and I realized how late it had gotten. The clouds were lined with purple and deep blue and the last remnants of orange, and it all turned Maisy’s hair a dusty pink.

“It’s getting dark,” she said, shaking the light from her hair.

“Tomorrow, then. You’re here for another week anyways. There’s still time for me to beat you again.”

They both laughed and walked together up to the Manor. Andrew held the door for her and she strode inside like she knew she belonged, and that she always would.

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I died at Little Manor. I often forget that I died at all—after so much time, facts and memories can become distant and confused, and the only thing I can focus on is what I am seeing in front of me. My memory will snap backwards on occasion, a spring loaded thing that takes me from the moment I am watching back to a time long ago, when my body felt warm and I could still hear the blood rushing through my veins if I listened closely enough. However, most of the time I watch. Sometimes it is like I am watching a moving picture, the thing Andrew would go to with Maisy, and then without her. The first time I saw a moving picture I think I was more startled than anything else. It was as if a book had come alive before me, jumping out at me with faces and unspoken, and then eventually spoken, words. It was like watching my mind project itself onto a screen. I wondered the first few times if it was something John and I would have enjoyed together, or Caroline and I, or all three of us an amused and amazed little trio. I quickly learned to try not to think of what could have been, yet sometimes I still lose myself in remembering.

I still prefer books, though I have to rely on reading over the shoulder of whomever I can, whenever I can, which becomes quite tedious when the reader decides to put down the story right at the climax only to pick it up days later, or even worse decides to not finish the story at all. Perhaps I am impatient, or it just reminds me that I believe my life was an unfinished book, a tale somebody began to write or read but hastily dropped in the beginning chapters. No one bothered to write me an ending. I died in that maze when I was only nineteen years old. I was—am—an unfinished story. Moving pictures are nice, I suppose, in that they entice you to stay until the end. Maybe my life with the Littles is more like a moving picture, something that plays out before me and that captures my interest so that I forget all else, especially wanting it to end or remembering how it began at all.

## Chapter Four

*May 1937*

There was something about the way the clouds hang in the sky that would always make me feel weightless. I don't think most people look—truly look—at the sky. Sometimes I used to lie on my back and look up and forget myself entirely. Everything in that moment became white and blue and drifting. Watching Andrew and Maisy underneath willow trees on the bank of the River Cam flooded me with nostalgia. I saw them lying on the grass, their eyes squinting past the canopy of leaves into the vibrancy of a sky whose warmth I could no longer feel, and for a moment I had trouble distinguishing their experiences from mine. John and I spent many afternoons in the selfsame position, our fingertips hovered close and vibrating with a secret longing we were not aware, yet, that we possessed. Andrew and Maisy, however, were almost flagrant in their declaration of love, their fingers intertwined, her head resting with ease on his chest.

It was the spring of Andrew's second year at Cambridge. Yet it seemed a different kind of inseparability, something more desperate and hurried as though they lived within an hourglass. Andrew and Maisy liked to take long walks, and they often strolled along the river, where it wound through fields of tall grass and poppies. Sometimes they would even jump into the water from the unsteady bridge that some university students constructed some time ago. Most times it was too cold for them to swim—I still vividly remember English winters—but they enjoyed picnicking with heavy scarves and blankets, or just walking hand in hand. It was a routine they fell into swiftly; Maisy would come from London on the fifth of each month and spend the day. They'd spend hours just wandering. Andrew always stung himself on nettle and Maisy always tried to get as close as she could to the cows and swans before losing her nerve and backing

away. They wandered and held hands and talked endlessly until it was time for Andrew to sullenly escort Maisy to the train.

I listened often to Maisy tell Andrew about her various jobs taking care of London's society children—a position I would most likely refer to as a governess and what Maisy tried to avoid referring to as a nanny—and saw the spark in her eye when she spoke of it. She still lived at home with her parents, but that did not seem to bother her. She seemed content to remain in London, remain in her childhood home, if it meant she could come visit Andrew. I knew there had been some talks of moving to America—I heard Maisy mention it offhandedly a few times that year. The way she talked about it, though, did not have me nor Andrew concerned. Andrew would listen to her casually joke about how she could never get along in America, how she could never stand their dreadful accents, and he would smile and squeeze her hand and act as though nothing could possibly change what they had. I wish that Andrew had paid more mind, that he had seen past her charade of nonchalance. She was always quite talented at acting as though everything was fine—this was something I would come to learn about her, however, and I was not attuned to it back then so I could not have known. I could not have known that, in fact, the plans to move to America were always more serious than she had let on. I am glad, in a way, that Andrew let her pretend. I think it allowed them a period of happiness that could have easily otherwise been marred by discontent and fear. Of course, I knew none of this then, and so I watched them naively, their innocence giving me a sense of peace I rarely had before or after that moment.

I wonder if it was the same for them, if they noticed that it was so perfect in those two years, if they feared it was impossible for it to get better. Although better is relative, and I believe now that love can grow even in dark times, even when everything else is against you,

even when time or distance or even death can try to stop you from loving. Still I think about John; still I wonder if, after all this time, I love him. Maisy and Andrew, though—theirs was a solid, unquestionable love. It seemed cemented and visceral, but also endless. I suppose it makes sense that I, ever the romantic, would not have seen the cracks as they began. It makes sense that I would have been caught off guard, and Andrew as well, with his ability to remain utterly clueless at times. Maisy, though, she would never let herself get tricked by anything, even love. That is why that moment, the two of them in the park that lovely spring day, was so perfect. Even Maisy had allowed herself to dream, to pretend, most likely for Andrew's sake more than for hers but she did it all the same. I try to remember if there was a change in her features when she brought up America that afternoon, if there was something I had missed, or something Andrew should have noticed. Yet all I remember is her long sun-kissed hair making halos on the soft grass, one of her hands in his and the other gently tugging on the grass as mindless, idle hands often do. It was a perfect moment, and for reasons I will never understand she chose that moment to make the first crack.

“Andrew,” she began lightly, in the voice I would come to recognize as a false sort of breeziness, “I want to talk to you about America.”

“I know, Mais,” he said. “You hate their accents and they don't break for tea. What else is there?”

“Much more,” she said quietly. Andrew looked at her, and I could see he was concerned.

“What do you mean?”

She sat up, then, not looking at his eyes. She was still holding his hand.

“There are boxes, Andrew. There are boxes lined up in the corridors.”

“No.”

“There are people coming to look today, at the house.”

“Maisy—”

“Nothing is settled, of course,” she added hastily, perhaps regretting her decision to let him in on something I felt strongly she knew about for a long time, and was hiding. She turned to him; he was still lying down, his eyes shut towards the sky. “They would tell me if things were settled.” She sounded more unsure than she usually did, but Andrew seemed almost as if he had stopped listening. I could practically feel the erratic, nervous beating of his heart; it is a sensation I felt many times. The moment she said boxes his eyes had closed, and I wondered if he was trying not to cry. After a few moments of silence, Maisy repeated, desperately, “Nothing is settled.”

“Of course, Mais,” he said. “Lie back down, tell me, I think this cloud looks like a flower, what do you think?”

Maisy looked at him hard, and I could tell she wanted to hear something different from him, but at the same time she looked a bit relieved, as though he had saved her the trouble of breaking his heart. She obeyed, lying down beside him as if nothing had happened in those awful minutes. She rested her head on his chest, and it rose up and down as he took deep, slow breaths.

“A rose, I think it looks quite like a rose.”

They remained that way, entwined, silently, for almost an hour. Neither spoke a word, until the wind rustled the trees and Maisy shivered. Andrew drew his arm tighter around her and kissed the top of her head. She smiled, but faintly, and he looked tired.

“You wouldn’t have to go anyways,” he said suddenly. She looked up at him questioningly.

“No?”

“You could go to university, of course, it’s so simple.” Andrew perked up, color coming back to his cheeks. He seemed rather pleased with himself, and he smiled at her. “You could come to Cambridge, or go somewhere else, it doesn’t matter. You would live in the dormitories. Maybe we wouldn’t see each other each month but you would still be here. You would still be here, with me, us, we would be fine. It’s so simple. You don’t have to go.” He rambled until he most likely felt as though he had convinced himself, and then he settled with a sigh. Maisy did not reply, but she did not have to. I saw the look on her face that Andrew did not, could not recognize, but an expression I wore for years. I saw it in the beginnings of the tears that did not fall, the subtle crease in her forehead, and in the way she knotted her fingers together as though she was trying to keep herself from saying something. I think I knew her well at that point, although I did not need to know her well at all to know she was thinking, *why aren’t you asking me to marry you?* It was the best solution for Maisy, a girl focused on family. Andrew, of course, in all his boyish naivety, had believed, and even voiced to her on occasion, that Maisy’s love for caring for children was just something to pass the time before she came around and decided to attend university. He did not consider, or maybe he had conveniently forgotten, that Maisy had always told him how she didn’t ever want to go to university. For Maisy, she adored children in a way that I knew meant she was desperate to start a family, but cared enough for Andrew that she would wait for him, wait until he was done with Cambridge. They would marry on a bright spring morning, not long after graduation. This was always her plan; she spoke to him of it sometimes, but took care to lighten her voice just enough that it would be possible for him to not take her seriously if he did not want to, and Andrew sometimes had trouble taking things seriously. He was smart, certainly, creative and bright and motivated. Yet he lacked a

sort of awareness at times. I've heard of this term, tunnel vision—I think it describes him well. I don't like to think of Andrew in a negative light, but I find it necessary to acknowledge his flaws only to explain to myself why, in fact, he did not propose to her in that moment. It would have been perfect on all accounts. Yet I'm certain the thought did not even cross his mind, for he was surely thinking that he had come up with a brilliant plan, one that made sense to him as a scholar and student and there was no part of him that thought Maisy would abandon him, that she would not follow him. However, looking at Maisy in that moment, I saw something break slightly. A trust, not in him but in a future she had planned. The world for her I think seemed a bit shaken on its axis when she realized Andrew was not going to ask her to marry him, that he was going to suggest that she attend university and leave it at that. I saw her wait for him to come to his senses, to look at her and say, "Of course, how silly of me, Mais, marry me!" He did not, though, and she did not ask him to. As desperate as she was to be with him, to marry him and begin her own little family, Maisy was much too proud a girl to ever admit to feeling let down or wrong in some way. It would have been shameful for her, Andrew's beautifully stubborn girl, to turn to him and say, "How could you? Don't you see what I want? Don't you care?" It was behavior she had mocked in girls they had known years ago, in girls she considered dull and frivolous, that only cared about a husband. Maisy wanted *Andrew*, not a husband, and so she didn't say a word about it. Instead, she leaned up and gave him a sweet, lingering kiss.

"I'm cold, Andrew, can we go inside?" Andrew nodded and they drew themselves up simultaneously. As they walked hand in hand through the fields back to Andrew's dormitory, I noticed a difference in them. Andrew, as usual, seemed self-assured and at ease, having convinced himself of Maisy's staying in England regardless of the decision her parents made. She seemed rattled, confused, and lost. How he didn't notice, and how she acted so convincingly

that she didn't care—I still cannot make sense of it, especially knowing what would transpire between the two of them later. They were young then, of course, and not as strong as they would some day be, individually and together, when the world forced them to.

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It was two weeks later that Andrew received the letter. It didn't seem out of the ordinary to him at first, of course, since Maisy had a habit of writing letters often. She always wrote to him of little things, like the way the sunlight hit the trees that lined her street. I think it made her feel closer to him, and I'd like to say that Andrew treasured these letters, and I'm sure in his own way he did, but I think he treasured the idea of them more. He always read them quickly and then put them on his desk until he would file them away later, giving me ample time to read the letters myself. Perhaps that is— it most certainly is—an invasion of their privacy. I knew this letter was a special one, for Andrew read it slowly and carefully and held on to it long after his eyes stopped scanning the words. I faced him as he read the letter, and watched his features change at least four different times. There was happiness at the onset, at the opening line of *Dearest Andrew*, as they all began, and then confusion that bled in to anger, and finally a deep sadness. His dark eyebrows swam as he read, and his eyes filled with tears when he finished. So I admit I snuck around to read over his shoulder, something I am still not proud of. Being someone that has to constantly interrupt a person's private life without their consent or awareness, I always tried my hardest to remain on the outskirts. I tried not to overhear whispered conversations, to linger in shadowed rooms pulsing with desires and passions I remembered quite clearly; to insert myself unduly into Andrew and Maisy's worlds specifically, for I always felt their love was something more private than any I had seen before excluding my own. Yet sometimes my curiosity would get the best of me, and so I read over Andrew's shoulder and learned that Maisy

was writing to tell him that she was moving away to California that week. I still remember that letter, so clearly, every word, for it struck me to my core. Her callousness in sending the information through a letter, the brevity of her writing—she had never written to him that way before. It was almost as if some other person had written the piece and signed her name to the bottom. The Maisy I could write pages about sunshine.

*Dearest Andrew,*

*I am moving to California by the end of the week. All the boxes are packed. I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this, but I can't convince Mum otherwise. She is determined that moving is her only hope at being an actress. Ridiculous, I know, but there's no choice for me but to follow her. I know you think I can go to school, but I can't. I don't adore it the way you do, and it would only make me restless. I love to take care of children, and I am sure I can find families to work for over in the States. I am writing this to you because I don't think I can bear to say goodbye to you. I'd just be a mess. Andrew, I am so sorry. I know I should have made it more clear that things were serious, that Mum was serious, but I thought I could pretend and it would make it go away. I—I don't know where to go from here.*

*Love always,*

*Your Maisy.*

There were some lines on the back, giving him her new address and such, but all in all it was a short letter compared to her others. It shocked me that she would inform Andrew of her moving in that way, and given the multitude of expressions on his face while reading I am certain it shocked him too. Relief from the tension came from Andrew's roommate, Kitt, who interrupted surreptitiously only moments after Andrew finished reading the letter, barging in his usual jaunty self.

“Mate, you’re missing a total bash out in the courtyard. Frank’s really got himself in it this time...”

Andrew cut Kitt off with a withering glare, a look that Kitt must have known was not meant for him, for he simply continued by saying, “Okay, mate, whatever she’s done, it can’t be that bad.”

“She’s leaving.”

Silence from Kitt, who still stood right inside the doorway. The door was still open and there was an even flow of people in the corridor, so Andrew turned back around to stare once more at Maisy’s letter. Kitt, who by this time knew Andrew and his relationship with Maisy well enough to know that Andrew did not mope unless the situation truly called for it, gently shut the door and walked in the room a bit further. He kept a distance between himself and Andrew; the two were still boys, after all, and affection between them manifested mostly in soft punches and raucous laughter. So, Kitt stood in the center of the dormitory room he and Andrew shared, silently watching Andrew stare at a letter, the contents of which he was still not privy to. The scene was odd—Kitt and Andrew were never silent around each other. The moment was tense but over quickly; Kitt was always fast on his feet, and he decided the best course of action would be to simply continue as if nothing were wrong.

“Frank and Harry are really getting into it, it’s a real brawl almost. Really going at it. Harry had his fists all clenched, I swear he looked like he was just about to sock Frank right in the face when I ran up to get you.”

Andrew was quiet, and did not turn this time to look at Kitt as he spoke. Andrew was testing Kitt’s patience, probably waiting to see if his friend would leave if he only stayed quiet for a bit longer. Yet I think by then Kitt knew Andrew well enough to know what was

happening. Besides, Kitt was always around to pick up the pieces of Andrew's moping if he and Maisy did not make up from an argument right away, it wasn't a new situation. Kitt's silence in addition to Andrew's was most likely him just biding his time until Andrew would come out of what Kitt once referred to as a "love-sick stupor" and join the festivities of the fight down in the courtyard.

"She's leaving," Andrew repeated finally, dropping the letter on the desk and putting his head in his hands. Kitt looked surprised and concerned, and most of all confused as to what his next move should be. He had never seen Andrew like this—I had never seen Andrew like this. I remember trying to piece it all together, see where he or she had gone wrong and how they could fix it, but I was worried, seeing Andrew's reaction to her letter, that maybe this time it was simply too late. I sometimes wish that had been the end of it for them, knowing what life would put both of them through a short time later. For a while I had hope that Andrew could have let her go, hope that he could have moved on, hope that I would not be here right now wondering what will happen to me when Andrew dies because he never had children, because he never loved anyone but her. I wish sometimes with a heavy heart that that letter had been the end of Andrew and Maisy, because if it was, it would have saved both of them so much pain.

"Leaving to where, mate?" Kitt's voice startled me.

"California. In four days."

"Hell, man. I'm really sorry."

"She said it all in a letter, Kitt. She didn't even tell me in person. She was just here, a few weeks back, she could have told me. Instead she writes me this bloody letter, and thinks I'll just be a dog at her bloody heels or something."

“What are you going to do? You should ring her, maybe.” Kitt’s advice surprised me. Usually Kitt was the one convincing Andrew to forget Maisy entirely; he didn’t understand the “compulsion to stick to just one,” as he’d say. Andrew turned around to face Kitt and tilted his head.

“And then what? I can’t tell her not to go.”

“Because you think she’d stay, or…”

“I can’t find out if she wouldn’t.” Andrew’s honesty was brutal and sharp, and tugged at something in my heart. He couldn’t ask Maisy to stay in case she said no, it would wreck him. “Even if she did stay,” he continued, “She’d resent me. I know it. She’d be missing her parents and I’d be the reason. And Maisy loves adventure.” He said it bitterly, as if he could already see the future for them if she stayed behind for him.

“So…what, you’re just going to leave it? You’re going to let her write you that stupid letter and you’re going to let her go without saying goodbye? Hell, mate, she’s going to bloody America, you have to at least say goodbye.” Kitt was adamant and almost yelling, and it seemed to surprise Andrew as much as me.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“What’s gotten into *you*? Ring your girlfriend, Andrew, even if it’s not to make her stay, ring her and tell her you love her. Don’t you think we all wish we could have what you two have?”

“Kitt, you’ve never once said—”

“Yes, yes, I like gallivanting around and all that. But I like love just as much as the next guy. You do love her, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“Have you ever told her?”

“I—”

It was then that I realized Andrew had never told Maisy he loved her. It was odd, all the time they spent together, how close they were, I just assumed he said it when I wasn't paying attention. Yet he hadn't said it, and Kitt of all people was the one to bring it to light.

“Just ring her.” And with that, Kitt turned and left the room, leaving the door open behind him and letting the noise of the world back in. Once Kitt left Andrew stood up and began pacing the small room. He kept glancing back and forth between the letter on the desk and the calendar on the wall, and I realized he was trying to remember what day it was. *End of the week*. I wondered if part of the reason Maisy broke the news to him in a letter was because she was afraid Andrew would either try to stop her, or that he wouldn't. Finally Andrew stood still, sat on the edge of his unmade bed, and mumbled to himself.

“I should ring her—Kitt's right—but how could she just send me this letter? Maybe she doesn't even want me to call...” Andrew continued his confused and angry monologue for a few minutes, while I tuned out and tried to think of how this could possibly turn out. I knew, of course, what I would have done—I came from a time before telephoning someone was even possible, and so the obvious route for a time-sensitive situation like this would be to simply go to her in person. There was no way I could communicate this solution to Andrew, though, so I just had to hope that he would figure it out on his own. My mind was racing, thinking of what I would tell Andrew to do if I could—and then I became petulant. I was angry with Maisy; if she was going to go away, leaving nothing but a letter in her wake, Andrew should let her go. Why should he fight if she wouldn't? Suddenly I was 19 again: headstrong, stubborn, self-assured, thinking I knew everything of love and life and sacrifice. Instantly I was once again incredibly

naive and, in my mind, back at the manor—trying to navigate a life I thought, incorrectly, that I was in control of. I realized I understood Maisy much more than I'd wanted to admit. We were simply two young, stubborn girls that thought letting love go was the right decision, that it would save them, but it wouldn't. I realized Maisy wasn't refusing to fight because she did not want to; rather because she wanted to too much for her to bear losing.

I know now, of course, it was not Maisy I was angry with, but myself. I had done something similar, eerily similar, and it had cost me everything. It had cost me my life, and I was angry. The fact that I could express none of this to Andrew was frustrating, to say the least, and I felt helpless and angry and sad all at once. I was so distracted by it all that I barely noticed him throwing on a jumper from the pile on the floor. I managed to ignore my bout of callowness long enough to manage to follow him as he hurriedly slipped out the door, leaving it wide open behind him.

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Andrew was a fidgeting mess the entire train ride to London. I'm sure he was wondering if this was even what she wanted, for him to say goodbye. In fact, it was explicitly what she had said she did not want, or rather could not handle. Instead of trying to decipher his thoughts, I chose to stare out the window. I watched the landscape blur each time the train picked up speed after a stop. The red and yellow poppies went from being standout specs on the rolling green hills to a blur of vibrant color pulsing beneath a strip of clear blue sky and the occasional cloud. On those clear spring days, the clouds were shallow and wispy, rather than billowing and full of depth like the rain clouds that were usually suspended in the sky. As the train moved faster the green of the hills blended with the horizon and all texture was lost. They looked warm and soft, but as memory serves they were actually prickly and rough to touch with the skin on the backs of

my thighs as I rolled down them. The occasional farmhouse swept past and the sheep were almost imperceptible flashes of white on the edge of my vision.

I will admit to remaining irritable for most of that trip, but once we reached London I realized it was far too exhausting to be upset about the things that I could not change, things that in fact were so far in the past they seemed almost irrelevant, except for them somehow being the reason I still even existed. Besides, I always felt an obligation to be present for whomever I could, as though my watchful eye could help them in one way or another. Of course, it never did.

So I let my qualms evaporate as I followed Andrew off the train and on the long walk to Maisy's home, the home that would no longer be hers, or perhaps was already no longer hers. I followed Andrew past rows of identical houses, with their half-brick, half white-washed walls, and grey tiled roofs. Each house had peonies delicately planted in rectangular flower boxes, framed by wooden shutters all painted different colors, some blue and some green and some red, as if trying desperately to distinguish themselves from their neighbors. Finally, we arrived at Maisy's house, clearly singled out from all the others by the big brass knocker, in the shape of a lion, situated directly in the middle of the door. Andrew knocked, and as he shifted from one foot to another, waiting impatiently for someone to answer it, I tried not to think of what would happen next. Regardless of whether or not Maisy answered door, I knew nothing could ever be the same for the two of them.

“Andrew?” Maisy's voice came small and shaking as she slowly opened the door.

“I got your letter,” he said. He sounded livid, which surprised both me and Maisy. The very beginnings of tears threatened both of them, for Maisy probably at hearing Andrew speak to her in a way she probably never expected him to. For Andrew, they were angry tears, or sad

ones, I could not tell. Neither of them let the tears fall, however, and they stood there at an impasse.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry.” He scoffed, almost laughing at her. “You’re sorry.”

“Yes. Would you like to come in?”

“No.” Andrew’s hands, clasped tightly together behind his back, were shaking.

“Andrew, please come in.” Maisy stood rigid in bare feet, a red-and-white striped skirt, and a mustard-yellow blouse. She looked disheveled and mismatched—I assumed it was because she already packed most of her clothes. She was not wearing any makeup, which was not unusual for her, but it made it obvious that she had been crying. Her cheeks were flushed and the skin around her eyes swollen, just a bit, but enough to evidence that, contrary to what Andrew mumbled to himself all day, none of this was easy for Maisy at all.

“What good would it do? You’re still leaving, I assume.”

“Well, yes. But—”

“Then there’s no point.”

“Then why are you here?” she said, raising her voice, practically yelling at him. “Did you come here just to be angry, Andrew, because you could very well do so in the comfort of your own room. Why don’t you go and tell Kitt what I’ve done, I’m sure it’ll be a laugh for him. Go, tell him, go!” She was certainly yelling at him now. Neighbors poked their heads out of windows, and there were shuffling sounds coming from within Maisy’s house. If her parents didn’t know about the letter before, they certainly knew something was amiss now. Andrew was trying to look stony-faced but he was failing. He turned red, slowly, and moved his hands to his sides, tugging on the loose threads of his fraying jumper. When it seemed like Maisy was

finished berating him, he opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. This softened both of them, for some reason, and when Andrew reached a hand out towards Maisy she took it without hesitation.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, and this time Andrew nodded. “I really would like it if you would come in.”

“Yes, of course,” he said, forcing a smile, and followed her inside, just barely, so the door closed behind them but they did not stray farther than the a few inches from it. They stood there without saying anything, Andrew with his back against the door, Maisy facing him.

“Maisy, why didn’t you tell me,” he asked, not looking her in the eyes but keeping his focus on her hands, which were tangled in his. He moved his thumb methodically over hers and his breathing was shallow.

“I should have. I truly should have. I don’t really have a reason, honestly, except that, well, I couldn’t bear to fight with you, well, I guess I didn’t do such a bang-up job of that, did I?”

“No,” he said, smiling genuinely now, “you didn’t.” Maisy laughed, then, and Andrew followed suit, until they were lost in it. It was Maisy who turned sour first, as though she suddenly remembered it all, their fight only moments before and how she was the cause. Then they stood again in silence, until another shuffle from some other room seemed to remind Maisy of something.

“We’re leaving early tomorrow morning,” she said quietly. “It’s going to be a long trip.”

It was then that I saw all the boxes, the dreaded boxes. Most of the windows were stripped of their drapery, and the hardwood floors that were usually covered in heavy Persian rugs were bare. Maisy’s mother had eclectic taste, to say the least, and to see the house deprived of its usual decadent velvet and wicker furniture was unsettling. I heard faint humming drifting in and

out of the kitchen, in between heavy clangs—Maisy’s mother was also not very coordinated. Between the humming and the clanging and the emptiness of the space but the simultaneous claustrophobia of the boxes and carpetbags and rolled up rugs, I felt dizzy and overwhelmed.

“I love you.” Andrew blurted the words out suddenly, nearly stuttering. His cheeks turned a sunburnt red and his eyes surprisingly bore directly into hers. It was habit he usually forewent when nervous but in this situation embraced, not necessarily out of want but perhaps out of the need to be grounded in the familiarity of her face.

“What?” Maisy looked back at him unblinking. “I mean—oh, Andrew, I—”

“I know, and it’s completely ridiculous that I haven’t said it sooner, Mais, I wish I had, I wish—”

“I know.”

“Yes.”

They stared at each other and fumbled, each of them trying to find the right words, and each of them failing. Yet somehow it all seemed to fit, the two of them sheepishly shifting on uncertain feet, knotting their hands together as if they were afraid to let go. It was sweet, full of naivety and innocence, and perfect because of it. I am inclined now to soften towards them both, remembering those moments brimming with uncertainty and longing and hope. It was not their fault that they could not predict war, heartbreak, recovery. I am burdened with too much knowledge, surely—I try to not let it cloud my memories, or the memories of others, the lives that I watched unfold and unfurl and break and repair themselves. Yes, they were perfect, and that is how I will remember it.

“I love you too,” she said, and he pulled her into a tight, lingering hug.

## Chapter Five

*May 1938*

Andrew was the perfect graduate. He walked proudly through the opening gate of the college, what they called the Great Gate, passing underneath the looming statue of Henry VIII that presided over it, and on to the Senate House where the graduation ceremony was held. He stood solemnly as they droned on in Latin, and stifled Kitt's giggles and crude jokes with half-dark looks and stubborn smiles. He tugged at the hem of the sleeves on his dark blue gown and rolled his eyes as Kitt shook the tassel on his head. It was, for anyone looking on, a perfect day. Yet for Andrew, it was something he dreaded, and something he had to do without Maisy. She had been in California for a little over a year, and they tried their best to keep in touch, but post was slow and the rumblings of war kept Maisy's parents nervous and suspicious that Andrew would drag their daughter back to England, she told him; so her letters came less frequently until just a few months before graduation when they stopped all together. Andrew sent her a few of his usual weekly letters, and he rang her as often as he could afford, but he never received responses and Maisy's parents always managed to answer the phone, and always told him she wasn't home. They never explicitly said she didn't want to speak to him, but from what Andrew complained to Kitt that was the impression he got. Andrew moped for a while, but was just as stubborn as he was in love with her, and he eventually refused to keep trying to get a hold of her. At first Kitt told him he was being ridiculous, but eventually it seemed they both wanted to stop talking about it and move on, and so they kept their heads down and focused on their studies—well, Andrew did—and graduation was upon them quicker than any of us were expecting. It was something that crept slowly for years, that thing on the horizon that no one spoke of, but those

last few months sped by quickly, and before the boys could blink they were standing in their serious black robes watching their serious futures pan out in front of their eyes.

There was a whole group of them, the serious yet rowdy boys that Andrew was friends with all three years and that he really turned his focus to when Maisy began to push herself to the background of his life. Andrew and Kitt took to each other the first week at Cambridge, both a bit rowdy but studious, and both quite popular with the other boys in their class, and they had been close ever since. Their popularity, mostly Kitt's, allowed the pair to make friends easily and selectively. By the end of their first year Kitt led a group of six marvelous scholars, himself included, with Andrew at his right side. Andrew, who was used to lurking somewhere between shadow and center stage, who loved to let Maisy command attention but simultaneously would insert himself into conversation with fire and intelligence—Andrew, who was not quite a leader but most certainly not a sheep—this Andrew followed Kitt devotedly through their years at university right into graduation. The troupe consisted, aside from Kitt and Andrew, of the following: David Marcus, with red curls and stuck-out ears. Harry White, with straight teeth and bitten-down fingernails. Billy Ross, quiet and keen on mathematics. Lastly Frank Manning, budding poet and alcoholic with a penchant for wind-blown skirts. All in the same class, no more than three months between the eldest and the youngest of them. They were well known, not just for their impressive marks but also their exciting adventures—most of which, I can attest to, were false accounts the boys concocted to appear more interesting to their peers, or the 'lot of dull blokes' as Kitt referred to them. So these six boys—I cannot call them men, for they were not yet, and I know exactly what would eventually turn them all into men—graduated stoically, and then went off to celebrate. Andrew took some convincing, though; he was feeling down about Maisy, no doubt, and I'm sure the last time he drank a bit too much because of her was

emblazoned in his mind—it was not a pleasant night, to say the least. He was moping on the couch, in the common room that connected Andrew’s room to Kitt’s, with Maisy’s last letter crumbled in his hands, when his friends tried to rouse him.

“Andrew, for Christ’s sake, it’s graduation. We have to go to the pub,” Frank said. He sat down next to Andrew and draped a lazy arm around his shoulders. “Have a pint with us, yeah?”

“You can’t just sit here all night,” Billy said.

“You better not,” Frank added, giving Andrew’s shoulder a tight squeeze. David, Harry, and Kitt huddled together in a corner of the room, whispering things I couldn’t hear because I was too focused on the fact that Billy Ross of all people would be trying to get Andrew to go out for a night of debauchery. When the three boys broke from their circle, it was clear they had been strategizing.

“All right, mate, get up, come on, we aren’t letting you do this. Would you really ruin all of our nights over a silly girl?” Kitt sounded harsher than he needed to, but it seemed to work, for when he called Maisy silly Andrew’s eyes flashed.

“Just because you don’t know what it’s like to be in love—”

“Love doesn’t look like this, mate. Really, get up.” The air grew tense and it seemed to be a battle. Frank withdrew his arm and stood, and it was four against one.

“It’ll be fun,” David said, elbowing Harry and Kitt who stood on either side of him. They shoved back and soon all five boys were almost in a brawl, jostling each other lightheartedly and laughing. I knew what they were doing before Andrew did—excluding him, showing off, telling him without words that he would really be missing out on a rowdy night with his closest friends if he didn’t snap out of it, as they would say, and quick.

“Oh Christ, guys, stop being such idiots. You’re going to break all the bloody furniture. Okay, fine, let’s go then, shall we?” Andrew was still sullen but at least he was game, and he stood up with a small smile threatening the corners of his mouth. He still wasn’t ready to forgive or forget about Maisy, certainly, but I’m sure he was at least ready to enjoy their last night as boys, without responsibility, carefree and young.

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They walked down the narrow, cobbled roads that led from Trinity to the river, where the pub sat overlooking. Andrew and Kitt playfully wrestled to lead the pack while the rest of the boys elbowed each other out of line, no one wanting to be the lone boy at the back of the group. They ventured out jovially, half of them already tipsy, past the shops and other colleges, following the chalk arrows on the sides of various brick buildings that pointed toward the Cam: *to the river* was written next to the arrows in someone’s sprawling, shaky hand, most likely a collegiate do-gooder wanting to make sure his drunken friends never got lost. Although Andrew knew the path by heart after all these years, he still always paused by the directions, as if double-checking just in case the roads or buildings shifted when he wasn’t looking. I wonder if it ever occurred to someone to draw the arrows pointing in the wrong direction, but if anyone would do it, it would be Kitt—maybe he had, but any time I followed Andrew to the river they were always a stalwart, trustworthy thing.

The pub was already flooded with Cambridge students by the time Andrew and his restless crowd arrived. The noise was nearly deafening, and there was barely room for the six boys to stand without knocking into each other, which all of the other drunken graduates already were. There were sloppy limbs flying everywhere, elbows hitting elbows, feet on top of feet, and everyone there seemed to be having the time of their lives. I envied them; I never had the

opportunity to grow too inebriated, it would have reflected poorly on my family. Caroline developed the habit for a year or so, in her younger years, and I took great notice of the disappointed and disapproving looks she would garner. There were a few nights in which John and I partook in a bit too much, but in those moments we had only each other's company, so it did not matter. We could never disappoint or disapprove of each other.

Kitt had Andrew downing ale before he even had time to loosen his tie. They were all still dressed in their best suits, from earlier, and it looked almost ridiculous in comparison to the scene in which they stood. It did not, of course, take long for girls to take notice of the handsome group. I did not think it would; they were, by any standard, the smartest looking boys there—taking into consideration their reputations both as a group and individually, it was no surprise that most, if not all, female eyes were on them. Frank soon had a girl on each arm, and Harry flirted casually with a particular raven-haired beauty whom he had his eye on for weeks. Billy and David skirted about, talking to a few girls but mostly amongst themselves. Kitt stood by Andrew as if in solidarity, but it was obvious he was trying to get the pair of them plenty drunk. Andrew, for all the airs he put on around Kitt of being stoical, did not require too much to drink before he began his descent into intoxication.

“Kitt, I think—what if I really botched it up this time, with her?”

“This time?” Kitt was sturdier at this point than Andrew, but still stood a bit unsteady in his freshly shined shoes.

“I mean, we've fought before, you know how she gets, but we didn't even have a row this time around. She just—went away.”

“She went away a while ago, mate.”

“I know, I know, but I mean, I think, oh—!” Andrew sloshed a bit of beer onto his crisp white button-down, and then began to laugh. Kitt joined in, laughing either at Andrew’s mess or just because Andrew was laughing, and the discussion of Maisy was quickly discarded and forgotten.

“Get me a round for everyone,” David yelled out, and the entire pub cheered. He never acted as if he came from money, but David had family over in America that were once involved in the railroads, and he was, as his friends affectionately called him, ‘filthy rich.’

“You heard the man,” Kitt half shouted at Andrew, and signaled to the bartender for two more beers. I think he actually held up three fingers rather than two—everyone was in quite a state. Perhaps I didn’t envy them as much as I initially imagined. “Hey, mate, over there, three o’clock, a beautiful girl, you should go talk to her, she’s been eyeing you all night.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Andrew said, suddenly remorseful, as if he remembered an obligation he should not have forgotten. Was Maisy still an obligation, though, after those months without word? I was always, and still am, inclined to believe in miscommunications—how could I not, after it all? Yet Andrew was stubborn and prone to bouts of sullenness, so perhaps he only saw her silence as a snub, or more dramatically, a betrayal.

“Why the bloody hell not? Forget about her, mate, I swear, if you don’t go over there I will, and then who will take care of you? Go, go, it’ll be fine. We can even have a signal, okay, if things go wrong? Just say—say—”

“I’ll say ‘another round on David Marcus,’ that’ll be the signal, and you get a free drink out of it,” Andrew said, grinning. Kitt gave him a hard pat on the back and sent him almost flying over to the brunette waiting for him at the other end of the room.

“Hi, excuse me, hi, I’m—”

“You’re Andrew Little,” the girl said, smiling. So I was right—all of their reputations preceded them, after all.

“How’d ya know?” Andrew wasn’t quite slurring his words, but he was definitely less eloquent than he liked to think he usually was.

“I’m a friend of Kitt’s. Family friend, that is. He’s told me about you, he said he wasn’t sure if you’d be here tonight, but I thought I’d take my chances.” She was perhaps more forward even than Maisy, and I was admittedly impressed.

“Oh, well, yeah, I’m here,” Andrew said, shifting his gaze between her and the half empty drink in his hand.

“Yes, you are.” She took a step closer to him. “I heard talk that you’re no longer seeing that girl you used to go with.”

“Oh, well, see—”

“I was glad to hear it.”

Andrew blushed, which was out of character for him, but she was being so direct it would make even Kitt turn red. She took another step closer and closed the gap between them, so her hands could reach out to grab his easily if she were so inclined, and I didn’t doubt that she was.

“Listen, I don’t even know your name.”

“Ruth.”

“Just Ruth?”

“To you, yes, just Ruth.” She smiled coyly and shook her head so her short dark brown curls bounced, noticeably. They fell just above her shoulders, which were bare except for the tight sleeves that clung to her arms yet somehow left her shoulders alone, and I noticed

Andrew's eyes darting from her hair to her shoulders to—elsewhere. She was in a red top, with lips painted to match, and she was certainly irresistible.

“I—um—”

“Tell me something about yourself, Andrew Little.” She reached out and caressed the length of his arm, and Andrew blinked slowly.

“Well, I, I'm a writer.”

“A writer,” she said, drawing out her syllables. “I bet you're very talented.”

“Sure, I, I don't know.” He stood rigid as she traced circles on his forearm with her finger. I could see him stare at her and I don't know if he forgot Maisy entirely in that moment, or if he was just drunk enough to not care, but he grabbed her hand and pulled her closer to him, and then he kissed her. He tried to pull away after a moment, perhaps realizing he was unsure if she even wanted to be kissed—although I don't know how he could have been unsure—but she quickly pulled him back in, one hand firmly on the back of his neck and the other sliding up and down the length of his right arm. He was still holding his drink, and so he stood awkwardly with one hand at his side and the other gingerly on the small of her back as they kissed Andrew's friends took notice right away, of course, and began cheering and whistling. Soon they had the entire pup applauding, which seemed to sober Andrew up enough that he realized what he was doing and immediately stepped away from her, embarrassed and slightly angry.

“Keen on her, are you then?” shouted Frank from a distant corner, still with multiple girls draped over him.

“Oh, shut up, will you?” Andrew's quip only made Frank laugh and turn his attention away. Kitt rushed over to Andrew then, stumbling and red-faced.

“Wow mate, I must say none of us were expecting a show tonight!”

“Stop it, Cantin,” Ruth replied lightly. “Our boy here is just having a bit of fun, aren’t you, Andrew?”

“Our boy probably doesn’t know what he’s doing, Ruthie, don’t take advantage.”

“Who, me?” she said, feigning innocence.

“You know full well how you get around my pals, Ruthie. Leave it alone. Come on, Andrew, I’m going to take you back home now.”

“It was you who sent him over,” Ruth reminded him, but Kitt only shrugged. “I did what you said to, I took his mind off it, didn’t I?”

“Maybe a bit too much. Okay, Andrew, let’s go then.”

“I’m having fun,” Andrew slurred. Kitt nodded, and put a steady hand on Andrew’s shoulder. “But I think maybe I shouldn’t have—oh, don’t tell Maisy!”

“I won’t tell her, mate,” Kitt said, laughing, and steered Andrew out of the pub and back to their dormitory.

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Back at Trinity, Kitt set Andrew up on the couch with some water and a blanket before leaving him to return to the pub.

“You sure you’ll be all right, then?” Kitt asked to be polite; he practically had one foot out the door already.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. Sobered up quite a bit already, honest. That girl, though—”

“Ruthie?”

“Yeah, you should go find her. Think she’s more suited to you anyways.” Andrew seemed sheepish but determined to give off an air of indifference towards his—adventures.

“I don’t know, mate, she’s a hell of a gal. Don’t know if I can match her.” Kitt grinned, flashing his perfectly white teeth at Andrew before slipping out the door. I heard a small “oh,” a startled female voice, come from the corridor just outside, but thought nothing of it. Perhaps it was Ruth come to check on Andrew, or Kitt, it seemed like she didn’t have a preference as long as she had eyes on her. I knew nothing of her but still would not have put it past her to follow the boys back. There were a few moments of shuffling feet and exchanging pleasantries.

“He’s in a state, so you know,” I heard Kitt say, his voice muffled through the door. My interest peaked when I realized whoever the girl was planned on coming inside. “Door’s unlocked.” There was no response from the girl, but I heard Kitt’s footsteps fall away and then the doorknob slowly began to turn. I think I knew even before she stepped in, from the way she left the door slightly ajar a moment before entering, as if afraid of what she would find.

“Hello.”

Andrew, who was most likely unaware of the interaction in the hall as he had only lain there with his eyes closed, unmoving, probably thought he was seeing a ghost.

“Maisy?”

“You’ve been to the pub, then, have you?” She smiled weakly at him as he struggled to stand up. He managed to get on his feet only to fall backwards on the couch.

“Everything’s spinning.”

“Okay, okay,” Maisy said, and she walked over slowly to him, sat down beside him, and put a tentative hand on his knee.

“You, you’re here.”

“Yes.”

“Where the bloody hell have you been, Mais?”

“I think maybe we should get you sobered up before—”

“I’ve waited months for word from you, I don’t want to wait anymore.” He was angry, and sad, and hurt, and it all came out drunkenly, which only seemed to amuse Maisy.

“Oh, Andrew, you’re drunk.” She stifled giggles as she stroked his hair and I was annoyed with her. She didn’t deserve to be sitting there, back in his life, all giddy and taking care of him, with no explanation as to why she had stopped speaking to him. I had been giving her the benefit of the doubt, of course, but to see here refusing to give him an answer—he was only drunk because of her, if I were to lay blame, and she didn’t even know. She didn’t know how much she hurt him.

“Maisy, listen to me. I’m drunk, and I’m tired, and I’m confused, but I really just want you to tell me where the hell you’ve been, okay?”

“Okay,” she said. “You have to believe me, Andrew, I didn’t know—my parents, they hid your letters. And mine. Never sent mine.”

“They *what?*” Andrew sat up straighter, angry, and Maisy pushed her hand harder into his knee, as if to prevent him from trying to stand.

“I think they meant well, I do, they were afraid of me coming back here. With everything going on in Germany, they were afraid. So they hid your letters, and never told me you called. Mum convinced me to give her my letters to mail, since she went to the post office once a week—I only found out when I was looking for some envelopes, then I saw the whole stack just sitting there in a drawer. I felt so stupid, so entirely stupid.”

“So you didn’t tire of me?”

“I could never,” she said gently, loosening her grip as he placed his hand on top of hers.

“I thought you wanted nothing to do with me. I didn’t understand. But why didn’t you call me?”

“Honestly, that was just me being stubborn and ridiculous. I did once, and Kitt answered and said you were out. I thought you had met some girl and were done with me, and didn’t even have the decency to write or call. I guess we both jumped to conclusions a bit.” It was the perfect moment for Andrew to confess to her his earlier rendezvous at the pub, but he didn’t. He should have, in hindsight, but everything in hindsight is colored differently than it is in the present. I’m sure the last thing he wanted was a fight with her, after just getting her back and realizing how it was all just a series of miscommunications and deceit on the part of Maisy’s parents, but he should have told her. It would have saved them an argument in the future, at any rate. Yet he didn’t tell her—not that I could say I would have done it any differently—and instead just wrapped his arms around her and gently kissed the top of her head. They stayed like that for a while, not saying anything, just holding each other, and when she lifted her head out of his chest to look at him her eyes were wet.

“I missed you so,” she said, and kissed him delicately. “I will never leave you again.”

“I missed you more,” he said, and kissed her back fully. I made myself scarce once it became clear they were not going to stop kissing, and managed to retreat both into another room and into my own head. Privacy was something everyone deserved, and the only thing I had left to give.

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When Kitt came stumbling back in at three in the morning, Andrew and Maisy were still on the couch, half-awake, Andrew’s hands tangled gently in her hair and her head on his chest.

“Bloody hell,” Andrew mumbled, sitting up quickly, startled by Kitt’s sudden entrance.

“Where have you been, then?”

Kitt closed the door ungracefully behind him and sat on the end of the couch, nearly on top of Maisy’s feet. She stood up, irritated, and smoothed her hair.

“You’re still here,” Kitt said. His voice sounded light but he gave her a hard look, and Maisy stormed into Andrew’s bedroom. “Lovely girl.”

“Don’t be an ass, Kitt.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Andrew sat quietly as Kitt pulled the rest of himself on to the couch and laid down with a sigh.

“Had a good night?”

“Mate, she’s really something. Really...really something.”

“Who?” Andrew asked half-heartedly. It was clear from the way he sat with his arms crossed and the way his eyes kept darting to the partially open bedroom door that he was eager to get back to Maisy. He had dealt with Kitt’s drunken stupors before, but he had missed so much with her.

“Ruthie. You know—” Kitt pouted his lips and made kissing noises. Andrew laughed but stopped himself, glancing nervously toward the bedroom in case Maisy heard.

“Okay, okay. Well, I’m glad you had fun.”

“Fun? Mate, she’s brilliant. Absolutely brilliant.” Kitt closed his eyes and in a matter of seconds his breathing slowed and evened out. Andrew gingerly stood up and pulled a blanket over his sleeping friend.

“He’s a bit of work, isn’t he?” Maisy was standing in the doorway wearing one of Andrew’s sweaters and not much else.

“He’s worth it.” Andrew walked towards Maisy, pushed her softly into the bedroom, and closed the door.

“Is he?”

“I wish you two would get along.” He kissed her on the forehead.

“Maybe we will. One day.” Maisy smiled at him and looked at the bed. “It’s late. We should sleep.”

“Whatever you say,” Andrew said, following her to the bed. I let them be, and went back out into the common room where Kitt was sleeping. I looked at his face and noticed that, even as he slept, he smiled.

## II.

“This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society.” — Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

## Chapter Six

*June 1820*

They were both breathless, disconnected from anything that wasn't the solid ground and the infiniteness of the sky. Their feet pounded the dirt hard as they ran determined through the maze, knowing its twists and dead ends so well by then that they could have escaped it with their eyes closed. Elisabeth had gone in first, leaving John to chase after her yelling that they were *too old for nonsense like this*, yet he laughed just as hard as she did and required no prompting besides that of her skirts flying behind her to partake in a game they had been playing for years. John was a man, then, Elisabeth not quite a woman but almost, although he still teased her that she had some growing up to do every time she would get lectured on the disarray of her person. Elisabeth always had mud on her dresses, or stray hairs frizzing around her face, or broken heels on her shoes. John found it charming, Elisabeth's mother found it frustrating, and Caroline Brown found it entirely lucky. After all, the longer Elisabeth resisted acting in the proper way for a young woman of sixteen years, the longer Caroline basked in the glow of their mother's favor, something Elisabeth cared little for and Caroline relied entirely too much on.

"Elisabeth, the sun is setting soon, we should be getting back now," John called out into the maze, unsure if his words would reach her ears or only reverberate against the towering ivy walls, that seemed so large when they were children and that increasingly became smaller and smaller—although the top of Elisabeth's head only reached about a little more than halfway up the maze walls, and could only see above them if she sat on John's shoulders. She hadn't sat on his shoulders for some time, though. Elisabeth may not have been as ladylike as her mother would have wished, but she still understood boundaries and propriety. She also understood that John at eighteen years was too much of a man to entertain her youthfulness for very much

longer, and so she took advantage of his participation as much as she could. She realized they would both be married off, and soon—Elisabeth despised the idea of marriage, and even more so despised the idea of John being married. Caroline called it jealousy, but Elisabeth rebuked the idea firmly. John was her best friend, she only saw him that way—or at least that was what she told herself in the dark hours of the night as she ventured into reading romantic novels and could not stop from picturing his face as she did so.

“Elisabeth,” John called out again, and this time he heard a faint laugh in reply. He smiled and slowed his speed, walking towards the direction of her voice as she laughed again and said,

“I don’t think you could ever find me if I didn’t want you to.” The maze was silent; John tread quietly as Elisabeth stood still, desperately wanting him to find her but never letting on. All she could hear was the sound of her breath as she wondered if he had abandoned her, if he had found her rhetoric childish and had retreated back to the Manor for more mature company. Elisabeth tried not to imagine John and Caroline in deep conversation about whatever gentlemen and ladies conversed about; in truth, the pair had never quite gotten along, and Elisabeth knew it was only the fast current of her trepidatious thoughts that allowed the scene to manifest in her mind. She was afraid of losing John’s friendship, had been for the last year as she watched him and his father begin discussing business and marriage and all sorts of things Elisabeth still felt too young to even want to think of. At nearly twenty, Caroline was already sewing patches of cream lace for the dress she would be married in, the dress she would wear in a few short months as her engagement to the rich and dull Henry Edmund Percy IV came to a close and their lives as husband and wife began. As Elisabeth found herself lost in the image of her older sister’s wedding, she felt familiar hands grasp her around the waist and she squealed in surprise.

“John,” she laughed, “I didn’t hear you. You’ve become impressively furtive.” She did not turn to face him; rather, she allowed his hands to linger on her slim, corseted waist. She felt his breath on the back of her neck as he leaned in to her—leaned down, rather, as he was significantly taller than she.

“I will always find you, Elisabeth.” His lips were almost touching her left ear as he whispered into it, and she felt a slight quickening beneath her skirts that were too heavy for summer, that she wished she weren’t wearing, that she wished he would—

“I’m glad for it,” she said, and tentatively placed her delicate hands on top of his, her elbows flaring out awkwardly at her sides but she didn’t notice, she was too concerned that he could hear how loudly her heart beat in her chest as if it were trying to escape. She knew then that, of course, Caroline was right, that Elisabeth felt much more than friendship towards John, but Elisabeth did not know how to proceed. They stood silently that way, their hands touching but barely, his hands resting on her waist but barely, his chin now resting on top of her head.

“Elisabeth—”

“Yes?” She finally broke free of his gentle grasp and turned around to look up at him.

“I don’t—”

“Yes.” Elisabeth wondered if this meant he felt the same, that he no longer saw her as just a friend, just the younger girl that came around each summer to keep him entertained as the weather turned from spring to fall. “You don’t have to—”

“I do, though. I have thought of it for too long to not say it.”

“Say what?”

“Don’t be coy, Elisabeth, you must know exactly what I mean. You must—I though you felt—”

“I do,” she said, and lowered her eyes. She watched him clench and unclench his fists, and she tried not to think of what she read each night in the books that littered her floor.

“You mean to say you know what I am trying to say, or that you feel the same?”

“I suppose if I said I felt the same, then I would also be saying I know what you are trying to say...” She was flustered, certainly, and the words fell out of her mouth without consulting her brain. He laughed, then, and with a single finger tilted her chin up so she once again was looking at him. He then gently took her hands in his, catching her slender fingers in his large, long ones.

“We have been friends for so long, Lissy,” he said, using her childhood nickname, a name few called her. “I didn’t think it would ever come to this. Yet the moment you stepped out of your carriage this summer, I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

“Yes,” Elisabeth said. It was all she could say. She was afraid if she were to begin to speak her heart, she wouldn’t be able to stop, and John would find her nothing but a hopeless, silly girl.

“Please say something, Lissy, I can’t stand here thinking that I’m just making an utter fool of myself.”

“What am I to say, John, that would not also make me seem foolish to you?” He grabbed her hands tighter, and she felt once more that tightness in her chest she had begun to feel that summer each time he looked at her too long.

“Tell me what I am telling you now, that I love you, Elisabeth Brown, and I can no longer pretend that I do not. That I can no longer pretend that each time I see you in the corridors all I can think of is too—”

“I love you too, John,” Elisabeth said eagerly, all of her trepidation floating away and leaving her feeling lightheaded and pulsing. Her fingertips were warm wrapped up in his palms

and her cheeks were fire. She felt as if every inch of her were alight, from her toes to the top of her head that she noticed fit so perfectly just underneath his chin. She began to feel the constraints of her corset more than ever, as she struggled to breathe normally. His eyes traced from her bosom, rising and falling from the effort, to her eyes until they finally settled on her lips, with focus on the lower one which she had caught in between her teeth moments before.

“May I kiss you, Elisabeth?” He had asked her if she would allow him to do what she had longed for, and she felt as though she would lose her ability to breathe entirely. She did not respond with words, but released her bottom lip, realizing she had been biting it so hard she almost drew blood, and lifted herself on her toes, stretching towards him, making herself taller for him so that he could—and then he, still holding her hands tight, leaned down and kissed her gently on her cheeks, first her right, then her left, and then on her eager lips.

*So this is what it is to be kissed,* she thought, as he pulled away and left her tingling and wanting more.

“Elisabeth?” He sounded nervous, as though he had broken some promise to someone that he made a long time ago.

“John,” she began, but stopped, not knowing how to voice what she desperately wanted to say.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me. It’s still me.”

“Well, in all honesty—”

“Yes?”

“I would like you to kiss me again.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. Only, well, only *more*.” She struggled to keep looking at him as a smile crept upon him and he began laughing. It made Elisabeth angry, that he would laugh at her, when he was the one that kissed her, when he was the one that told her to be honest! “You don’t have to laugh, John. I understand.”

“No, you don’t.” Without warning he let go of her hands and wrapped his around her waist, bringing her in close to him so that their bodies were touching, and she felt more than just the weight of her skirts against the part of her that she always tried to ignore, and then he kissed her again. Her lips parted and they locked together in a turbulence of fulfillment and the excitement of further anticipations. Elisabeth did not know how long they stood kissing that way, she only knew she couldn’t breathe but she didn’t mind, and he seemed just as eager as she for in one somehow fluid movement they both lowered themselves to the ground. She felt the weight of him on top of her and wondered if this was it, if this was the moment she had read about and dreamed about and tried failingly to not imagine, if he would take her there, right there in the maze, their special place, what it would feel like, if anything could feel as incredible as him kissing her and being on top of her, if—

“Elisabeth, I can’t, we can’t, not here.” He pulled away and propped himself above her on his hands, so that their bodies were still touching but the pressure of his chest was off hers, so that he could compose himself in a way he could not if he continued to kiss her. She was frustrated but relieved; she did not, after all, have any idea of what she was doing, and in keeping to her nature longed to read more books on the subject, to talk to Caroline about it, to do more ‘research,’ as she would put it, before giving herself entirely. Her head told her to be grateful for the reprieve, yet the rest of her ached for him. She wondered how two people that began intimacy ever stopped—she did not think she could ever stop.

“Tonight,” she said, as she took in his features as if for the first time. She had never noticed the rich brown of his eyes before, and wondered what he thought of the reflective robin’s egg blue of her own. His brow was furrowed and his lips pursed, as though conflicted. Elisabeth smiled sweetly at him, and thought about turning her head to the side so she wouldn’t be distracted by his features. She kept looking at him, though, drinking him in with her eyes, capturing the way he looked at her. “Meet me somewhere tonight.”

“Lissy-”

“Do you not want to?”

“Of course, but there are—circumstances.”

“I don’t care about circumstances.” She believed it when she said it, although she was unaware of what circumstances he could be talking about, and wondered if she really meant it, if she really wouldn’t care if it meant she could have him completely.

“We should talk. Later.”

“Yes.”

John stood up slowly, pushing himself off the ground with his hands unsteadily, as though he were pushing off of water rather than solid ground. He rolled his shoulders up and back and brushed the fresh grass stains off his knees. Elisabeth sat up but did not stand, only sat with her hands kneading the fabric in her lap, bunching and twisting the light blue-grey silk. She looked up at him and smiled again, the kind of smile that says, *I know something you don’t*. He cleared his throat and she laughed lightly, amused by his sudden awkwardness and her apparent boldness. She had never felt quite so bold before, and she would be lying if she said she didn’t enjoy the rush of it. She felt as though she had him, then, had him from one kiss.

“Tonight, Lissy, we will talk.” With that, and one last lingering look, John walked away, leaving Elisabeth smiling to herself in the heart of the maze.

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Elisabeth took her time getting back to the Manor. She lingered first in the maze, lying on her back, letting the late afternoon sun warm her skin as she went over and over in her mind the events that transpired between her and John. She remained still but her heart and mind raced and winded and crashed into each other for the eternity she spent thinking of him. Only once the sun slowly began to set and a chill fell over her did she finally stand and make her way inside. She traced the gooseflesh on her arm absentmindedly as she twirled and skipped through the maze, the garden, down her favorite pebbled path, until she reached the back door that led from the garden to the kitchen. It was dark and she did not want Mother or Father to know she had stayed away from the Manor so long, so she snuck in quietly, only to be met by Caroline, also sneaking, sitting at the servant’s table with a cup of tea and a handful of biscuits spread out in front of her. She looked entirely guilty, as Elisabeth was sure she also did.

“What are you doing?” Elisabeth asked her sister. It was unheard of for any of the guests or family members to be in the kitchen, let alone dining in it before supper, and it was equally absurd for Caroline of all people to be doing so.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” Caroline shot back defensively, putting a hand over the biscuits in an attempt to hide them—although both sisters knew Elisabeth had seen, and besides, biscuits or no biscuits Caroline was still at the kitchen table.

“I asked first.”

They stared each other down for a moment, Elisabeth eyeing Caroline’s little spread and Caroline looking at Elisabeth for signs of something, although she was not sure what.

“Mother’s been practically starving me,” Caroline said. She had caved so unexpectedly, Elisabeth was almost suspicious. “My corsets have been to tight lately, and so now she watches me at absolutely every meal, and I can barely get two bites in before she gives me *the look*.” Elisabeth nodded. She knew *the look* all too well. “I figured no one would find me if I ate down here. And you know Mrs. McCleary’s biscuits are just heavenly.” Both girls smiled and laughed, until Caroline stifled her giggles with a delicate hand in case anyone were to hear and discover her treachery. “Your turn, then. What are you doing sneaking in to the kitchen after dark?”

Elisabeth appreciated her sister’s honesty but knew she could not reciprocate, at least not in that moment. No one could know about her and John, not yet, and she would be embarrassed to admit to Caroline how little happened—and yet how much.

“I got lost in the maze.”

“You, lost in that thing? Unlikely. You’ve known your way around for ages.”

“I misjudged how long I had before the sun set, and I’ve never gone through it in the dark before.”

Elisabeth kept her eyes on her sister, knowing that to cast them down or look in any direction would implicate her in some way. Caroline was incredibly attuned to when Elisabeth was lying.

“Yes, well, I suppose Mother and Father do not have to hear of either of our escapades tonight.”

“I agree.”

They smiled at each other and Elisabeth laughed again as Caroline lifted a crumbling biscuit to her lips. Elisabeth shook her head, smiling, and left the kitchen, carefully making her

way to her room without being noticed. The first thing she saw when she slipped quietly through her door was the small perfect square envelope sitting on her bed. Her heart began to race—she knew even before she closed the door behind her that it was a letter from John. She imagined he must have written it immediately after returning from the maze. The idea of him fervently writing to her mere moments after their encounter made her head pound. She threw her shoes off and took three large steps towards her bed. Her hand hovered nervously over the letter. What if he wrote her to tell her he regretted their kiss? Elisabeth realized she couldn't be disappointed if she simply refused to read what she now was certain was a note from him, as she recognized her name on the envelope as being in his hand. Of course, her curiosity bore into her stronger than her fear, and she gingerly tore the paper with the silver letter opener she kept on her bedside table.

*Dearest Elisabeth,*

*I left you only minutes ago. I am sure you are still lingering in the maze, I know how you love it there. To speak of love to you now seems strange...*

There were three lines he had crossed out, blotted out so perfectly that Elisabeth had no way to make them out. She was frustrated, and mostly irritated that he didn't just start a new letter to her rather than allow her to speculate on what he decided not to say to her.

*I do want to meet later to talk, as we both proposed. If you would allow me to visit your room tonight...*

More crossed out words. Elisabeth would have been angry if she weren't so preoccupied with the odd feeling that came over her when she read that he wanted to visit her room, at night. They spent a lot of time together, surely, but they never spent time in each other's rooms. It just—wasn't done.

*Let me know, at your earliest convenience, when and where you would like to meet.*

*Best,*

*John.*

Elisabeth knew if anyone—namely Caroline—were to see this letter, she would have many questions to dodge, and Elisabeth was never good at lying. She made a decision to tuck the letter, folded as tightly as she could manage, into her bodice. She told herself it was just to keep the letter safe and secret, and not because she wanted his words close to her heart.

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Elisabeth barely heard a word Caroline or her mother said to her that night as they did their embroidery by the fire. The men were all in the library, and Mrs. Little had a habit of retiring directly after dinner with her little dog at her heels, so she rarely joined the Mrs. and Miss Browns in their little nightly circle by the hearth. As Elisabeth tried to focus on the dull task in her hands, her mind wandered to that perfect afternoon she and John shared only hours before. She longed to join him in the library, to run her hands over the rows of carefully cultivated books while she listened to him talk about whatever men discussed in libraries. She was rarely allowed in the Littles' library long enough to know it the way she knew her own, but she wished to. This library was grand, vast, and housed not only great works of literature, but also sometimes John. It would smell of paper and pipe smoke and polished wood. It would be dim at night but brilliantly lit in the mornings and afternoons, if Mr. Little ever allowed the servants to part the heavy brown muslin curtains that stoically and statically shrouded the floor to ceiling windows. Elisabeth asked him once why he didn't like to let light in, and he replied that it was to protect the books, but she didn't believe him. Elisabeth had a habit of making sure the library at her home was always flooded with light, so she could lie on the rug and let the sun's warmth color

her cheeks as she lost herself in book after book. Elisabeth's mother always rolled her eyes at her bookish daughter, a daughter who needed to *focus on your manners, please*. Her father did not necessarily disapprove as he did find it strange, and he only lectured her once.

*"Don't get to lost in books, Lissy."*

*"Why?"*

*"It is easier to forget one's own reality, when too caught up in another's. It can cloud your judgment."*

*"It's fine, Father, really."*

He smiled at her and shook his head, and never mentioned it again. Yet she knew, even without her father warning her, that Mr. Little was the exact type to disapprove of her fondness for reading. The first time he caught her on the floor of his library surrounded by a stack of his best books and more than one burned out candle, he told her:

*"You'll never find a husband if you keep indulging in things that shouldn't belong to women."* When she just stared at him, he scoffed and said, *"Oh, you think I'm old fashioned. No, on the contrary, I think it well for a woman to be educated. But when a habit becomes so—distracting from her other duties—it must be curtailed."* After that conversation, which took place about two summers back, Elisabeth ventured into Mr. Little's library only when invited, and joined her mother and sister in activities she hated yet knew Mr. Little would approve of. Especially now, she wanted him to approve of her. She was, after all, going to marry his son.

"Elisabeth, I asked if you're using that thimble. Mine simply won't stay on." Elisabeth blinked and tried to pretend as though she weren't entirely lost in thought, but the focused, diligent young woman it seemed everyone wanted her to be.

“Oh, no, Caroline, you can use it. Here, hand me yours.” The girls switched thimbles and the rest of the night carried on as it usually did, peaceful and quiet, except for the loud beating of Elisabeth’s heart she was certain was audible. Yet no one said a thing to her about her fidgeting feet and flushed cheeks, not even Caroline, who knew something of her sister’s escapades from that afternoon. Elisabeth could feel the rough paper of John’s letter against her skin, and wondered if he had received her reply. If he had, and he was inclined to see her as he said he was (although Elisabeth knew all too well the fickleness of men’s hearts from what Caroline once explained to her), they would meet in the library at midnight. Elisabeth chose the hour knowing the entire house, even the servants, would be sound asleep and she would not have to explain her being out of bed at such a time. She chose the library because, well, if she were going to be furtive and sneaking, she might as well break all the rules at the same time. Elisabeth wondered if seeing John at midnight was breaking a rule. They had, after all, been friends for almost ten years, and they often got into mischief together. Their parents would usually smile and shake their heads—but something about this felt different. Maybe it was because Elisabeth was wearing corsets, or because John was growing a mustache, or that next fall would be Elisabeth’s debut in London. They were growing up, to Elisabeth’s great disappointment, and she knew that things were changing. She was changing, and he was changing, and they were different people now but still they were together. Elisabeth didn’t see how, if they were still together, anything could be wrong at all.

When the clock struck nine Elisabeth’s mother excused herself to bed. She neatly folded the wedding cloth she was sewing for Caroline with the delicate hands Elisabeth always marveled at. Elisabeth sometimes felt as though everything she touched would somehow unravel. It was as if everyone but her moved with such security in their steps.

“Don’t stay up too late, girls. Make sure the fire is out before you retire for the night.”

She kissed both her daughters on top of their heads and left the room with an air of grace that Elisabeth knew she would never have. She wondered if she were, not for the first time, feeling jealous of the way her mother, and even Caroline, existed in the world. Elisabeth knew she was loud and spontaneous and improper—yet she also knew, as of that day, that somebody loved her, and she only had to decide whether or not that was enough.

“Caroline,” Elisabeth said, once her mother was out of earshot, “have you ever kissed anybody?”

“Of course I have,” Caroline said, not looking up from her sewing.

“Have you ever—done more than kiss somebody?”

Caroline tilted her head to one side but still kept her eyes on her fingers, which moved easily with the needle.

“Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity.”

“You’re too curious.”

“Caroline, please. Have you?”

“Well, yes, if you must know.”

“With your fiancé?”

“With that old bore? No, Elisabeth, when I was younger, with someone else. What does it matter?”

“It doesn’t.” Elisabeth slouched in her chair, disappointed. She had hoped for some sisterly advice, something that would both help her with John and perhaps bond her with her sister. She supposed she should have known better than to expect anything less than a proper out

of Caroline. The answer didn't surprise her, though; Caroline was beautiful, and behaved so well she rarely had too many eyes on her, or expectations.

"So you know," Caroline said, finally glancing up at her sister, "it's not as special as you may think."

"No?"

"Perhaps if it's with the right person it can be. But no, not for me. Are you satisfied?"

Elisabeth nodded and tried to focus again on her work, but her mind was running away from her. She thought that Caroline would help settle her nerves, but instead Elisabeth was left feeling more anxious than she was to begin with.

"I think I'm going to go to sleep," Elisabeth said, and left the room hurriedly, before Caroline had time to even say goodnight.

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Elisabeth had made her way to the library an hour early. She crept down the stairs and through the large double doors that led from the study as silently as she could, once she was certain no one would be awake to notice a rogue creak of the floorboards. She hoped that if someone did notice, they would attribute it to a mouse or the wind or a ghost. She had meant to listen for John's footsteps, but got bored while she waited and picked up a book to pass the time. She was quite startled when, after what felt like only seconds, those imposing doors opened and John's shadow swept into the room.

"Lissy?"

"John, yes, I'm here." She wasn't sure if she should greet him at the door, or stand in place, or remain sitting—she was utterly at a loss. Her mother never taught her the proper etiquette when having secret midnight meetings with a boy—with a man. John closed the doors

behind him and Elisabeth decided to walk toward him. He caught up to her first, though, with his long legs and eager stride. “I’m so glad you’re here, that—”

Before she even finished her thought his lips were on hers. She was so shocked at his abruptness that she inadvertently stepped back from his kiss.

“I’m sorry,” he said, flustered, knotting his hands in front of him. “I didn’t plan to do that. You just, you’re here, and, well, I just couldn’t help myself.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind. I thought you wanted to talk, though. After this afternoon, when you left the maze, I thought all you wanted was to talk.”

“Yes. Right. To talk.”

“You said that there were circumstances.”

“Yes. Circumstances.”

“Are you going to talk to me or just repeat everything I say to you?” Elisabeth laughed but stopped herself, remembering she was supposed to be quiet.

“I can’t think straight around you now,” he said. Elisabeth couldn’t tell if he was blushing or if it was just the candlelight. Elisabeth took his hands and looked at him, searching for traces of hesitation on his face but finding only burning eyes. She leaned up and kissed him, meaning only to relax him and, if she were honest, herself. Yet they both let the kiss linger, and soon he had her in his arms and they were on the floor once again. She broke the kiss and reached a shaking hand to the buttons on his shirt, but he put his hand over hers to stop her.

“We shouldn’t.”

“Why, John, why shouldn’t we? Give me a reason why we shouldn’t.” She was even bolder than she usually was, and she was told she was usually quite bold.

“I—circumstances.”

“I said I didn’t care.”

“I’m betrothed.”

Elisabeth froze.

“You’re to be married?”

“Yes. It’s been arranged since we were children. Since before I even knew you. After this afternoon, I went to speak to my father, to see if I could change things, but—”

“Who is she? Why must you marry her?”

“It doesn’t matter who she is. What matters is that her family has money, more than we do, and my father needs it. It’s practically a business deal, Lissy. I’m so sorry. I thought I could get out of it—I don’t love her, I love you. I want to be with you.”

Elisabeth ran through all the outcomes of the situation in her head in seconds. She knew if she continued things with John, it would leave her heartbroken. She knew she would one day have to meet his wife, and be cordial and kind, all while her heart lay in pieces in her chest. Yet she also knew if she stopped things now, she would feel nothing but regret and longing. At least, she thought, she could have him now, and no marriage could change that. She wanted to share something with him while he was still something tangible, something that existed in her life that belonged, in the moment, only to her.

“I don’t care,” she said firmly, and kissed him again. She expected him to protest once more, but he only looked at her as if asking *are you sure*, and when she nodded her consent, they both let their inhibitions go.

## Chapter Seven

*London, August 1938*

It was supposed to be a sunny day when Andrew and Maisy made their way to Piccadilly, but five minutes out into their adventure the rain began to fall. He wanted to run for cover, and began to, but she stood firmly and smiled, spreading her arms out and lifting her face to the sky to embrace the sudden change in weather. She was always seeing things he wasn't; the beauty in an unexpected downpour, the way blue would peek through the dark clouds, how the rain made everything brighter when it went away. She tried explaining these things to him but he only grimaced and held his jacket above his head.

"Can we just please go inside somewhere? My clothes are going to get ruined." He was a few feet away from her, almost shouting over the rain.

"Why are you so prissy?"

"Excuse me?"

She let out a loud laugh as he glared at her. It took no time at all for the two of them to get their rhythm back after their short hiatus apart. They rarely spoke of it, which I at first was wary of—I was worried they weren't communicating enough. I soon realized it was something that would have just been too painful for them to discuss. They bickered often, they always had since they were children, but I don't recall ever seeing them argue, truly fight, at that point. Andrew thought that they fought, but they didn't, not really. So as she stood in the rain, with her arms outstretched and laughing at him, I don't think it occurred to Andrew to truly be angry with her at all.

"I said you're being prissy. Enjoy the rain with me, Andrew. I missed being in the rain with you." Her words softened his resolve and he stepped closer to her, but still didn't drop his

jacket. She laughed again and closed the space between them. She kissed him just as the sun made its way back from behind the clouds. “See,” she said, pulling his arms down from above his head as the rain faded, “these things don’t last very long. You have to enjoy them while they last.” I don’t know if Andrew took any deeper meaning from what she said, or if she meant anything else by it, but it resonated with me. So much time is spent worrying, or arguing, when it could be spent simply enjoying the exact moment in which nothing changes and everything is wonderfully, blissfully static. I wish someone had told me that sooner.

“You’re right, but now we’re soaking wet. They’ll never let us into the cinema like this.”

“We have time before the matinee. Let’s just take a walk. We’ll be dry within the hour, I’m sure of it.”

So Andrew and Maisy walked through Piccadilly the next hour, hand in hand, just talking. It was always what they were best at, just talking to each other, not having to say much of anything. Just listening to one another seemed to be enough for them.

“—and the next thing I know he’s on the table, singing the wrong lyrics to a song I don’t even know, and the girls are just everywhere, some are laughing but I think a lot of them were actually captivated by the whole thing, and poor David Marcus is sitting at the other end of the pub just praying Frank doesn’t fall off and cause a scene so we don’t get kicked out—”

“Of another pub,” Maisy offered.

“Right. It would’ve been the third one. So David Marcus almost has his hands over his eyes, he can’t watch.”

“Why do you call him David Marcus? Why isn’t he just David?”

“Oh, I don’t know. He just—he’s just David Marcus, is all.”

“You still call him Richie?”

“Not anymore. He got all broken up about it one day, said he didn’t like the reminder that he had more than us, worried it made us see him differently. So now he’s just David Marcus.”

“And the others?”

“Well, Frank is just Frank, Billy is Billy—well, sometimes he’s Bill, or, if we want to get a rise out of him, William. Harry is just Harry and Kitt is Kitt.”

“And you?”

“It varies. Kitt called me ‘Little’ for the longest time. I tried not to let it get to me—”

“Which, of course, it did.” She nudged him in the side gently to let him know she was only teasing, and he gave her a short peck on the cheek.

“How would you feel if someone spent an entire year calling you Little?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never had the opportunity.” Her face froze, taking in the weight of what she had just said. Andrew didn’t seem to notice, however. She did say it softly, and he was too busy being irritated at Kitt for what I was guessing was a myriad of things. The two hadn’t spoken much since the night Maisy came home.

“I mean, it’s a dreadful last name, really,” he said, as if he didn’t even realize she spoke at all. Relief flooded her features and she put on her signature easy smile.

“It’s not that bad, come on.”

“Whatever you say.” He kissed her cheek again but she turned and caught it, making him laugh. Not a giggle, he would argue, just a light little laugh perfectly natural for men to have. Maisy would let him have his ego, she once told him, if it meant she got to hear him laugh like that. “Then something changed, I don’t know, and he just started calling me Andrew. And of course all the others did whatever Kitt did—” Andrew looked a bit sad then, nostalgic perhaps. Maisy leaned into him and squeezed his hand. “How is he?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“When was the last time you spoke?”

Andrew looked up and away from her, trying to recall or trying to avoid her seeing him sad. But I saw the way he squinted his eyes and bit his lip. He missed his best friend.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Andrew said, slipping a casualness into his tone that Maisy had to have noticed was put on, “not since the beginning of June or so.”

“That long?”

“Busy, I suppose. And I am, too. We had catching up to do, you and I—”

“You’re going to pin this on me?” She said it lightheartedly but it stirred something in Andrew—he dropped her hand. “Andrew, I didn’t mean—I’m sorry. I was only kidding.”

“I know.” They kept walking next to each other, the air thick with moisture and unspoken words. Andrew had a habit of trying not to seem weak, but sometimes it made him standoffish. They were used to walking next to each other, though, so maybe she didn’t notice the heaviness of the silence the way I did. They moved into a flat in Marylebone, an easy walk from most things they were interested in and things they were uninterested in but did anyways, because they were young and bored and excited about each other’s company. They picnicked at Hyde Park, took leisurely walks to Piccadilly, and even sometimes to the other side of the Thames to the Tate and along the Embankment, though Andrew always complained at the end of those trips, and I watched Maisy silently nurse blisters upon their return. She had some sort of steely resolve she must have developed overseas; she was always a strong, brave girl, but something was different. She was more resolved, more resilient. I didn’t note until later how well that would serve her during the war, and also how impossible it made it for anyone to really understand the extent to which she felt things. Andrew, on the other hand, had grown in almost the opposite

way. I noticed how much he resented living off his father's money—he took the flat, but was adamant about paying off rent as soon as he got a job. He and William had a small falling out Andrew's second year at Cambridge, when William remarried a lovely woman who just happened to not be Andrew's mother, and who had a young daughter she brought into Andrew's small circle of relations. Andrew expressed betrayal and, although William's eyes looked sad, his words were harsher than his face would have let on. Andrew was never really one for reading expressions well. I suppose that's how Maisy was so easily able to slip past him sometimes. As he struggled to break away from his father's shadow and a name that seemed to follow him wherever he went, Maisy struggled to break into something I couldn't quite understand. Maybe she was constantly afraid of someone knowing she was afraid.

“Look,” Maisy said, breaking the silence. Her voice sounded softer than usual.

“What is it?” Andrew sounded irritable, but most likely he was mad at himself or Kitt, and not at her. He was rarely ever mad at her.

“Listen, I meant. The players. The music is so lovely.”

They stopped in front of a small street band, a guitarist and a young boy on a makeshift drum. They played something familiar, yet distant. Maybe a tune I had heard on the radio, but that I had ignored—I still didn't care much for radios. As they stood, Andrew shifted his weight closer to her and soon he had his arm around her and her head was resting on his shoulder and it was as if nothing had happened. They both smiled absentmindedly, and she played with the fingers on his hand that wrapped around her waist. In that moment, they were so simple and easy, and nothing mattered. In that moment, it was hard to imagine that anything could possibly change for them.

“Andrew?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

“I know.” He leaned into her and kissed the top of her head.

They stood there for a while, just listening to the music and being next to each other, until they were sufficiently dry, and then made their way to the cinema. Andrew paid for both of them, despite Maisy’s protests that he shut down with a quick kiss. She always said she didn’t like when he kissed her to get her to stop talking, but the sparkle in her eye said something entirely different. They went to the cinema often those days—they bickered about what to see, and when to go, and how to get there, but the bickering was just part of who they were. Take it away and they would no longer be Andrew and Maisy, but simply two young sweethearts out on a summer afternoon.

I doubt that either of them expected to run into anyone they knew; they never really did. London was a big city, and they lived away from most of the people they knew. In those few months after coming back from Cambridge, Andrew and Maisy rarely saw anyone else. They occasionally had tea with friends they used to have in their younger years, but they were always those sort of strained interactions in which you say empty words with blank smiles, and the moment it’s over you breathe deeply and try to remember why it was that you were acquainted with these people in the first place. I think that kind of thing comes with getting older, when you grow up enough to realize just how much you’ve changed and other people have stayed the same, but I don’t know firsthand.

Since they never ran into people they knew, it must have been a shock when Andrew literally walked straight into Kitt and Ruth at the cinema. The look on his face was one of relief and fear all at the same time—I suppose he wasn’t really certain who’s fault it was that they

stopped talking. Kitt had the same confused mix of emotions playing out on his face. Perhaps I never really cared for movies because watching people interact in their day-to-day lives was much, much more fascinating. The way their faces change without them realizing it, the way body language shifts, the way inflections rise or fall. None of it is conscious, and it's barely detectable in the moment. Yet I'm not ever in the moment, not really, so I see it all as if I'm watching it play out on a screen.

“Kitt, oh, how are—”

“Andrew, mate it's good to see—”

They spoke over each other awkwardly, as if they had forgotten how to interact with one another. Maisy stood right next to Andrew but Ruth had taken a small step back, intentionally or not I wasn't sure. I remembered that Andrew still hadn't told Maisy what happened at the pub the night she came home, and I had no idea if Ruth or Kitt knew that Maisy didn't. Ruth had her eyes on the ground, digging a toe into the grey carpet. Kitt and Andrew looked each other up and down, stared at each other, tried to figure out what to say to each other. While they silently sized each other up, Maisy was looking at Kitt with blazing eyes.

“It's really good to see you.” Andrew spoke first, hurried, extending a hand. Kitt looked at his friend's outstretched arm for a moment. The two hadn't shaken hands since the day they met, it was too formal, Andrew knew this, he began to withdraw the gesture, but Kitt, ever the gentleman, took the hand.

“You too. Hi, Maisy.”

She nodded at him but didn't smile. Andrew dropped Kitt's hand and looked at Maisy, as if for help. Just with one look, they were able to have an entire conversation.

“For Christ’s sake, you two, you’re best friends, will you just get over whatever happened and just talk to each other?” Maisy had no patience for their timidness. She knew now from their conversation earlier that it was hard on Andrew to not speak to Kitt, and suddenly they were in the same room and acting so strange around each other. Someone had to speak up, and Maisy took the initiative despite her anger towards Kitt. I don’t recall her ever really expressing to Andrew that she didn’t like Kitt, but it was obvious now from the way she stood with her hands balled up in fists, her lips tight, her feet pointed away from him. It was as if the boys hadn’t heard her, though, for they stood rigid as statues.

“Your gal’s right. To be honest, I don’t even know what happened. I just got so busy after graduation—”

“Me too. We had to move, get settled—”

“Yeah, settled.” Kitt glanced at Ruth, who still stood a bit behind him, her hands folded in front of her. Her right hand covered her left. “About that, I suppose I should tell you—” Kitt looked hard at his friend, and seemed to change his mind. “Well, you remember Ruthie, yeah?”

“Of course. Hello. This is Maisy.”

“Pleasure,” Ruth said, smiling brightly through dark red lipstick.

“Good to meet you,” Maisy said, smiling warily. I think she could sense something was off. Andrew avoided looking at Ruth, who avoided looking right at Maisy for too long, who couldn’t help but glare at Kitt, who was still glancing between Andrew and Ruth.

“We’re engaged,” Kitt said suddenly. It took a moment for his words to register with all of us. Andrew looked blankly at his friend. I wonder if he felt he no longer knew Kitt anymore. Kitt, engaged. Kitt engaged before Andrew. That was probably what was going through Maisy’s head, for she quickly shifted from looking angry to looking very incredibly sad.

Andrew didn't notice, though. He was too busy staring at Ruth's left hand, which she now uncovered to reveal a sparkling ring. It seemed to have been unspoken between her and Kitt that he would be the one to break the news to the person he used to be closest with. Of course, Kitt was now closest with Ruth. They were to be married.

"Movie's about to start," the teenager selling tickets called out to them. The four of them stood in a silent square. Maisy had subtly taken a step away from Andrew just as Ruth stepped up back towards Kitt. Again, none of them noticed the little ways in which they reacted to things. That, perhaps, was the most interesting part of it all.

"How about we skip the movie, and you two come over for tea?" Maisy's voice was quiet but steady. She was talented at playing the hostess. Even under these circumstances, she would shine.

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They all took one cab back to Andrew and Maisy's flat. The ride seemed to somehow spark something in Andrew and Kitt, for in no more than five minutes they were back to almost exactly how they used to be at university. The shift from the atmosphere at the cinema to the almost jovial mood in the cab was stark, but didn't affect the entire foursome. Maisy and Ruth were quiet, both staring out different windows. I still wonder what they were both thinking. I wonder if Maisy was relieved earlier in that afternoon when she found out Andrew and Kitt had lost touch. Maybe their reunion had shaken her confidence. Maybe she was jealous. She didn't realize that Kitt may have been Andrew's best friend, but she was the love of his life. Irreplaceable. If only she had known she was irreplaceable.

Ruth could have just been a quiet girl, but my memory of her was not one of a quiet girl. Maybe she had just been drunk that night, but the more I thought about it the more I realized she

and Kitt did seem to fit together. He was so happy coming back that night—he would later tell Andrew that they did nothing but talk all night. Andrew didn't believe him, but I did. Kitt was softer than he would let on to his friends, or even to himself. I suppose it didn't surprise me at all that they got engaged so quickly. Kitt had always secretly wanted what Andrew had with Maisy—or so I always believed. He and Ruth were childhood friends, she had told Andrew this much before jumping on him at the pub—she was Kitt's Maisy. Of course Kitt would never admit this to anyone, not even himself and especially not to Ruth. Yet I don't think it was all to do with Andrew. I remembered the smile he fell asleep with that night. You can't fake that kind of happiness, I know this much; I used to absentmindedly smile all the time the summer John and I fell in love, but for Caroline's entire engagement she never once did. I think I caught her smiling at a letter once, but I don't think it was from her fiancé.

“Keep the change, cheers.” Andrew paid the cab—for all his declarations of wanting to break free of his family's money, he sure did foot the bill often—and the four of them headed up to the second floor. Maisy opened the door as Andrew and Kitt continued to chat, lingering behind the two girls, who seemed to be nearly forgotten.

“Sorry it's a bit of a mess,” Maisy said as they stepped inside. She sounded strained.

“It's lovely,” said Ruth. The boys let the door slam behind them and Maisy jumped. I had never seen her so shaken up before. Something about Kitt and Ruth made her uneasy, I just wasn't sure what. “Those boys, I swear, will be the death of us.”

“What? Oh, those two, they can't take anything seriously when they're together.”

“It's like they turn into children.”

Maisy and Ruth both laughed lightly, and smiled at each other. They had found common ground, things were loosening up, Maisy's shoulders seemed to relax.

“Would you like some tea? I can put on a kettle.” Ruth nodded and Maisy took five long steps into the kitchen as Andrew and Kitt continued to chatter about anything and everything. I didn’t even try to listen—there was no way I could keep up. No one could ever keep up with them. “Make yourself comfortable,” Maisy said, but Ruth was already seated on the navy blue sofa in the center of the living room. Kitt and Andrew talked a bit longer in the doorway, while Ruth sat fiddling her thumbs—Kitt came to sit beside her just as the kettle sounded.

“Hi,” he said, kissing her cheek.

“Hi,” she said, smiling and reaching for his hand, which had already found the ends of her hair.

“Okay, you two, I want to hear all about how you—well, you know—” Andrew tripped over his words and Kitt laughed.

“Don’t tell the story without me,” Maisy called from the kitchen as she poured four even cups of tea. The group sat patiently, quietly, until Maisy came back with a tray. She placed their drinks on the mahogany end table and sat in an armchair separate from the three of them. I don’t know if she did it on purpose, or just felt there wasn’t room for her on the sofa, but either way she was now disconnected from them, just as she was when she was off in America. I wondered if anyone else noticed the connection, or if I was just too used to reading between the lines.

Kitt told them all about how he and Ruth simply connected, straight away, and were inseparable since the night they realized they had what he called “an attraction” to one another. He managed to tell the story without giving anything about that night away to Maisy, and as he concluded his story a look of relief washed over Andrew’s face, smoothing the crease in his forehead that had developed since they ran into each other at the cinema.

“I’m so happy for you, mate,” Andrew said, clapping his friend on the back. It was the three of them—Andrew, Kitt, and Ruth—on the sofa, while Maisy sat, still apart, looking somewhere in between Andrew and Kitt. For once, I couldn’t read her expression.

“Me too, Kitt, truly.” Maisy sounded genuine enough, but I still wasn’t sure. Andrew smiled at her and she smiled back, and I tried to examine the corners of her mouth for something to give her thinking away, but there was nothing there. Nothing in the corners of her eyes, either, or in the way she held her hands. She was perfectly neutral, a blank page settled restfully in the final page of a book. Maisy had never been blank before.

“It’s funny, when you think about it, how I began the night with this one—” Ruth gestured her head towards Andrew and laughed.

“What?” Maisy sat up a bit straighter, looking right at Ruth, hard.

“Ruth—” Kitt started, but she brushed him off.

“Oh, I’m sorry, is it impolite to mention? It’s only, I find it funny, that you had me kiss Andrew after all, and I ended the night with you, and now look at where we all are.”

“Ruthie—”

“What?” Ruth looked genuinely confused. The poor girl had no understanding of what kind of door she had just opened for the four of them.

“Maisy, I—” Andrew stood up with urgent eyes.

“You kissed her? When?”

“Oh dear,” Ruth said, and looked desperately at Kitt.

“Perhaps we should go,” Kitt offered.

“Perhaps.” Maisy was still looking at Ruth. Kitt nodded at Andrew solemnly and took Ruth by the hand.

“It was good to see you, mate,” he said, and with that he and Ruth were out the door just as quickly as they had come.

Maisy was staring at the space Ruth had just vacated. She was certainly no longer blank; she was full, marked by splotches of ink and torn corners. Andrew stood for a moment, not saying anything, and tried to get close to her to take her hands but she held them tight in her lap.

“You kissed her,” she said flatly.

“Maisy, please let me explain. You weren’t ever supposed to know.”

“Oh. Yes, I suppose that makes it so much better, Andrew, that I was never bloody supposed to know.”

“Look at me, please, Mais, can we talk about this?”

“When did you kiss her? She is engaged to your best friend, Andrew, when did you find time to kiss her?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Am I not worth explaining it to?”

Andrew sighed and sat back down on the sofa. He reached for his cup of tea but Maisy glared at him, so he kept his hands folded in his lap, then tapping nervously on his knees, then running through his hair as he so often did.

“You remember—of course you remember—when you were away, and I wasn’t getting your letters or your calls.”

“Yes, I explained it all to you.”

“Of course, and I know that *now*, but see, *then*, I thought you were through with me. I was a mess, Mais. The boys—”

“Kitt.”

“They were just trying to get me to have some fun. I went and got drunk with them at the pub. And she kissed me.”

“She kissed you at the pub when you were drunk and thought I was through with you.”

Andrew seemed relieved.

“Yes, yes, exactly. It was nothing.”

“And you only kissed?”

“Of course! We only kissed, just for a moment, and I didn’t even kiss her, not really, well, no, I didn’t.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” He seemed confused. When just a moment before she was perfectly livid, now she was telling him she understood. Although that wasn’t really what she was saying. Okay and *I understand* are completely different things, but all Andrew saw was a solution to a problem he had been keeping a secret for months.

“What am I supposed to say? I suppose it makes sense, you thought I wasn’t coming back to you.”

“Yes.”

“But you should have had more faith in me.”

“It wasn’t like that—”

“I would never have given up on you like that. Sure, I thought maybe you were done with me, and I was upset, and I left it alone for a while. But I would never have just given up for good.”

“I didn’t give up for good.”

“You kissed someone else, Andrew. You know you’re the only boy I’ve ever kissed. Really kissed, anyways. You were the only one that ever counted.”

“So are you, Mais, the only one that matters.”

She unclenched her hands and rubbed her temples. I like to think she believed him, or at least that she was trying to.

“She’s engaged to your best friend.”

“I know.”

“Kitt’s engaged.”

“I know.”

“And we’re not.”

The silence was like mud. Thick, dirty, heavy, impossible to clear away.

“I didn’t realize that was something you were worried about.”

“I’m not worried, Andrew, I’m sad. I’m sad because it makes me feel as though you don’t want to marry me, and then I wonder why I’m here at all. I came back for you, I moved away from my parents for you, and here I learn you’ve kissed another girl and Kitt’s engaged before us and everything’s upside down and maybe I shouldn’t have come back at all.”

Maisy stood as if to leave the room but Andrew stood with her and grabbed her waist to stop her.

“Let me go.”

“No. I will never, ever let you go. Listen to me. I love you, Maisy Harlan, I have loved you since we were eighteen years old, probably since we were younger than that, and I will love you for the rest of my life.”

“This better not be a bloody proposal, Andrew, not now.”

“It’s not. Listen, I want to marry you someday, I do, honest. Just not now. Not when I’m not my own man yet. Not until we’re truly settled. Don’t you see? I want you to marry a man, not a boy, not someone stuck in his father’s world. Let me find myself first, Mais, please, and then I promise you—I promise you forever.”

His own man. I had heard Andrew say those words before. Funnily enough, when he met Kitt for the first time. The conversation came back to me suddenly: Andrew and Kitt, sitting at a pub, at the end of their first week of school together, when Kitt initiated the exchange.

*"You go to Trinity College, yeah?"*

*"Mhm."*

*"You're in my Shakespeare course."*

*"Right, yes."*

*"Kitt Cantin."*

*"Andrew Little."* Andrew extended a polite hand but Kitt just smiled and slapped him a little too hard on the back.

*"You're a Little! Your name's on benches and bloody placards all over the place. So you're rich, then?"*

*"My father's rich."*

*"What's the difference?"*

*"It's—it's just different. I'm going to be my own man one day. Soon."*

*"Whatever you say. But this round's on you."*

Andrew had always been determined to ‘be his own man’, but I was never really sure what that meant. I didn’t understand why it kept him from marrying Maisy, why it meant he couldn’t really come to terms with his family’s wealth, and why he was always so adamant to

dismiss it, as if taking from his father was synonymous with conceding to something. Did Maisy understand any of this? Maybe she knew Andrew better than I did. After all, he talked to her all the time, but never once talked to me.

Andrew and Maisy stood still, frozen in time, as if afraid moving would break something so utterly fragile. Maisy was the first to move; she stepped back from him and he let his hands slip from her waist. There was a deep sadness in both of their eyes, but Maisy looked hardened. She looked as if she were building walls.

“I’ll wait,” she said, not exactly meeting his eyes. “I’ll wait for someday. But if someday doesn’t come—”

“It will, I promise. I love you, Mais.”

“I love you too.” She reached for his hands and drew him into a tight embrace. He kissed the top of her head and exhaled deeply, relieved and naive as anything. How could he not tell she didn’t want to wait? If I were her—and the situation with Ruth, on top of it all. Andrew saw Maisy as incredibly forgiving, but I just saw her as hopelessly in love. I knew better than they did, of course, for young people rarely notice or care, that a promise like that meant nothing in an unpredictable world on the brink of something terrible.

## Chapter Eight

*September 1939*

Andrew and Maisy had been together in their little Marylebone flat for less than a year before the dark stirrings of war stretched its heavy fingers out into London. It is hard to say when the war truly began; the historians have their answers, their specific dates and events, but when did it truly begin for the people who were not expecting it to happen? For the families who sat down for supper at precisely 6:30 every evening, for the children who skipped to school in streets that would soon be gone, for the young couples like Andrew and Maisy who wrapped themselves up together every night, draping legs over legs and arms over shoulders as if they would disappear if not held on to tightly enough, as if they were filled only with air? It is impossible to say when war begins for them. I'm sure William would have felt it first, before his son: a hazy feeling of fear stinging him sharply in the parts of his memory that could not let go of the trenches, the destruction of barely a generation ago. Maisy's parents, across the sea in their modern Los Angeles home, would not be as blissfully ignorant as their neighbors; no, they would be too much on the lookout for danger—it was only a year ago they expressed to Maisy their fear of her returning to London, a fear their brave and romantic daughter had ignored, a fear all of the world would soon be touched by.

Time is too fragile, but we only notice after it breaks, after it disintegrates delicately in our hands as we frantically try to cling to crumbs. I wonder if that's something Maisy noticed when Andrew told her he had enlisted.

“You *what?*” Her voice broke somewhere between anger and sadness.

“Oh, come on, it's not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal, Andrew, you enlisted to go to war!”

“Look, we’re going to beat the Germans in a heartbeat, I’ll be back before lunch. You’ll see.”

“You’re delusional. Did you learn nothing from the stories your father’s told?”

“I’m not my father, this isn’t my father’s war. There are new times, modern times, Mais. We’re better now, stronger.”

Maisy stormed out of the living room before Andrew could finish his sentence. She was upset, and I didn’t blame her. Nothing Andrew was saying sounded like him at all. He had never been particularly patriotic, he never really paid attention to what was going on in politics. Yet there he stood, standing straighter than he ought to on a Sunday morning, with something manic in his eyes. Of course Maisy was upset. If I could have slapped sense into him it would have been the least I would do. I followed her out of solidarity, I was on her side, I was confused and angry, *don’t you know how these things go, don’t you remember?* No, he didn’t remember, not how William lay awake at night with a cold sweat soaking the sheets, not how his mother had cried so often when her husband was away, and how even when he returned there was something missing even though he was the lucky one that got to keep all of his parts. I remembered; I was cursed with remembering. All I do is remember. I couldn’t stop Andrew from enlisting, even if I had known he would try. All I could do was remember, and hope that by some infallibility of youth Andrew was right about this war. Of course, he couldn’t have been farther from the truth, and maybe I knew it even then.

He knocked softly on the bedroom door. He didn’t want to fight with Maisy, he only wanted to fight with the Germans.

“Mais, I’m sorry. Listen, can I please explain?”

She said nothing, so he slowly pushed the door open and found her a perfect statue, rigid and cross-legged on the bed, with red-rimmed eyes.

“This isn’t you,” she said, hostile and gentle somehow at the same time. “Where are you? This isn’t you.”

“I know. I just—there’s not much for me here right now. No, I don’t mean you, of course I don’t mean you,” he stammered, when she shot him a look that could’ve pierced through stone. “I’m barely making any money, my writing isn’t even being looked at by anyone let alone being picked up by publishers. I sit here all day and write stories no one wants to read, and then you come home and you’ve been taking care of kids all day and you’re tired and we’re too young to be this tired.”

Something in what he said seemed to make sense to her. Her muscles relaxed, her jaw unclenched and a single tear fell free and slid down her cheek.

“What am I going to do, when you’re gone? There’s nothing for me here, either, Andrew. You’re not the only one who’s bored, who wants an adventure. I can’t just let you go and then sit here and wait and not have any adventures.”

“I have an idea that you might not like.”

“When do I ever like your ideas?”

He came to the bed and wrapped his arms around her and held her while she cried.

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“Yes, as soon as possible—I know you aren’t going to be there anymore, that’s why—yes, with Maisy—no, not indefinitely, just until this war is finished—yes, I know how you feel about war, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Dad.”

Andrew had been on the phone with William for an hour, trying to explain his plan to move out of their London flat and into Little Manor. Andrew wanted Maisy away from all the chaos, and somewhere she might feel more useful. The only problem was, William and his new wife still lived at the Manor, although they were in the process of moving to a smaller, more manageable home in Edinburgh. No, not the only problem—

“I don’t even really *like* the Manor,” Maisy whispered to Andrew as he negotiated with his father over the telephone. “I don’t see how that will fix anything.”

“Trust me, it’ll be better—no, Dad, I wasn’t talking to you—yes, we can make our own way there. Yes, we—yes. Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

Andrew hung up the phone hard, massaging the crease in his forehead. Maisy, sitting next to him on the couch, put an arm around his shoulder.

“Is he angry?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say angry. Disappointed. Confused. Hurt—”

“He’ll be fine,” she said, but her voice carried less confidence than it usually did.

“I hope so. But he said it’s fine, we should move in, it makes sense. At least he sees that.”

“Andrew—”

“He called me senseless. For enlisting.”

“He didn’t mean it.”

Andrew squirmed out of her embrace and reached for a cigarette from the pile he had haphazardly strewn across the coffee table while talking to his father. Five or six lay scattered around the telephone—the black and brass thing that seemed now to buzz with William’s stinging words. The sound of Andrew slamming the phone back into its cradle still echoed through the flat. He lit the cigarette and took a long, violent drag.

“He didn’t mean it,” Maisy repeated, her arms hanging limply at her side—she didn’t know what to do with them, he didn’t want her touch. The crystal ashtray, a housewarming present from Kitt and Ruth—Andrew and Maisy never questioned how they could afford it—was full, and Andrew mindlessly scattered grey ash across the table as he continued to tap his cigarette over the pile of stress he and Maisy had accumulated only that day. He handed her the cigarette; she took a half-hearted drag and only coughed once. Maisy still wasn’t very used to smoking, it was a habit she picked up that year in London. *You can’t go anywhere to escape it, anyways, so might as well take part*, she told Andrew when she lit her first. She never smoked around the children she watched, though. Only in the flat with Andrew, and sometimes after they had just spent time with Kitt and Ruth.

“I think he did.” Andrew spun the dial on the telephone with his left hand while drumming his fingers on his knee. He sat on the edge of the couch, staring straight ahead at the bookcase he had installed himself only a few months earlier. I wondered if he was thinking about what it would feel like to leave it all behind. I wondered if he regretted enlisting already. “I’m just—I’m not upset with him. I understand. I just wish he knew why I did it.”

“Why did you do it,” Maisy asked softly—her fingers twitched, as if she wanted to run them through his hair but thought better of it, as if she was worried she would scare him away or out of telling her why in the world he would willingly leave her to go fight a war his father already fought.

“I didn’t see where my life was going,” he said. “I kept thinking about the future, and I couldn’t see it. All I saw was me writing nonsense in this flat, and you being disappointed in me.”

Maisy opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. I suppose she wanted to tell him she'd never be disappointed in him, but I suppose she didn't want to lie to him either.

"I didn't want to be bitter, or an alcoholic, or whatever other stereotype, pick one. I just want to write things people want to read, I can't do that if I haven't lived, Mais. And I'm not living, not now, I'm really not. We're having fun, sure, but—"

"You're not happy."

"It's not because of you, I just...no. I'm not happy."

Maisy's breath came in sharp and she looked away from him for a moment.

"I'm not, either, not really. I haven't thought about it, I suppose, but, no, I'm not, we're not happy."

"What do we do? I couldn't think of anything else to do."

They both sat there quietly for a long time. Maisy took one last drag and crushed what was left of it in the overflow of ash on the table. Normally she would be annoyed by the mess—now she only stared blankly at it, as if it held all the answers. Then, I noticed a change in her face, a brightness creeping in at the corners of her eyes.

"What do you want today to look like in ten years?"

"What?"

"In ten years, when you look back. How would you want it to go?"

"You've lost it Mais." He stared hard at her; she was smiling.

"Be serious."

"I am, I just don't follow."

"Okay, listen. Today hasn't happened yet."

"It's happening right now!"

“Yes, but it hasn’t happened *yet*, right?”

Andrew wasn’t the only one not following.

“Sure.”

“Okay, so, if today hasn’t happened yet, that means you can make it whatever you want it to be. So, in ten years time, when you think about today, how do you want it to look? What will you wish you had said, or done? That’s how to figure out how to *live*, Andrew. Not by counting the number of days you’ve spent unhappy, worried that it’ll stretch on like that. Just be the person you want to be proud of when you’re older.”

It was simultaneously the craziest and most brilliant thing she had ever said.

“But I can’t control that.”

“Who else is in charge of your life except you?”

She sat eagerly, her face all lit up with expectations. She had tried her best to reassure him, to get him out of whatever headspace sent him to wherever one goes to sign their life away. He still looked at her as if he didn’t recognize her as he tried to let her words sink in. Then, a short laugh, just a little noise, really, but it was all it took and soon he was smiling and laughing and throwing his arms around her and kissing her forehead.

“Maisy, you’re brilliant. I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said, her words swallowed by his kisses. After breathless moments, he pulled away from her and put his hands firmly on her shoulders.

“We’re going to move to the Manor, I’m going to win this war, and we are going to be happy. That’s what it’s going to be in ten years. We’re going to be happy, you and me, together.”

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The moment they pulled the car into the driveway at Little Manor I was struck with the most heart-wrenching nostalgia I'd ever had. Of course I had been to the Manor since I died, I had spent more time there as a ghost than I did alive by an entire century. Yet there was something about Andrew and Maisy, something so familiar and something I felt so connected to, that seeing them come to the Manor as young adults, and not the children they once were, made me extraordinarily sad. It was selfish, probably, to be upset that they got to live the life I had so desperately wanted with John. They were now older than I had ever been. They had, quickly and without warning, surpassed me.

They pulled their car into the driveway at Little Manor and I was dead and John was dead and I was alone. I didn't know, truly, how I still loved him so deeply after all that time, after seeing him have a life with someone else, seeing him be a father to someone else's child, yet I did. I do. I never could stop loving him, and maybe it was only the memory of him or the might-have-beens but even now I wonder if he will be waiting for me, or if he and Emily are there, wherever *there* is, together, and he has forgotten all about the young girl he once said he loved. That is what I thought about as Andrew and Maisy parked in front of those large doors, painted a deep navy blue by someone decades ago. They held hands as they walked through the many rooms, some dusty with neglect and some as bright as I remembered them being over a hundred years ago. There had been renovations, and so much had changed, yet the bones of the imposing house remained the same, and I could not shake the feeling that the walls held tightly to all of the secrets that had gathered in between the stones.

The rooms seemed smaller, somehow. I had gotten used to the openness of the London flat, it's funny how people can become accustomed to something so quickly, and something about the Manor suddenly felt oppressive and dark. Curtains were drawn over all of the

windows, the rugs were heavy with fabric and time, and when someone walked on them they sent up a cloud of dust. William and his new wife Irene had neglected the Manor, that much was clear. It wasn't an easy task to take care of a place like that, and I didn't blame him for slacking. The Little family had always hired servants, and then maids, to be in charge of the upkeep. Yet when Andrew was born his mother, Sarah—that strong, seemingly infallible woman—felt deeply that a home was only just a house unless taken care of by those who lived there. William wanted to believe in it, believe in her, and so even all those years after her death and with a new wife on his arm he still refused to hire maids. Maisy seemed wary as she made her way through the long hallways, the dark rooms, a space so different from the one she had probably expected to stay in for at least a while longer. The Manor used to be this big, beautiful, mysterious thing to me—now, it was claustrophobic and riddled with the remnants of all the people I had seen pass through. Yet I was the only one that remained. I was the only one that knew how truly wonderful it used to be.

“Andrew, it's a mess,” Maisy whispered to him as they made their way down the main staircase. “It didn't used to be like this, when we were here as kids.”

“No one's been here in a while, to help clean up,” Andrew said as he tried not to trip on frayed rug edges as they moved slowly from the entrance hall to the library, where William and Irene waited for them. Andrew's new stepsister, Margaret, was away at boarding school. She was young, thirteen, and shy, and she and Andrew hadn't exchanged more than three words to each other at the wedding, despite his best efforts.

“We have a lot of work to do, then,” Maisy tried to say cheerfully, but she sounded strained. Andrew squeezed her hand as they stood solemnly in front of his father and stepmother, the four of them not quite meeting each other's eyes. Maisy examined the

chandelier above her while Irene idly picked at her long nails. William and Andrew looked at each other but past each other, somehow.

“I’m glad you’re here, I’m sorry we have to leave so soon.” William’s words nearly echoed through the library. They all stood; the furniture was covered in yellowing sheets. William and Irene had been planning to shut up the Manor for good before Andrew surprised them with his proposal. It seemed they made no effort to undo the packing they had begun.

“Thank you for letting us stay,” Andrew replied stiffly.

“Yes, truly,” Maisy said, smiling. It was the brightest thing in the room. The chestnut-brown muslin curtains were drawn nearly all the way except for where they met in the middle, where a small ray of light came through, illuminating a cylinder of particles floating suspended in the air. I remember hoping Andrew and Maisy would open all the curtains—the Manor used to get such beautiful light, especially in the mornings. Of course the trees outside the windows would have to be trimmed. I remembered the way they used to play shadows over the furniture and the people, back when they were meticulously manicured by the gardeners once a month. Now they were overgrown; shrubs were scattered haphazardly, the garden was entirely run by weeds and wilted roses, and ivy climbed so high and wild on the walls it threatened the second story bedroom windows.

“It helps us, as well. I wasn’t thrilled about shutting down the Manor,” William said. “I’m glad that it’s staying here, in the family, with someone to look after it. It’s been in our family for generations, after all.”

“Nearly two hundred years, right love?” Irene chimed in, barely looking up from her nails. It would have been rude, the way she ignored Andrew and Maisy, if it weren’t so obvious it was only because she was nervous. Her fingers shook and her eyes darted occasionally to her stepson

when he wasn't looking. She hadn't had much time since marrying William to really get to know his son—it was partially because Andrew had been away at Cambridge, but also because of Andrew and William's shaky relationship. I so wished they would get over whatever it was that was holding them back from really being able to talk to each other, but it had been etched into them Andrew's whole life. It would take work, and they couldn't work on it if one or both of them were always away.

“Yes,” William said, but didn't get any further with his thought before Maisy interrupted him.

“I had an idea for the Manor,” she said, her words tumbling out of her mouth as though she had been forcing them down and was unable to repress them any longer. She turned red as William looked hard at her and even Andrew looked confused.

“An idea,” William said. It wasn't a question, but it wasn't quite a statement either.

“They've been evacuating children out of London,” she said, more calmly now, “sending them to the country. The children who don't have relatives though, they are having trouble placing them out here, and I just thought—the Manor is so big, it's been nearly empty for so long, I just thought—”

“You want to take in evacuees? Here?”

“Only if it's okay with you,” she said hurriedly. Andrew was still staring at her; he looked vaguely impressed and nervous at the same time. There was a long silence marred only by the heavy ticking of an imposing grandfather clock.

“Why not,” William said, suddenly smiling. “I think it's a wonderful idea.”

Andrew looked more surprised than I had seen him since Maisy kissed him for the first time. It was all he could do to not leave his mouth hanging open in shock. Maisy only smiled

sweetly, but she was practically buzzing with excitement. She had this way of holding things inside where she thought she was containing it all, but occasionally her emotions would slip through the cracks in her skin and become visible if you were paying attention. I was always paying attention, especially to her.

“Thank you,” Maisy said, and instinctively reached her hand out to William. He shook it with a smile and Andrew’s surprise turned to puzzlement.

“Dad—”

“Andrew. You’ve got a real great girl here. Don’t let her go.” William’s smile faltered as he looked at his son, and then he stepped toward Andrew and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t plan on it,” Andrew said. He smiled at his father and moved suddenly to hug him. I don’t remember the last time before that moment that Andrew and William had embraced. William had been broken for so long, but it seemed that with that hug some part of him was beginning to glue itself back together. The crease in his forehead that had become a permanent part of him since coming back from the war eased slightly as he held his son close. They were about the same height, I realized, and wondered when that had happened.

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The only thing that I know with certainty is that, for some unearthly reason, I do not haunt houses. That would be understandable, if I floated passively through walls, knocking into windows and breaking glasses to bring fear into the hearts of those who dared to still be alive when I, their fearsome ghost, was not. No, that would be too easy, too expected. I haunt people. I haunt the generations of John Littles that have passed through the halls of this Manor but also others—I stick to them like a shadow, an unwelcome guest intruding in on the most intimate and mundane moments of their lives. I don’t know if I would even consider what I do genuine

haunting, but I can't think of a better word for it. Regardless, I quickly discerned that I was not confined to the Manor; it was a relief, but also a concern. If I could wander with these young men, if I could travel the world with them, would I forget that I was a ghost? Would I become too entrenched in the world, too attached to mortal things, too connected, until one day it was possibly all ripped away from me and I went somewhere, *somewhere*, where everyone else that died went? That idea would flare up in me like erratic waves, ebbing and flowing but always there on the edge of my consciousness. I have, over time, come to terms with the fact that I really am not in control at all. Yet there was still a hope of autonomy that would occasionally stick to me like sand, and that hope was most urgent when it was time for Andrew to leave Maisy at the Manor to go fight a war.

I followed William to war. I did not have a choice. I could try to describe the tug, as though there was a rope tied to my waist that trailed me a certain length behind these men, but it wouldn't be adequate. I seemed to inhabit the spaces they did, so I could wander freely in a house as long as they were there. The Manor was large—large enough to tug me back to Andrew if I deigned to wander too far, but I did not feel inhibited by his presence at all. On the contrary, it was the most free I had felt since I was alive. They were dangerous—the moments that I forgot I was not a rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed girl skirting through the hallways awaiting some big adventure, the moments I forgot I no longer breathed.

William's war was the worst thing I thought I would ever see, but something in me sounded warning bells when Andrew dressed in his fatigues and stood in the doorway. Every part of me ached to stay behind. I felt guilty; I should go with him, watch over him, I was his protector, he had no one but me once he left the Manor. I didn't feel it, I couldn't feel it, but the memory of a cold-sweat anxiety flooded my senses and I would have grounded my feet into the

floor and held on to the stair banister and driven myself as far into that house as I could, if I could, but instead I was helpless and afraid. Andrew kissed Maisy and smiled at her and I wanted to scream.

“I’ll be back before you notice I’m gone,” he said to her lightheartedly as she kissed him gently on the cheek, echoing what he said to her the day he enlisted. I wondered if he really believed it.

“I know,” she said, smiling. “I love you.” She looked down at her hands, which were wrapped up carefully in his. He caressed her knuckles with his thumbs and then very slowly let go, his arms dropping to his sides. He rolled his shoulders back and stood rigid, like the soldier he now was. He still grinned like a little boy, and he almost looked as though he was playing dress up in his father’s clothes, but he was a man now.

“I love you too, Mais.” He kissed her again, hard, his hands on the small of her back, holding her tightly to him, and then he pulled away. “More than you know.”

I prepared myself to follow him out the door as he turned his back to her and hesitantly stepped outside. They had decided she would not go with him to the train station; Andrew and Maisy were never really good at goodbyes, and they seemed to want to leave an air of nonchalance around the whole affair. They spent the last year clung solidly together just to let each other go—no, she would not accompany him, and they would not acknowledge that he was leaving her behind. They acted as if he were simply going on a vacation that he could not take her along on.

Andrew stepped outside and Maisy went to close the door on him, his back still turned to her, and I was waiting for that tug, that pressure, but it did not come. I heard his heavy boots on the gravel walking away from the Manor and still I remained. I watched Maisy stand by the

closed door, both hands on the large brass knob as if she were holding on to him; I watched Maisy's knees buckle as she slowly climbed the stairs, one hand on the banister to keep her steady. I waited in the entrance hall, not necessarily knowing what I was waiting for. I had never wanted so desperately to be free as I did in that moment. Even before death I was never truly free, not really. Freedom was not something I was accustomed to, so when Maisy went upstairs and I could no longer hear the crunch of the pebbles under Andrew's feet and I was alone, it took me a while to register what had happened. I had done it; I had stayed behind. I detached, somehow, from Andrew, and in that moment I knew I did not have to go to war again. I was free. I was free, and I was terrified.

## Chapter Nine

*Autumn 1939*

The fact remains that ghosts do need to haunt something, and my feeling of purpose swiftly disintegrated the moment Andrew left without me. I don't know how long I remained in front of those closed doors, waiting for something, anything. I heard Maisy pacing upstairs, the occasional *bloody hell* interrupting her faltering footsteps. I assumed she was bumping into old pieces of furniture and tripping over the trains of curtains that puddled on the floor. There were so many edges to the Manor that I used to know how to avoid; it was something she would have to learn. The grandfather clock continued its eternal ticking as Maisy's footfall grew softer above me until it was merely an echo, and I knew she must have made her way to the balcony. It was one of my favorite spots in the Manor—a white latticed balustrade protruding from the master bedroom, overlooking the back of the Manor on to the garden. It curved inward on the house, and always made me feel as if I were standing at the bow of a ship, leaving off on an adventure. Of course, I only ever explored the balcony after I had died—it was an addition put on by William's mother—and I suppose if I had stood on it as a young girl it would have felt more like I were being caged in.

I eventually made my way to the drawing room and I skeptically eyed the furniture that cluttered the space. White sheets were still strewn across armchairs and magazines littered the glass table in the center of the room. There was an odd mix of old and new; a cocktail cabinet, one of those inventions of the early century I found completely pointless, sat prettily next to an old—older than me—china cabinet. The mirrored panels on the oak cocktail cabinet contrasted with the dark maple and glass of the cupboard that once stored fine china and now housed mismatched trinkets that had no other home. Neither of them seemed to belong in that room,

which used to be used only for seating company, but now was transforming into the room where all the ‘extra’ furniture and bobbles lived. Picture frames cluttered the collection of tables scattered in various corners of the room, and the heavy dark-green and oxblood rugs clashed with the light cotton paneled window dressings, which were flanked on the sides by thick navy-blue stripes. To the modern eye it might have been acceptable, but to me I only thought of how those of my generation would react, and it wouldn’t be well. Mrs. Little always kept the drawing room spotless; it was, she would say, one of the most important rooms in the house, second only to the dining room. She would have a fit if she could see it the way it was then. Yet I wasn’t terribly disturbed by the state of the drawing room; my favorite room, of course, was the library.

I used to think memories were these floating, ethereal things that existed in particles of light and air; you couldn’t see them, couldn’t touch them, couldn’t put your finger on why the smell of rain made you inexplicably sad. Yet wandering around the Manor those first few minutes—hours, however long—after Andrew left I began to change my mind. My memories seemed to be encapsulated in very visceral, tangible things. Items. Objects. End tables and carpet runners and cracked vases practically shook with the strain of my memory trying to break free and return to me. Return to someone. I wasn’t even sure if these memories belonged to me anymore, or if they ever did. I thought about John, and that night in the library, and then I thought about his wedding, and the birth of his son, and his grandson, and the hundreds of footsteps that have echoed within the walls that now held me. I knew, somehow, that I wouldn’t be able to leave the Manor without Andrew, and I didn’t particularly want to. There was some sort of peace I felt with the idea of having some time, some enigmatic amount of time, to simply exist. Andrew and Maisy exhausted me sometimes. They were full of energy—boisterous, loud, young—yet it was the fact that they reminded me so much of John and me that would push me

over the edge sometimes. I would feel as if I couldn't breathe and almost laugh at myself.

*You're being silly, of course you can breathe, you're fine*, then immediately, *you're fine because you can't breathe because you're dead*. There was a morbid comfort in knowing nothing could happen to me. I was invincible, which would be an incredible thing, except that there wasn't anything I wanted to do with it.

I was startled out of my thoughts by a loud crash from upstairs, followed by a string of creative swear words. It was one of those moments that Andrew would have teased her about if he were here—but he wasn't. He left, and I remained, and Maisy was fumbling around the Manor with no one to guide her. The small fear that had been nudging the back of my mind, the fear that I had no reason to continue to exist in this space without a Little to be attached to, began to dissipate. Maisy. She would need me. Her stubbornness, outgoing nature, and the dazzling charm she was able to instantly turn on sometimes distracted me from the fact that she reminded me so much of myself, and it drew me to her. It wasn't just her relationship with Andrew, although that was absolutely part of it. It was the way she could sometimes interact with the world so delicately—could see things in raindrops and falling leaves that no one else saw, but I saw, I always saw. Occasionally I even had the feeling that she saw me. She'd stare intently at the space I occupied as if she were looking right at me. She'd tilt her head, and squint, and then something would distract her and she'd smile that radiant smile that brought out the two almost unnoticeable dimples at either side of her mouth, and I would be alone again. I realized I wasn't without purpose just because Andrew was gone—if I really thought about it, I had been paying more attention to Maisy than to him for a long while.

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The children came in early November. Maisy took in the strays, those unlucky orphans or those whose parents sent them away to safety but without relatives to send them to. They had been shuffled around since September when they were first shipped off to the country, tagged like luggage, in their school clothes. It took a bit of back and forth for Maisy to convince the orphanage that had taken them in to hand them over—something about too much paperwork and the children needing a proper education. That was when Maisy made up her mind to also become their schoolteacher. She came back to the Manor one afternoon with a car full of books and school supplies that took her—and the housekeeper Andrew hired before he left—three trips to bring inside. They dropped everything in the study, that dark room leading from the entranceway to the library that somehow perpetually smelled like cigars, even when no one had smoked in the room for years. The week leading up to the children's arrival was fraught with lamentations over the absence of desks and a proper teaching license, but she was reassured both by Andrew's letters and the orphanage's insistence that in wartime a teaching license was the least of anyone's worries. As long as the children were occupied and out of mischief, the government was satisfied, or so everyone told her.

Maisy left the Manor alone in the early afternoon and when she returned she had six children under the age of twelve in tow. They quietly shuffled in behind her as she cheerfully spoke to them as if they were all old friends. It would be a funny scene, if it weren't so somber—Maisy, chipper and charming, discoursing with children as if they were her equals, and them looking confused and out of place in their shiny black shoes, pulling at their wrinkled coat collars. They were rosy-cheeked and solemn, and eerily silent. I could tell Maisy didn't know what to do with them. The children she usually watched back in London were the rambunctious, spoiled children of rich and absent parents—she spoke of them to Andrew fondly but with a

twinge of exasperation. These children were different. They had already been through so much just in the last few months, and seemed so, so tired.

Maisy deposited the house keys on the tall, round table in the middle of the entranceway, and turned to face her new charges. After a moment's hesitation, she smiled and shrugged off her pale blue coat, letting it fall to the floor. The children looked at her with wide eyes as she kicked off her shoes and sat down cross-legged on the floor.

“Come on, then, don't be shy.” She nodded encouragement as they looked at each other and at her in bewilderment. Slowly, one by one, they took their coats off gingerly and placed them delicately on the floor. Even the two boys were careful with their things, most likely wary of it all somehow being a trick. “Oh, please, sit, I'm sorry we must sit on the floor but I didn't want to muddy up the drawing room, and that's such a stuffy room anyways—” Maisy was rambling.

“It's okay,” one of the boys said as he sat down, using his coat as a cushion. “Chairs are dumb.”

A few of the girls giggled behind their hands. Maisy smiled brightly.

“I entirely agree. Thomas, is it?”

“Yes, Miss.”

Maisy opened her mouth and I knew she was going to tell them to address her less formally, she had practiced telling them so in the mirror multiple times, but something stopped her. No one except the grocer and occasionally Andrew, sarcastically, called her Miss.

“Miss Harlan, if you please.” She spoke with an authority that seemed to catch her off guard—her smile faltered, but only for a moment. She caught herself and grinned widely once again. “So we have six of you and four rooms, unfortunately, a few of you will have to pair off.

Thomas and Bennett, yes, you two can share a room, and Clara and Laura, you girls as well? Does that sit well with everyone?" She ended it as a question, and I wanted to scold her. *No, you don't do that, you must be firm with them or they will question your authority.* I wanted to scold myself, then—I sounded so like my mother.

"Yes, Miss Harlan," they all said in unison, as if rehearsed, except for one of the girls, who just nodded. They sat there for a while, the six of them in a small semi-circle, the older girls awkwardly smoothing their skirts to occupy their nervous hands. A small bell sounded from the kitchen, and Maisy pushed herself up from the floor. She shook her long hair out of her face.

"Right then, it seems lunch is ready. We're going to eat in the kitchen today, there's still some chairs needed for the dining room—right, let's go, then, follow me." Maisy strode down the entrance hall and turned sharply right, leaving the children scrambling to follow her. "Oh, you're all so slow," she called back to them, her laugh echoing through the hall. One by one, the children began to clamber up off the floor excitedly, and went toward the sound of her voice with surer steps than they walked in with. Only one little girl, the quiet, youngest one who didn't join the collective *Miss Harlan* from earlier, hesitated at the end of the hall. She squeezed the doll she held in her left hand tight. She must have been around six years old. I came up beside her so I could see the profile of her face, which was streaked by one single tear on each cheek. I instinctively tried to put a hand on her shoulder, and of course I could not, but I think she must have sensed my presence because she took a small sharp breath and whipped her head around. Perhaps I was making it all up, the idea that she somehow sensed me, but either way something motivated her to shuffle her little feet toward the kitchen with her doll nearly dragging on the floor behind her.

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After they warmed up to each other, Maisy and the children, it seemed as though they all belonged together. They were wary of her for a while, to be sure, but she was amazing with them immediately, especially the youngest ones, and she found her footing quickly. Eventually I noticed the Manor had regained some of its previous glory. These children transformed the long-dark place into one of laughter and games. They hid in the curtains and jostled with their forks. Maisy would always rein them in gently but firmly, her voice shifting to a tone I never heard her use before—motherly. It suited her quite well. She began using words like “love” and “dear” and sounded very much the caretaker. It wasn’t just her voice that changed. Maisy took charge, and for the first time she enjoyed housework. She hemmed their skirts and darned their socks, and if need be made them entirely new clothes with scraps collected from the old ones. She hired a cook with the money William allotted to the project and made sure the children had three square meals a day. I remember watching the freckles spread across her nose and cheeks as she chased her new charges around the gardens. She wouldn’t let them in the maze; she told them scary stories of lost little boys and girls that became trapped there forever. They all rolled their eyes and ignored her, getting themselves lost in the maze anyways. Breaking Maisy’s rules wasn’t a terrible rebellion, but rather something I saw as normal behavior, a marker of the fact that they seemed, finally, at home. Most importantly, it was obvious that they all adored her.

Maisy was slightly unconventional, but wholly wonderful, when it came to the mundane chores that accompanied caring for the children. She insisted in making things fun and lighthearted, to distract from the noise of the planes overhead and the awful reports the radio spat out in vitriolic static. She gave them their haircuts in the driveway, so the wind would sweep away the newly shed hair and save her from the trouble. She frequently held picnic lunches in the foyer when it became too cold to continue the tradition in the garden. The children soon

learned to put aside their skepticism and they went along with her willingly and with smiles on their faces. They would occasionally look at each other with that sort of look that said, *grown ups are so odd*, and although I was fairly certain Maisy caught these looks more often than not, I think she embraced them rather than let herself be offended. She wanted to be the grown up, I realized with a sharp pang of something resembling jealousy. She got to be the grown up.

It struck me that Andrew would be proud of her if he had ever seen her around children, the way she could be both kind and stern at the same time—yet he had never seen it. Luckily Maisy was distracted enough with her new responsibilities that she didn't seem to be mourning the loss of Andrew's company too terribly. I would occasionally catch her looking wistfully out a window or rereading over his letters so often that his words were smudged with her fingertips and sometimes her tears. Yet she didn't seem like a half of a person the way I expected her to be—well, I didn't really expect that from her, I suppose, but from myself if I were in her position. If I were in her position—perhaps that isn't the right way to phrase it, as I was, in a way. I was faced with the loss of the man I loved, but rather than being far away on some foreign soil he was right in front of me, untouchable, and I'm not sure which is worse. She was stronger than that, than me; she wouldn't break entirely, but I could see pieces begin to chip off at the edges of her smile. One of the children always interrupted her melancholy, though, and a sigh of relief always escaped her, gently and so subtly no one would really notice. She couldn't sit at the window and miss Andrew; she had a job to do.

One of the biggest hurdles she faced was Clara Bloom, the youngest, the little girl who never let go of her old, tattered rag doll. Clara was shy and nervous long after all the other children shrugged off the weight of their pasts with their coats and left them in a heap by the door. When they would all play in the garden or jump in piles of fallen leaves, heeding Maisy's

warnings of *be careful, you'll break something*, Clara sat in various rooms in the Manor with her doll on her lap, twisting the fabric limbs around and around. Maisy was worried about her, as was I, not only because she isolated herself physically, but because Clara refused to speak. She was seven years old and an orphan, one of the children who fell into a more unfortunate lot. According to the orphanage, which Maisy phoned soon after realizing Clara would not speak, her parents perished in a factory fire when the girl only the year before, and she hadn't spoken a word to anyone at the orphanage, so as far as they knew she was mute. Maisy refused to believe this, however; she would catch Clara occasionally muttering to herself or to her doll when she thought no one could hear. She was simply terribly shy, and Maisy was terribly determined to remedy this.

Maisy made up her mind that if she spoke to Clara often enough, and if the other children followed suit, the girl would have no choice but to respond eventually. Maisy called each of her charges into the study one at a time over the course of a few days to inform them of her plan. The boys, Thomas and Bennett, put on the boyish air of nonchalance that Maisy saw right through; she had mastered it herself by that age.

"Come, now, boys, don't you want to partake in the war effort? Make your parents proud?"

"The war effort?" Bennett scoffed. "How is helping a little kid 'contributing to the war effort'?"

Thomas elbowed his friend in the ribs and Bennet let out a small yelp.

"I can tell you're both good young lads. I'm sure Mary and Lydia would take notice if you went out of your way to be kind to little Clara."

The boys both blushed. Maisy had a knack for recognizing the relationships the children formed; Mary and Lydia were the oldest girls, both nearly twelve years old, a year ahead of both Thomas and Bennett, who had desperate crushes on them. It didn't seem to matter which boy liked which girl, only that notes were passed between hands and not-so-subtle glances were passed over the dining room table. The girls seemed to like the attention more than they liked the boys, who I'm certain they saw as beneath them, in a way, because of age and a certain 'maturity' they always tried to exhibit. They distanced themselves from Clara and Laura, the younger girls, to prove something, although I'm not sure what it proved besides an inability to put aside ego. They weren't unkind, but possessed that self-importance I think all girls around that age are cursed with.

Thomas and Bennett exchanged a glance that seemed to say, *we must do whatever it takes for these girls to notice us*, and smiled forcefully at Maisy.

"Of course, Miss Harlan," Thomas said gallantly, almost facetiously, and Bennett managed to choke out the same words. The moment they turned their backs Maisy rolled her eyes at them. She was still young enough, after all, to remember being that age, and probably remembered the way Andrew and his friends used to treat her. Something about pulling the ribbons out of her hair and barring her from their playground games.

With Thomas and Bennett being the final ones on board with the mission to help Clara speak, Maisy seemed more determined than ever to accomplish the task she set before the entire household. Every day, Maisy would pull Clara aside for about an hour, sit her down in the drawing room or library, and just talk to her. I'm sure it helped Maisy, too, to have a sounding board for her thoughts, which she expressed without reservation. Maisy talked about her old life in London, about the years she spent abroad, about Andrew, about her parents—she told Clara

anything and everything, while the little girl sat patiently, occasionally nodding along but mostly looking down at her feet that swung like interchanging pendulums above the floor. Progress was slow; Clara would, once a week or so, ask politely at dinner for someone to pass the salt, or whisper her please's and thank you's. The longer Maisy's mission went on, however, the more Clara opened up, and her speech began to seem impeded less by shyness and more by her not having anything to talk about, since she spent most of her time alone or listening to Maisy while the other children played. About two months in to the project, Clara surprised Maisy, and me, by saying,

“I'm sorry Miss Harlan, b-but I don't have m-much to say, and I'd rather go play w-with the others n-now.” She spoke softly with a slight stutter, as if afraid to say certain words. It was the first fully formed sentence she said since her arrival at the Manor, and possibly for a long while before that. Maisy opened her mouth as if to speak and then closed it again, unsure of what to say. She smiled at Clara, a full, genuine smile, and a small laugh of relief escaped her lips. It was just an exhale of air, really, but it seemed to say, *I can't believe I did it.*

“Yes, of course, love. Go, I'll be here if you need me.”

Clara smiled back and clambered out of the big armchair, her feet landing on the rug in a little thud. She nearly ran out the door, and through the corridors I could hear the faint echo of her little voice saying, “w-wait for me, Laura!”

Maisy was alone again, but I imagine it was a comforting kind of solace, the kind of alone felt after accomplishing a heavy, difficult task. Maisy had gotten Clara to speak, even if it meant losing her to the other children. It was perhaps the most selfless thing Maisy had ever done—maybe Andrew would say it was her coming back from America to be with him, but I doubt her parents saw it that way. She lost her confidant but gained confidence in herself, in her abilities.

It was that day that I think I stopped seeing Maisy as a child herself. She was no longer the tenacious little girl who relentlessly teased Andrew, or the teenager who used to run swift and barefoot on wet grass; she was a young woman in charge of six lives, in charge of keeping them clean and fed and well. She managed it all with such grace, such ease. I never wanted to tell her anything more than I did in that moment that Clara skipped out of the room; I wanted to tell her how proud I was.

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By winter the children became restless, as they could no longer play outside. They managed to keep themselves busy for a while: Mary and Lydia spent their hours draped over the fashion magazines Maisy was able to order for them; Thomas and Bennett ran around chasing each other with homemade swords; Clara and Laura argued over which dolls belonged in which room of the old dollhouse Maisy found hidden away under a sheet in one of the bedrooms. Yet it was inevitable that cabin fever would overtake even the most introverted ones, and Maisy soon had her hands full trying to think of ways to keep them all occupied. She put on makeshift puppet shows and read books aloud in as many different voices and accents as she could muster. She did her best, despite the fact that there was no one to tell her she was doing a good job, no one to support or help her. How she never lost her temper is beyond me—I knew Andrew would have lost it in a second if he were there.

I wondered a lot about what kind of father Andrew would be. I always thought he would be the great, sort of friendly kind, the father that plays hide and seek with you and lets you stay up past your bedtime as long as you promise not to tell Mother. A bit like my father, perhaps, if not more lighthearted and playful. I never imagined he would parent the way William did, but then I suppose I never imagined he would be a soldier. Even trying to connect the world soldier

to Andrew didn't sit right with me. No, he wasn't a soldier; he was a boy in soldier's clothing, probably writing poetry under the stars. Probably not. I liked to imagine that, though. I liked to imagine him safe and happy, albeit homesick, off on some grand adventure. He would return with stories of glory and success and would sit his children on his knee years later and tell them all about how he bravely warded off those damned Nazis; and Maisy would chastise him for saying damned in front of the children, and they would bicker but they wouldn't really mean it, and long after the children went to bed they would laugh together and hold each other and everything would be all right.

War wasn't like that, though, and nothing of the sort ever came to pass. I will never know what sort of father Andrew could be. I don't think him capable of the rough sort of love William bestowed, even now. I've seen him with children, of course—his nieces and nephews when his stepsister Margaret finally married and had the unfortunate blessing of triplets, and then their children after that. Caring for someone else's children, though, is different than caring for your own. Maisy treated Clara differently than the other children probably because she was an orphan, and Maisy felt as though Clara belonged to her. Maisy couldn't claim Mary or Lydia or Laura or Thomas or Bennett—not that she would particularly want to claim Bennett, anyways, he was a bit of a rascal—but Clara was all hers. I saw her write to Andrew on multiple occasions about how much he would adore the girl, how quickly he would fall in love with her the way Maisy did. I think if everything happened differently, Maisy would opt into braiding Clara's long raven hair for as long as she could; I think Maisy would have adopted her. Of course Maisy wouldn't dream of such a thing until she and Andrew were married and the other children were able to go back home because, of course, she couldn't play favorites. So she bid her time,

waiting for Andrew to come home and for the war to end, so she could finally begin to have everything she wanted.

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A spectacular storm came in mid December, bringing with it a distraction from their boredom. By then the weather seemed to grow increasingly desperate to ward off German planes, and it had been raining for three unrelenting weeks, but this storm was particularly bad. The wind howled and the rain fell in fat drops, and I worried it would drown what was left of the roses. Maisy, in the dining room, struggled against the windows, which doubled as the doors to the veranda. Water had already pooled at her feet and threatened the table and chair legs. Somehow the doors had gotten stuck earlier in the day, and she figured she would remedy it later, but the unexpected storm rolled in and now the wind was too strong for her to shut them against it.

“Miss Harlan, can we help?” Thomas asked, hovering behind her. She shook her head vigorously at him.

“No, I can—manage—” She pushed all her weight against the glass but it didn’t budge. Lightning cracked and Thomas flinched, and walked hurriedly out of the room. Maisy huffed and brushed her hair out of her face. She turned around and leaned her back against the door, dug her heels into the floor, and tried to push that way, but the floor was so wet she couldn’t get her feet to grip and she promptly slipped. She sat there, seemingly defeated in a little puddle, and looked as if she were going to cry. Just then, however, Thomas returned with the rest of the children in tow.

“Miss Harlan, please let us help,” he said, and walked towards her, extending a small hand. Maisy smiled up at him and laughed.

“You are so stubborn. Fine, then, see if you can do a better job!” She stood and watched, amused, as her charges put everything they had into closing the doors, but still they wouldn’t move. A low rumble of thunder preceded another bright flash; someone screamed and Clara began to cry.

“Oh, it’s all right,” Maisy said as cheerfully as she could, “I supposed we just have to make the best of this.” She left the room and the children stood, bewildered and wet, waiting for her to return. Suddenly the faint sound of the radio drifted through the corridors. The music got louder and then Maisy was in the doorway.

“Come on, then,” she called to them, and disappeared again. The children all looked at each other—a few of them shrugged, Mary looked down at her feet, examining her wet socks, and Bennett was still pushing against the door, trying to be the hero.

“You heard her,” Clara said forcefully—well, as forcefully as she could manage. “Let’s go!”

“But we’re all wet,” Lydia complained, having joined Mary in lamenting the state of their socks.

“Let’s go,” Clara said again, and grabbed Lydia by the hand, attempting to drag her out of the room. Lydia smiled and laughed quietly.

“All right, all right,” she said, giggling, and followed Clara towards the music. The rest of the children ran after, not wanting to be left behind. Bennett was the last to leave the dining room, glaring at the still-open French doors on his way out.

When they all reached the music they found Maisy in the drawing room, in bare feet and a slip, twirling to the radio. It was mostly static, but the music was still discernible. The children watched Maisy for a moment, in awe of the grown up acting like such a little girl right before

their eyes, and then they all stripped off their wet socks and cardigans and joined her. Maisy grabbed Clara's hands and spun her around in circles; Thomas and Bennett shyly held out their hands to Mary and Lydia, who giggled to each other and allowed the boys to lead them in a mock waltz. Laura stood alone until Maisy and Clara reached out to her and brought her into their little circle. It was the perfect picture of joy I thought I wouldn't see until the war was over. They all danced and laughed while the radio tried its best to fight through the weak signal of the storm. Vera Lynn's warm, intoxicating warble drowned out the thunder:

*We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day...*

## Chapter Ten

*June 1940*

It had been less than a year—less than a year and everything seemed as though it was going well, until Maisy called William to talk about money. I watched her nervously tap her fingers on the handle of the telephone as she listened to his rough, tired voice explain to her that no, there was no more money he would be willing to put into her *project, it's not a project, Mr. Little*, and if she could not sort out funds on her own then there was nothing he could do to help her, *yes, of course I understand*. She slammed the phone in its cradle and angry tears rolled down her cheeks. She wiped them away with the back of her hand as Clara walked in the room, sucking her thumb.

“Miss Harlan, are you all right?” Her words were muffled by her continued chewing on her thumb.

“Yes, love, everything is fine.”

“You’re crying.”

“Oh, summer allergies, is all. It’s such a nice day outside, why don’t you go play in the garden? Make sure to wear your sun hat,” Maisy called after the young girl as she skipped out of the study. Maisy sat at the desk with papers strewn in front of her. Her cheeks were red and there was fire in her eyes. She was mumbling to herself as she flipped through yellowed pages—worn, oft-read letters. Some of the letters were from Andrew, some from her parents—it took me a moment to figure out why she would be sorting through them. She re-read them frequently, but always by the fireplace in the drawing room or on the sofa she had brought in to the library. Never angrily, at William’s desk, with such fervor. It took me too long to realize she was sorting through Andrew’s letters to figure out when his last one came. She had been so busy with the

children she probably didn't notice how long it had been, but I did. I started to worry about a week before—usually Maisy would be huddled in the library armchair, pouring over his words for hours. His letters got shorter and shorter and the details of his 'adventures,' as they called them, were becoming more vague, but she still read them as though they were entire novels. I think she missed the sound of his voice more than anything. I wondered if she worried she would forget what he sounded like, or what he looked like right when he woke up in the mornings, or the expressions he would make when he was writing. Those little things, the ones we take for granted, seem to sometimes be the easiest to forget. I never worried about forgetting those things because I was always around, always watching; yet for the first time I struggled to place the sound of Andrew's laugh, the way he walked, things I didn't even realize I knew. Maybe Maisy's memory of him was stronger than mine, maybe she clung more tightly to those memories because she knew what it was like to forget. I remember how it took them a while to get used to each other when she returned from America—that was nothing compared to someone returning from a war.

Maisy put her head in her hands and, despite my constant curiosity, I decided to leave her be. She deserved to be alone with her thoughts and feelings at least once in a while. I still wonder what they would think, any of them, if they knew I was nearly always watching. Would they see it as an invasion of privacy? Would they think me rude, brazen, indecent even? Did I think these things of myself? I wandered out of the study and paused at the doorway—sometimes I spent so much time following others it took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do alone. I grew attached to being attached. Anywhere I went in Little Manor would spark some painful memory from my past, which is why I rarely went upstairs to the bedrooms. I'd watched Maisy put the children to sleep—her lullabies were soothing and it was sweet to watch

their little eyelids flutter as she tucked them in and sang or read to them. The boys even let her pull the sheets up to their chins, but refused stories and songs. They were too manly for those sorts of things, they told her. Yet I saw the longing in their eyes, when I would sometimes linger to make sure they weren't being rowdy when they were supposed to be sleeping, as they could hear her soft singing from the bedroom next door.

I was still hesitating in the doorway when I heard Maisy's quiet crying. I could imagine her shoulders shaking as she tried to internalize her sobs, so the children wouldn't hear. I don't know exactly what she was upset about; I'm sure it was a mix of her last phone call with William, worry for Andrew, the stress of caring for the children. Maybe she was just lonely, and wanted to be comforted. I wished so desperately I could wrap my arms around her and hold her while she cried, stroke her hair as she told me everything she was feeling. Yet I could not do these things, and all I would accomplish if I went back in the study would be invading one of the most private moments a person can have. I pushed myself to not turn around, but rather exit the study entirely and venture upstairs. I figured now would be as good of a time as any, without the distraction of following anyone, just myself and my thoughts to guide me through the halls I used to so effortlessly walk through. I reached the second floor landing still with my wits about me, but when I reached the threshold of the bedroom I once called my own for every summer since I could remember my resolve weakened. That room, which was now reserved for Clara and Laura, held too many memories that I would rather forget, but seemed incapable of letting go of. Although the electric lights buzzed audibly I still felt the warmth of candlelight on my face as if I were holding the light in my hands. I felt the base of the candleholder, the cold metal prickling my fingers but keeping them welcomingly cool on hot nights. I heard Mr. Little's terribly snoring that used to echo through the corridors and make it hard to sleep. Caroline and I

used to struggle to stifle our giggles if we made our way upstairs after he fell into what John used to call *his impenetrable slumber*. The overwhelming flood of memories was more physically jarring that I expected it to be—I was used to remembering, always remembering, but usually my nostalgia was brought on by something. Something someone said, or did, or wore, but this was different. I went upstairs with a purpose, entirely free from distractions and curiosity about anything else but revisiting my past. I felt almost as if I were being selfish for only paying attention to myself and my feelings. I quickly realized I didn't like it one bit. It reminded me too much of being alive.

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The sound of the doorbell startled me out of my runaway thoughts. I was grateful for the reprieve, but I couldn't figure out who would be at the door. The children never left the Manor without Maisy, who always had a key. The housekeeper and gardener always used the back door. Faded pink light filtered in through the curtains, which Maisy had the children keep drawn when they weren't in their rooms to keep the furniture from getting dusty, so I knew it had to be around supper time, and no one would ever come calling at supper time. No one would ever come calling, regardless. I made my way downstairs to the front door, which Maisy was just opening for an older woman I didn't recognize.

"Mrs. Gramham, what a surprise. Please, come in." Maisy sounded cheerful but I could tell from the way she looked at her visitor that she was nervous and confused. Although I had never seen the woman before, I knew the name—Mrs. Gramham ran the post office. Maisy mentioned her to the children before their first excursion into the nearby town. Apparently, Mrs. Gramham had a tendency to open people's letters, a habit Maisy described as endearing but

frustrating, especially when she and Andrew now wrote such private letters to one another. Even I didn't read those letters.

It was odd that Mrs. Gramham would come calling, especially in the late afternoon. The post office would be closing now, and she would normally be going home to her family after a long day's work, or so I assumed. Within minutes of her arrival I already concocted an elaborate backstory for her. In my mind she was a happy and devoted housewife with a few young children, maybe three. I already knew she had a penchant and reputation for being nosey, albeit in a charming sort of way, but I could see it for myself from the way she examined the inside of the Manor with her small green eyes that sunk unflatteringly into her head. She was taller than Maisy and incredibly thin, with wispy blonde hair cropped short to her ears. She couldn't have been more than thirty.

"Can I get you something to drink? Water, tea?"

"Oh, no thank you, dear. Oh, you're too kind, it's such a shame."

"Excuse me?"

Something was wrong. The woman who ran the post office had come calling at suppertime. I don't know why that didn't set off alarm immediately. Maisy's generous smile was faltering and she shifted nervously on her feet. Mrs. Gramham's eyes were glued to a space just to the right of Maisy's head—for a moment I thought she could see me, and then I realized she was only trying not to make eye contact.

"Oh dear, it's so inappropriate of me to have done so, but I just can't help myself, I'm so terrible—enough about me, though, really. I seem to have inadvertently read a telegram addressed to you, dear, and, oh, I'm so sorry. He was such a lovely boy, I knew him when he was just a lad, you know—"

Mrs. Gramham continued to ramble while I saw Maisy try to piece together exactly what she was saying.

“A telegram.” It was a statement, not a question. Maisy never got telegrams. Andrew and her parents wrote, William and her friends from London called, and she didn’t have much contact with anyone outside the immediate town besides that.

“Why, yes. It came in days ago, fell under a desk and I didn’t find it until today, I would have thought Mr. Little already told you—oh, oh my, you don’t know, do you?”

“Mrs. Gramham,” Maisy said through her teeth, “would you please tell me what on earth you’re going on about?”

Maisy usually reserved her hot temper for private company, but I could tell if Mrs. Gramham didn’t cut her nonsense short, and quickly, she would soon feel the full wrath of Maisy’s frustration.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news—oh here, and again, I’m terribly sorry.” She pulled the telegram, folded neatly in half, out of her left breast pocket. She hadn’t even had time to take off her jacket before she gave Maisy an apologetic smile and scurried out the still-open front door. I didn’t really need to read over Maisy’s shoulder to figure out what was going on. I knew it was about Andrew, and I knew it wasn’t good, and she seemed to know all these things too because for a long while she didn’t unfold the piece of paper. Despite my growing anxiety, I was much less nervous than she was. It never crossed my mind for a second that there was a certainty Andrew was dead. I believed fully that he was alive only because I was still there, in that Manor, with Maisy, watching and listening as it seemed I always had and always would. Andrew could not be dead, I thought, because I still was—at least in the capacity I was accustomed to. Yet I was still fearful, of course. Anything could have happened to him. He

could have been captured, or seriously injured—I then remembered that Mrs. Gramham mentioned the telegram was delivered days ago. Maisy had been on the phone with William just a few hours ago, or however long I spent occupied by my racing thoughts in my old upstairs bedroom. What did he know that he didn't disclose to Maisy? I thought nothing could be that serious, pertaining to Andrew, if William didn't mention it to her. Unless it was so bad that he couldn't bring himself to tell her—

Maisy could no longer contain her nerves, and she took the telegram to the library to open it. The children were still running all over the Manor. They paid no mind to the post office woman ringing the bell, of course, it meant nothing to them. They darted in and out of the kitchen, drawing room, bedrooms, their footsteps a constant backdrop for the goings-on of the place. Yet when Maisy went to the library and shut us in, locking the door for what was most likely the first time, all the noise fell away. She enveloped herself in silence, sat herself down in Andrew's favorite worn leather armchair, and unfolded the telegram.

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The library was full of memories for the both of us, something I failed to realize until I saw her eyes sweep over the room with the same glittering nostalgia I recognized all too well. For her, there were mostly objects. The uneven ladder leaning against the narrowest bookcase that she fell off as a clumsy, long-legged teenager. The row of old, fancy books on the very top row she and Andrew used to try to reach via said ladder but never were able to. The oriental lamp that stood impressively on a round table where it had been since I was a girl, that always gave off an aura of "do not touch, very fragile." Maisy gave off that same energy now. I noticed how she twisted her hands together as she stood in the center of the library, remembering her childhood or imagining her future, or both. I could tell she was afraid. Andrew had been gone so

long, so long. Or had it been no time at all? Now, according to Mrs. Gramham and the war office telegram, Andrew may be gone forever.

Andrew had been declared Missing in Action. There wasn't much information besides the war office giving their condolences. *We regret to inform you.* It was almost worse than something definitive; he could be dead, he could be alive, he could have escaped, or been captured, or be injured somewhere, but nobody knew. Information slowly leaked in over the next few weeks—there had been a battle in France, somewhere called Dunkirk, that the British troops needed evacuating from. That's where Andrew was, apparently, when someone saw him slip under the water. Everyone was saying the evacuation was a frenzy, thousands of soldiers on a beach being shot at while just trying to get home.

When Maisy called William, furious at him for his *cavalier tone this afternoon*, he calmly told her that with no heir to the Manor he had no choice but to shut it down. This is what she had to explain to the children when they asked why they were being sent away, again, to another strange place. The thing about war, I've noticed, is that everything becomes quietly efficient. The children were placed almost immediately after Maisy called the orphanage. *No, I'm not trying to send them back, I don't want to do this.*

It was about a month after Maisy received the telegram that the doorbell rang again. She had been pacing the library, touching the spines of books and shuffling papers she had organized ten times over. She jumped slightly and then rolled her shoulders up to her ears and back over her spine. She had been on edge for so long. The doorbell ringing now wasn't a startling occurrence the way it was when Mrs. Gramham showed up. Word had spread to town about the Little boy, the one they all knew from his youth before his father packed them up and went to

London, lost in this terrible, terrible war. People were constantly at the door with flowers and kind words. Maisy could barely muster her polite smile she once put on so easily.

“Coming,” she called, as she composed herself. She shook her hair out of her face and smoothed the front of her blouse, wrinkled from the way she would absentmindedly twist the fabric in her hands when she was thinking hard about something. I wondered if every time the doorbell rang it reminded her of Mrs. Gramham and the telegram and her life changing.

“Miss Harlan, should I get it?” Clara yelled from the entranceway.

“No, it’s okay love, I’ve got it.” Maisy took a deep breath and walked to the door quickly—if Clara answered the door she would inundate the guest with a barrage of questions that never seemed to have adequate answers, no matter how hard the adult in question would try. The bell rang again, and then a third time.

“I said I was coming, you don’t have to be so impatient—oh—” I had never seen Maisy more flustered than when she opened the door and there, standing in front of her with an easygoing grin on his face, was Kitt Cantin.

“Well maybe if you weren’t so slow I wouldn’t be so impatient.”

“Kitt, I—I wasn’t expecting—”

“Well that would have taken all the fun out of it! Now are you going to make me stand here or invite me in? It’s bloody raining out here, Mais.”

It was the first time, at least that I could recall, that he called her by her nickname in a tone entirely free of sarcasm. He seemed different, right away, all though I couldn’t exactly place why. He looked older, more sophisticated, yet still had that mischievous, boyish gleam in his eye. When Maisy stepped aside to let him in, and he stood in the entranceway out of the light of the sun, I realized what was different. He had grown a mustache.

“What are you doing here, Kitt?”

“Oh, come on now, lighten up. You aren’t even going to offer me something to drink or somewhere to sit?”

His tone was light but there was something else there. He was being nonchalant and carefree, but trying a little too hard—I could see right through him. His heart was hurting as much as Maisy’s. She stood in front of him with her arms crossed, shielding herself from whatever he had to offer. I had never seen her this closed off before, not even around Kitt.

“Miss Harlan!” Thomas came running up to her, breathless. “There’s a lady on the phone, she says she’s from the orphanage—”

I hadn’t even heard the phone ring.

“Oh, yes, well, tell her I’m not in, will you?”

“But Miss Harlan—”

“Please, Thomas.” Something about her tone was sharper than usual, at least when she spoke to the children. Thomas nodded and ran off again.

“Cute kid,” Kitt said off handedly as he glanced around, most likely avoiding eye contact.

“They all are. I’ve been fighting so hard to keep them here, but William...never mind. Tea?”

“You got anything stronger?” He winked at her and she rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on, relax. I’m here as a friend, really. Can we please sit somewhere and talk?”

Maisy looked him up and down, and then tilted her head to one side, examining him.

“You have a mustache.”

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They sat uncomfortably across from each other in the drawing room, neither saying anything. I suppose Maisy thought Kitt should speak first since he was the one that came calling, and Kitt didn't know how to say what he came to say. Maybe neither of them wanted to talk about Andrew because it would be too painful, but I could tell they were both longing to. Despite never really getting along, there must have been something calming and familiar about just being in the same room together. It made things feel normal for the first time in a while.

“How have you been?”

Maisy glared at him. Kitt, for all his charm and wit, was never good at conversing with Maisy, and now he had opened the floodgates.

“How have I been? Honestly, Kitt? I've been bloody terrible is how I've been. Andrew...” She stopped yelling at him almost as soon as she started, and put her head in her hands. Kitt watched her silently, his forehead creasing as he squinted at her as if trying to decipher what she was feeling. Maybe he was just surprised she wasn't in tears, but Maisy was too proud for that. She had been trying for so long to put on a brave face, not only for the children but also for herself. I watched the desperation, her absolute need to maintain normalcy, cling to her the way the perfume of flowers clung to my hands when I would pick roses before the winter took them away. She was grasping at anything that would keep her from falling apart—I suspect she felt if she fell into tears she would never stop crying.

“I didn't mean it like that. I just—you know, you're not the only one this has been hard on. You could have at least called.”

Maisy looked up at him, blazing. I had never seen her so angry.

“Me? Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't realize you needed comforting from *me* in this trying time, I should have been more *considerate*.”

“Get off your bloody high horse. You’re not the only one hurting here.”

“You don’t think I know that? You don’t think I know what you both meant to each other—”

It was the first time she had spoken of Andrew to someone besides William, and she had referred to him in past tense. There was no way it slipped by either of them. Her face turned pink and she bit her lip hard but the tears had already begun to fall.

“Maisy.”

“Don’t.” She stood up and began to storm out but Kitt caught her by the wrist.

“Maisy, please.”

I don’t think she would ever admit that she let him stop her, but in that moment I knew she wanted to be stopped. She wanted to be held but she also wanted to yell and scream and cry and he knew, Kitt knew. He pushed her on purpose, I realized. He knew she must have been hurting more than him, at least he had Ruth, and he had pushed her on purpose so she would yell at him.

“I don’t know—I can’t talk about it. About Andrew.”

“I’m here to talk about you. Just sit down.”

He let go of her arm and she looked at him, again her head tilted to one side. She opened her mouth as if she were going to speak but instead only shook her head and sat down again, this time in the chair next to him. She sunk into the red and white-patterned cushions, letting them swallow her.

“You can’t stay here. You have to leave the Manor. You know you do.”

“What on earth are you going on about?”

“Maisy, I’ve spoken to Andrew’s dad. He told me he doesn’t want the children here anymore.”

“Yes. I’ve found placements for nearly all of them. Why does it matter?”

“You can’t stay here all alone. No children, no—”

No Andrew, is what he was going to say, but stopped himself. Maisy wouldn’t look at him; she kept her eyes straight ahead, staring at the wall. There used to be a painting of some woman there, I could almost still see the faded outline of the frame. William must have taken some art with him to Scotland, or maybe it had been gone for longer than that.

“I have to. I promised him. All those years ago, when I came back, I promised him I wouldn’t leave. How could I just shut it up and walk away?”

“He wouldn’t want you to be shut in here all alone, Maisy. You know that.”

“What if he comes back?” She turned her head toward him, her grey-green eyes wide as if something had startled her. I had never noticed before, I don’t know how I didn’t, that they had flecks of gold in them.

“Oh, Maisy.”

“You’re telling me you really believe he’s dead?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t, either. So how could I leave?”

“When you were in America, and your letters stopped coming, I gave Andrew a similar speech to the one I’m about to give you.”

“Please, I don’t want a lecture, Kitt.”

“Christ, you’re both so stubborn. Just listen, okay?”

Maisy said nothing, but crossed her arms across her chest and sunk a bit further in her chair. She still had her eyes on him, skeptical.

“Love means sacrifice, right? I know that. It means putting someone else first. But not at detriment to yourself. Because, well, you want to be the best version of yourself you can be for the person you love. So you do have to put yourself first, even if doesn’t feel right.”

“But—”

“But if Andrew is still alive, you think he’d want you wasting away in a Manor neither of you really liked that much anyways?”

He was right, of course. The entire reason Andrew enlisted in the first place was to give himself and Maisy a chance to be happy again, to have purpose and fulfillment. With the children gone, Maisy would have nothing. Even if Andrew came back, she wouldn’t have enough. They would be just like they were in London—content, maybe, and peaceful, but certainly not happy. She sat there for a moment, eyeing Kitt suspiciously as if he were going to steal something. Slowly she sat up straight and let her arms relax and fall to her side. She twisted around and tucked her feet up under her legs, so she was completely on the chair, facing Kitt. The beginnings of a smile threatened the corners of her mouth. “When did you get so smart, Kitt?”

“What can I say? Marriage changes a man.”

She looked shaken by this for a moment, perhaps remembering the fight she and Andrew had about marriage before he enlisted, but she didn’t say anything about it.

“No, I know you were like this for Andrew when you were at Trinity. I know he only came to see me off to America because of you. I blamed you for a lot, probably because it was easier than blaming myself, and I was wrong. I’m sorry. You’re his family, Kitt.”

“So are you. I suppose that kind of means we’re stuck with each other.”

“Took us long enough to figure it out.”

He leaned forward and put a hand on her knee.

“Please think about what I’ve said. You know there’s always a place for you with me and Ruthie.”

“I will, I promise. Are you staying? Please do. It’s nice having someone—it’s nice having a friend here.”

“As long as you want. I have my bag in the car. I figured if you didn’t want me to stay I’d just have to sneak in the back door in the middle of the night.” He withdrew his hand and stood, smiling, as Maisy let a small laugh escape. “Show me to my room, then.”

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Maisy and Kitt talked for hours, on the cream satin chaise lounge that sat in front of the master bedroom balcony, watching the rain fall. They didn’t talk about Andrew. Maisy reclined with her feet drawn up to her knees, as Kitt sat at the end of the long chair and talked about anything that didn’t remind them of Andrew. It could have gone one of two ways for them; either they only spoke about Andrew, or not at all. The latter option seemed the easiest for both of them. He told her about his and Ruth’s wedding, which Maisy and Andrew missed because he was off somewhere with a gun and she was there, in the Manor, with the children. He told her about how Ruth absolutely *refused* to wear white, at first, only wanted to wear red, and something about her mother giving her a hard time about it. I was focused less on his words and more about how it was so strange that Maisy and Kitt were having a perfectly cordial, if not entirely friendly, conversation, and it actually had nothing to do with Andrew. It occurred to me that Kitt and Maisy had a lot in common, and probably would have been fast friends if they weren’t so caught up in being jealous of one another when it came to Andrew. The grandfather clock chimed three times, reverberating from downstairs.

“I didn’t realize how late it got,” Maisy said, flustered.

“You should probably get some rest, if you’re going to manage those little beasts tomorrow.”

“They’re not beasts,” she said, laughing, as she stretched her legs out in front of her, purposefully kicking Kitt in the side.

“Right, sorry, monsters,” he said, standing. He extended a hand to her to pull her up. “I’ll go off to bed, no worries.”

“Thank you for everything, really. For coming, and—” She stood up and smoothed the front of her trousers, and then looked at him strangely.

“My pleasure,” he said, but he said it slowly, and was looking back at her. They stood there like that for a while, and then Kitt began to lean forward, just slightly, and Maisy didn’t move at all, and then his lips were on hers. Just briefly, just a moment, but long enough for her to sink into it before pulling away. Her cheeks were flushed and she didn’t even try to feign surprise.

“We can’t,” she said, but limply. “I won’t.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know—”

“It’s fine. I think it’s been a long night for both of us.”

“Yes.”

“Good night, Kitt.” Maisy watched him as he walked out the door, shutting it behind him. When she was certain he was in his room and out of earshot, she curled up on the bed and finally began to cry.

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Kitt stayed for about a week, and they never once spoke of the kiss, at least not that I noticed. He stayed while Maisy sent the children off to their new homes, for what she told them would only be a short while. He stayed while she paced the upstairs corridors, trying to decide what she should do. After a few days he and I watched as Maisy picked up the phone to tell William she was leaving.

I couldn't say I was surprised by her decision, but I was angered by it. I didn't understand how she could leave, how she could give up on Andrew. I didn't think about the fact that she was much less certain he was alive than I was, but I still held it against her. I fumed in my perpetual silence as she packed up the Manor with Kitt's help. I wanted to scream at her, *he's still alive, don't you see? Don't you care?* I didn't understand how she could fold Andrew's things and put them in a neat pile for William to come for when he was ready. Of course it wasn't easy for her, and I knew this, but in the moment it didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was leaving and I didn't know where that left me. I knew I wouldn't be able to follow her. I tried so many times; when she went to town, to the train station with the children—I never made it more than half a mile down the dirt road that lead away from the Manor. It was as if there was some invisible barrier, my own personal wall fencing me in. Knowing Maisy was leaving, and that I couldn't follow—it was truly the first time I felt the depths of my limitations. I was hopeful that since I was able to break away from Andrew and stay with Maisy that my abilities, whatever those may be, were changing. Yet watching her pack, I felt more restricted than ever. Something beyond my understanding, the same thing that bound me to John's descendants, was the same thing that now bound me to the Manor. Was I doomed to eternity, now, in this place, this wonderful, terrible place?

When it was time for her and Kitt to leave I waited defiantly in front of the door.

They walked right through me.

Maisy shut off the lights and I was utterly alone.

**III.**

“We can never go back again, that much is certain. The past is still too close to us. The things we have tried to forget and put behind us would stir again, and that sense of fear, of furtive unrest, struggling at length to blind unreasoning panic—now mercifully stilled, thank God—might in some manner unforeseen become a living companion, as it had been before.”

— Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*

## Chapter Eleven

1945

Yellow flowers. A blue door. Rain. These are the sorts of things I remember, the things that still feel tangible. They come to me suddenly and bright. Overwhelming. The coach ride to Little Manor. Riding horses. Mother's perfume. The smell of a new book, and of an old one. Things that I didn't notice shaping my world until it was too late, and I could only grasp at later. Sometimes, trying to remember the little things was like reaching for wind, and only the big moments stuck. Caroline's engagement, London balls, John, that first night—yet I realized, as time went on, the little things were just as cemented in my memory, and my heart, and were just as important as the milestones. My first corset, dazzling sunsets, the way candle wax would stick and harden on my finger, yellow flowers, a blue door, rain. That's how I build my past in my mind, like a puzzle of colors and snapshots of things I don't even remember remembering. Those little things are sometimes the things I miss the most.

Caroline and I used to play hide and seek when we were little. She would never admit it, would say she was too old, *how preposterous*. But she loved it. I was always better at hiding, since I was smaller and a bit craftier than she was. I used to hide mostly in the cabinets where the spare linens were stored. I loved the fresh smell of wood, the linens tickling the hair on my arms, the way the darkness would close in on me when I shut the doors. Caroline always found me, though, both because she memorized my most frequent hiding places and because I could never properly stifle my giggles when I heard her footsteps near me. She was graceful about it, of course, as she was about everything. She was always so graceful.

*The cabinet doors opened and light flooded in—*

Except I wasn't eight years old, hiding in a cabinet in the upstairs corridor of our little country house. I had lost my bearings. How long had I been there, in the dark, drifting in and out of memory? Maisy left, she left me in the dark, she shut all the curtains and I could no longer count the days. I think I wandered around for a while, or was that years ago, when someone else occupied the space I now haunted seemingly indefinitely? All I knew was for the first time in what felt like a very, very long time, there was light, and there were footsteps. Maybe I was overreacting, and Maisy was only gone a short while, and she had changed her mind and come home. Despite my anger with her for leaving I suddenly couldn't decide if that was a good thing or not. Yet those weren't Maisy's footsteps; they were too heavy, like boots. Maisy never wore boots. I realized—I must have forgotten—that I was downstairs in the drawing room, curled up (or so I imagined myself) on a chair. I listened to the boots get closer, and then the handle of the door rattled and the door opened.

Andrew looked so tired, and so different, it took me a moment to realize it was him. He had dark circles under his eyes, and his hair was longer, much longer. He had a smattering of dark stubble across his face, which reminded me of those few months back at Trinity when his literature professor declared that Andrew was too clean-shaven to be taken seriously as a writer. He discovered quickly that he could barely grow a mustache. He examined the room for a moment, and then shook his head and picked up the telephone. He dialed slowly; his fingers shook.

"Dad? Yeah, Dad, it's me." His voice surprised me, only because I had never noticed before how strikingly similar it was to John's, and it felt as though time fell away. I had no idea how long Andrew had been gone, how long ago Maisy left with Kitt, how long ago I died. I had nothing to grasp at, nothing to ground me. There was only the grandfather clock with its

constant ticking; that clock and me, the only constants, it seemed, in the world. We were all there was. Clocks can break, though, and no matter how broken I felt, I was still here. “I’m all right, sure. Yes, I got your last letter—yes, listen, I’ll be on the first train tomorrow morning to Edinburgh, I promise. No, Dad, I’m too tired to come tonight. Just want a good night’s sleep—okay, sure. I’ll ring you before I leave the Manor. Yes, Dad, I’ll make sure to lock the door. Okay. Yes. See you tomorrow, goodnight.” Andrew hung up the phone wearily, sucking in his breath as if he forgot how to breathe properly. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and exhaled sharply. He seemed so much older; I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what he had been through.

I know now, of course, that the war lasted much longer than anyone, especially Andrew, anticipated. I know that Andrew didn’t return until the end of that long, terrible war because he had been a prisoner of it. I pieced it all together arduously—Andrew didn’t want to talk about it to anyone, for a while, and then when he tried it all just came out incoherently, his stories interspersed with long glances out the window and bouts of anger. I was so worried for a long time he was going to turn in to William, change the way his father changed, but he didn’t. He just became a little more sad, a little more lethargic, but he didn’t have the nightmares. I only knew the full extent of what he had been through when he published his memoir.

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Andrew slept nearly the entire train ride to Edinburgh, his rucksack tucked between his knees and his head bumping gently on the window as he left the Manor behind him. He only took a few things; he was never very materialistic, and I imagined that after five years as a prisoner of war he learned to get along without the things he used to rely on. He packed his favorite book and some paperwork William asked for, and only a couple of shirts and trousers.

Maybe he thought he wouldn't be away long, maybe he thought he'd go off on some grand adventure to find Maisy and they'd go home together. Maybe he was too jaded now for those sorts of fantasies. I learned later that the reason Andrew wasn't surprised to come back to discover Maisy gone was because he eventually was able to get in touch with William, who told him she had left. It was about a year, he wrote later, after he was captured that he was finally able to get a letter to his father. He sent one to the Manor for Maisy, of course, but she was already long gone by then. I didn't know, on that well-deserved peaceful train ride, the extent of what Andrew knew about Maisy's departure. I hadn't been privy to five years of correspondence between Andrew and William, nor to Maisy's whereabouts or if she even knew he was alive.

Andrew stood for a long time at William's front door before ringing the bell. It was a small house, a cottage almost, on the top of a green hill. It was idyllic by all accounts, but Andrew's homecoming was anything but. He had shaved back at the Manor and should have looked more like himself, but his eyes were heavy and he stood a little differently than he used to. His boyish slouch was gone, replaced by tense, rigid shoulders and feet at attention. Maisy would make fun of him, if she were there. I half expected her to open the door, to have been waiting with William and Irene for this moment, this moment that now seems so obviously inevitable, but five years is a long time. I couldn't be surprised when Andrew wasn't greeted by freckles that were almost gold and a wave of reddish hair and her flashing green eyes, staring at him as if to say, *Christ, what took you so long?*

"Son—" William and Andrew stared at each other, both unsure of what to do, and then Andrew fell into William's arms and buried his head in his father's chest. He must have been holding himself together, staying strong for so long, and finally felt safe enough to fall apart. William stood awkwardly, but then he wrapped his arms around his son and held him tight.

“Dad,” Andrew said, when he finally let go, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? What on earth for?”

“You were right, I shouldn’t have enlisted. It was a mistake. It was a stupid, stupid mistake. I’m sorry.” He looked down at his feet, as if he were embarrassed.

“Andrew, look at me. They drafted nearly everyone. It wouldn’t have made a difference. Do you hear me? It wouldn’t have made a difference. This isn’t your fault, none of this is your fault.” I think it was the most eye contact William ever made with his son, and there was a softness in his look I hadn’t seen in years. “Come inside, come on.”

Compared to the Manor, William’s Edinburgh home was miniscule. One story, two bedrooms, a cozy living room and a cramped kitchen. Yet watching William flit about, making Andrew tea and putting bags in the guest room, he seemed more at home than he ever did at the Manor. Maybe it was because he was getting older, and needed less space, or perhaps he felt fulfilled enough in his marriage that he didn’t need much else but her company; whatever it was, William seemed different. I had to keep reminding myself five years had passed. When the two of them were finally seated at the small square table in the center of the kitchen, awkwardly stirring their tea, Andrew asked the question I so longed to hear the answer to.

“Dad, where’s Maisy?”

William coughed and looked down at his swirling tea.

“Dad,” Andrew repeated, firmer.

“Oh Andrew, you just got here, must we?”

“We absolutely must. Where is she? She never returned my letters. I know you said she left, I know that. But why? When? Dad, you haven’t told me a thing.”

“Maybe it’s not my place to tell.”

“What the bloody hell does that even mean?” Andrew stood up and put the palms of his hands on the table, leaning forward. “Please, I have to know. I have to know why she left, where she went, why she isn’t here. Why isn’t she here? Dad, can you even look at me?”

When William didn’t answer Andrew’s questions, Andrew stormed out to his room and slammed the door. It reminded me of when he was a young boy and he and William would fight all the time—rather, Andrew would fight and William would remain utterly tight lipped, which was infinitely more frustrating than if he just yelled, at least in my opinion. I couldn’t piece together then why William wouldn’t just tell Andrew where Maisy had gone. I knew why she left, of course, but did William? Did he know about Kitt’s visit to the Manor, the way he convinced Maisy to leave? Maybe William didn’t know where Maisy was, and was embarrassed that he didn’t try harder to track her down when the war ended. It never once occurred to me that he was the reason she wasn’t in Edinburgh or at the Manor, waiting for Andrew with open arms.

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Andrew stayed in his room, brooding, until supper, and when he came out to Irene’s voice calling him to the kitchen, he was greeted by a slightly rounder, tired-looking Kitt Cantin standing outside the bedroom door. Andrew blinked at him as though he were seeing a ghost.

“Well, are you just going to stand there staring at me or you going to actually say hello?” Kitt was teasing him, but Andrew’s feet seemed cemented to the hardwood floor. “Christ, mate, I know you’ve been in a war or something of the sort but you can still give me a bloody handshake or *something*.” Leave it to Kitt to make Andrew’s ordeals in war seem like a minor inconvenience.

“Sorry. Yeah, come in.” Andrew stepped aside to let Kitt in the room but Kitt only laughed.

“Come in? That’s all you have to say to me? Radio silence for five bloody years and all you say is ‘come in?’ That’s not you, mate.”

“I’m sorry, Kitt. I’m surprised to see you. I hadn’t heard from you.”

Kitt’s mouth nearly fell open.

“*You* hadn’t heard from *me*? I didn’t know you were even *alive* until a few months ago, then your dad said you were coming here so I thought I’d grace you with my presence rather than write you some lousy words. I guess me coming all the way to bloody Scotland isn’t enough for you, though, no, what do you want, a parade? We all went to war Andrew, you’re not special.”

“You don’t know the first thing about what I’ve been through!”

“Then tell me, mate. Sit down with me and talk to me. Don’t shut me out. Let me be here for you, yeah?”

They both breathed heavily, as if shouting at one another released a tension they were completely unaware they possessed. Andrew swallowed hard and nodded, looking sheepish, as Kitt walked inside and shut the door behind him. It was as if they were little boys afraid of William overhearing their secrets. They sat on the edge of Andrew’s bed, next to each other but not making eye contact. Kitt rubbed his hands on the knees of his trousers and Andrew tousled his hair, a habit I was glad to see he didn’t lose.

“Sorry I yelled,” Kitt said, glancing at Andrew. Andrew said nothing but as he looked at the floor a smile crept onto his face, and then he was laughing, and then Kitt was laughing with him and all was forgotten. I was utterly confused, how they could go from screaming at each other about war to belly laughing in Andrew’s room as if they were still schoolmates at Trinity

and no time had passed. Maybe it was the ridiculousness of the situation, that there was this *war*, how could there have been a *war*? Another one. Another terrible, awful—

“I deserved it. I was an ass.” Andrew said while catching his breath in between laughter, the sound of his voice cutting off my thoughts. I heard him speak only to William and occasionally to himself, in a mumble while packing, but the way he spoke to Kitt just then, in his familiar boyish embarrassment—he sounded like himself again.

“No, I was. I’m just so bloody glad to see you.”

“Me too. Really, really glad.”

They didn’t hug, but they didn’t need to. The air was calmer between them.

“So, you got fat.”

“Christ, Andrew, you don’t think I know that? That’s what being a father does to you, honestly.”

“A father? You’re a bloody father? Oh Kitt—” I thought Andrew would be mad, but he only smirked. “That poor kid.”

Kitt smacked him on the back of the head and they both fell into laughter again.

“He’s two years old and he’s brilliant. Really amazing. And so is Ruthie, she’s incredible with him. I didn’t think I could love her more, but then again I was never the brightest, so shows what I know.”

“Kitt—”

“And she’s really beautiful, even more beautiful, if that’s even possible.” “Where’s Maisy?”

“Oh. Oh.” Kitt rubbed his temples as if trying to summon the words from his head with his fingertips. “I can’t believe your dad didn’t tell you.”

“My dad didn’t tell me a thing. About anyone. Not a single thing. You said you didn’t know I was alive until a few months ago? He’s known for years, Kitt, years. He didn’t tell you, did he? That I was alive?”

“No, mate, he didn’t tell me. And if he didn’t tell me, I’m guessing he didn’t tell Maisy.”

“I can’t believe he would *do that*.” Andrew tried to stand up to confront William, but Kitt anticipated it and put a restricting hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“I understand.”

“You understand? You understand why my father wouldn’t tell the two people I care most about that I was alive? Please, enlighten me, because there isn’t a single part of me that could possibly ever understand.”

“I know so many boys that died, Andrew.” Kitt’s tone was uncharacteristically serious. “And I didn’t find out for certain until, I’d say, a few weeks after they informed the families. The families waited, you see, to tell everyone else, just in case.”

“Just in case?”

“Just in case their boys were still alive, somehow. A lot of families—a lot of mothers—they, they waited until they got the things. You know, if they couldn’t get, well, the bodies. They waited to be sure, just in case.”

“They didn’t want to get anyone all worked up if their kid could still be alive, they were keeping hope alive, I get it, but that doesn’t explain anything. My dad knew I was alive.”

“Just in case, Andrew. Think about it, okay? Just think about your dad.”

I certainly thought about it. I thought about William’s history, the way war changed him, and how he must have felt knowing his son was trapped as the enemy’s prisoner, an enemy he fought himself years before, and he couldn’t do a thing to help. I thought about William telling

everyone Andrew was alive just to get that dreaded telegram. Just to be told no, he didn't make it, just to be told he got his hopes up to have them entirely destroyed, turned to dust. Then suddenly I understood, and I saw by the way Andrew's eyes widened and began to fill with tears that he understood, too.

"Okay, fine. Yes. But Maisy, why didn't she come? Why didn't she come when he called her?"

"Oh, mate, I don't want to be the one to tell you this."

"If it's bad news, Kitt, I only want you to be the one to tell me. Is she all right? Is she—"

"She's fine, don't worry. She's, well, she's more than fine."

"What?"

"Andrew—Maisy's back in America. And she's married."

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I used to give Caroline a hard time for being a judgmental person. I accused her of placing too much value on finery, of being shallow, of discrediting people simply because of their status or what they wore. It was true, all of those things about her, but looking back on it I think she was just a product of our mother. I wasn't like that because I purposefully rebelled, and because I had John. Since we were children John and I went out of our way to disobey our parents and social constructs, to play in the mud and forgo manners when we could. Yet I remember a time when we got older and that changed, and I noticed that I paid more attention to what I wore and how I interacted with people than I used to. I remember gossiping with Caroline about Catherine Marshall and how *embarrassing* it must have been for her to trip over her dance partner during a waltz. I don't like remembering that I started to become the shallow, judgmental person that I always chastised Caroline for being. I hesitate to criticize myself. I admit my ego is still fragile,

although not nearly as fragile as when I was living under the scrutiny of my mother, the jealousy of my sister, and the occasional eye of my great love and the woman who would marry him—as well as his overbearing father. Regardless of how often I refused to possess those qualities that I so often struggled against, I have to admit now that of course I fell into those patterns; there were so many people to impress, always so many people to please.

I thought about all of this when Kitt told Andrew Maisy was married, and I thought about how it would be wrong of me to judge her, to be as angry with her as I instinctively wanted to be. I was protective of Andrew, of course, but if I am being honest I also felt betrayed. I felt as though I had forged a bond with her over the years and especially our time alone together at the Manor. She was the first person I could follow that wasn't related to John, and that meant something to me. She was perhaps as important to me as she was to Andrew, but even that thought was selfish, probably. I was hurt—she left me, she left us, to start a new life across an ocean when she promised, she *promised* she wouldn't. I was mad at Kitt, for talking her into leaving. I was mad at William for not telling her Andrew was alive. I blamed her, I blamed them, I even blamed Andrew for a moment, thinking that if he hadn't been captured everything would be fine. Of course that's not true. He could have easily been killed in another battle, because he wouldn't have just been sent home to live with Maisy in quiet tranquility. That isn't the nature of war, and that wasn't their nature, either.

So in those long moments, infinite moments, between Kitt telling Andrew Maisy was married and Andrew reacting, I convinced myself to not be angry with her. I thought about time the way Maisy would see it—five years, to me, was nothing, but to her those five years were everything. She was only growing older, more anxious to start a family. She honed her mothering skills while everything was crumbling around everything and then she had to give it

up and pack everything away and make a decision. How could I truly be mad? Five years was such a long time, for them. Looking at Kitt in that moment, I realized it sharply. I saw the passage of time in the new lines on William's face, in the way Andrew replaced his sullenness with a new quiet fortitude, in Kitt being a father. Kitt Cantin, Andrew Little's handsome, popular friend from Trinity College who used to take a new girl punting on the Cam every weekend, was married with a child. If that didn't say everything about how long it had been since Andrew, shall I say, *left*, I don't know what would.

*"Married?"*

"I'm really sorry, mate."

"How do you know?"

Andrew stared at Kitt hard.

"What?"

"How do you know she's married?"

Kitt shifted his weight away from Andrew; he put his elbows on his knees and rested his chin in his hands, closing his eyes.

"I went to see her. A few months after they told us you were missing. I went to the Manor and I told her to leave. She came back to London and stayed with me and Ruthie, for a bit, and then she said there was nothing for her here anymore and she just wanted to be with her parents. Things got really bad there, anyways, it was probably best she—"

"I can't believe you. The two of you never even got along, and then suddenly you pay her a visit and she's staying at your house? How the hell did that happen?"

"I told her she shouldn't wait for you, Andrew. It was me. I told her to leave."

Andrew stood up and left the room, slamming the door behind him. I couldn't tell if he was being petulant or simply wanting to avoid an argument. I understood why he was upset, of course, and he had every right to be, and he didn't even know about the kiss—although I doubt that's something Kitt would ever bring up.

"Don't be like that," Kitt said almost haplessly to the closed door, his head sinking further into his palms. Andrew was standing in the corridor; I could hear his feet shuffling just outside the door. He paced and Kitt rubbed his temples and I wondered why on earth Kitt admitted to it.

"What's going on in there?" William's voice echoed from the kitchen. It was such a small house compared to the Manor, it was odd to me that William could hear Andrew slam a door, and that he would even intervene.

"Leave it alone, Dad," Andrew called out sullenly, and it almost made me laugh how much he sounded like he did when he was a teenager. Kitt looked at the door and a mischievous look, one I recognized, came over his features. It was the same look he had when trying to convince Andrew to climb the facade of King's College in the middle of the night right before graduation. Andrew refused; I don't know for certain if Kitt ever went, but he missed breakfast the next morning and had a sly sort of glow about him the entire week after.

"No, Mr. Little, don't leave it alone. Your son is being a git." Kitt swung the door open with an echo of his old swagger that seemed to have disappeared somewhere within the folds of fatherhood. Andrew swung around, fists balled, and for a moment I thought he would punch Kitt right in the nose.

"What? *Me?*"

"Yes, you."

“Boys, honestly,” William said at the end of the corridor, the three of them standing in a long, odd-shaped triangle. “You would think you were six years old. What on earth are you fighting about?”

“You know, Dad. Come on, don’t play the doting father now,” Andrew said with a new sort of venom in his voice. “You didn’t tell Kitt and Maisy, you didn’t tell *Maisy*, I was alive? How could you do that?”

“Don’t you see how selfish you’re being?” William stepped closer to his son. “Don’t you see what it would have done to them, to her, if they had that sort of hope?”

“Dad, does she know?”

“Andrew—”

“The bloody war is over. Does she know I’m home?”

“Yes,” Kitt said. Andrew didn’t even look him in the eyes.

“I’m going to leave you two—”

“No, Dad, you don’t get to walk away from this like you walk away from everything that reminds you of war, or of mom. Not this time.”

The three of them were in a stalemate. Andrew had his arms crossed over his chest but, other than that, looked nothing like the child his father accused him of being. His features were dark and he looked at William as if seeing him for the first time, and not liking what he saw. Kitt’s eyes darted between them, his pupils following a game of father-son tennis he had seen unfold only a handful of times. He inserted himself earlier, trying to tell Andrew that Maisy knew he was alive, but it was even clear Andrew registered what his friend had said.

“Andrew, she knows you’re alive. That’s how I know she’s married, okay? I rang her the moment I found out—I suppose I wanted some sort of solidarity in my feelings, who knows. I

know it was supposed to be all rainbows and sunshine, hearing you were safe, but to be honest, it was odd, something about it just felt odd. Maybe I got used to you being gone, maybe I felt like such a different person, I have a son now and we were just boys when—anyways, I called her, and told her right away, didn't even say 'hello, this is Kitt,' but I'm sure she knew. And she told me how glad she was, truly, and I could hear something crack in her voice and she told me she was married, newly married at least, but there it was." Kitt let the words fall out of him before anyone could interrupt. He was nearly breathless by the end of it.

"I'm sorry," William said, a surprising tenderness in his voice. "I shouldn't have—"

"Did she sound happy?" Andrew chose not to acknowledge his father's apology, and I think it was because he wasn't ready to accept it.

"Yeah, mate, she did. Last time I spoke to her before that, she didn't really seem like herself. Sort of hollow, I guess."

"Oh."

"No, I don't mean—well, yeah okay, yes, it was hard on her, you being gone, and then missing. Of course it was hard on her, it was hard on all of us. But that isn't your fault, you know that, right?"

"I enlisted, of course it's my fault."

"They drafted everyone, mate."

"I told you that already," William interjected, but Andrew still ignored him.

"If anything, it's my fault for telling her to leave the Manor. She didn't want to, you know, not at first, but I convinced her. I thought you wouldn't want her there all lonely just pining for you."

“I know. You’re right, I wouldn’t want that.” Andrew’s expression shifted from sadness to something resembling peacefulness. “Dad,” he said, turning to William for the first time since snapping at him, “I think I’m not going to go back to London. I know we have a lot to work out, if I stay here, but I’m hoping we can figure it out. If you still want to.”

“Of course I do. You know you’re always welcome here,” William said stiffly, almost as if he didn’t believe it. The two of them had so much to fix between them that Andrew’s offer of peace seemed almost like a joke. Yet I think Andrew was ready to move past the heated conversations with Kitt and his father and move on to, well, healing.

“And I think I’m not going to call Maisy.”

“Not call her?” This was from both William and Kitt.

“She’s happy, and besides, she’s married, what good will it do?”

“Don’t you think she’d want to hear from you?” Kitt asked.

“Maybe. And all I want is to hear her voice. But I don’t think I can do that to her. And I know, I can hear her now, *who said that’s your call to make?*” He smiled a little and he was right, I could hear Maisy yell at him for making that decision for her. “She moved on, and I don’t mean it in a bitter sort of way, and I need to, also. I think if I hear her voice all it’s going to do is make me miss her even more desperately, and knowing I can’t have her—it’s too much, you know? Do you mind if I just go to my room for a bit, I think I need to rest just a little before supper. I’ll be there soon, okay?”

Without waiting for a response Andrew moved past Kitt to the bedroom and closed the door behind him. I was torn between following him and watching the interaction between Kitt and William, but my decision was made for me as William, without a word, turned his back to Kitt and the bedroom and walked away. Kitt stared at the closed door for a while, realizing, as I

did, that Andrew needed his space, but burdened by the desire to comfort him. Of course, the only one that could comfort him was Maisy. To this day I'm not sure if I think it was the right thing for Andrew to decide to leave her alone—and he did stick to it, surprisingly. It was a mature decision, certainly, but a heart breaking one. I never really understood why he did it. Maybe he was afraid if he called her he would never be able to let her go, but he never did, regardless. Maybe he was afraid he'd beg her to leave her husband and she'd refuse, and that would be worse than not knowing if she wanted him or not. It was tricky because Maisy didn't leave because she was done with Andrew, she only left because she truly felt she had no other option. I understand her decision. It took me a long time to accept it, seeing how lost Andrew was without her, but I had a sort of epiphany after the emotions of it all settled down. If I had taken Kitt's advice, as Maisy did, I don't think I would have died the way I did. If I decided to leave John, let him go on his path rather than struggle against that which I knew neither of us could change, I might have lived a long, happy life with someone else. He would be rich and hopefully handsome and he wouldn't be the love of my life but I could tolerate him, at least, and we'd have beautiful children and I would die old and tired surrounded by my legacy, the way I've watched so many die. But I didn't have a Kitt, and so I didn't know any better, and I didn't have as strong a will as Maisy, so how could I hold it against her when she lived and I didn't?

So Andrew never called Maisy, and I can't imagine how hard that must have been for him, but she never reached out either. Perhaps she didn't want to open old wounds while busy building a new, beautiful life somewhere in America with someone who wasn't Andrew. I couldn't even picture it, her head on a different shoulder, her slender fingers entwined with someone else's, someone else's hands tangled in her strawberry blonde hair. In my memory,

even to this day, she belongs to Andrew, and I can never picture her any other way—even after I saw it for myself.

## Chapter Twelve

*Edinburgh, June 1950*

The bookshop was crowded, more than it usually was. It was small, to be fair, but in a cozy sort of way. There were a few well-loved, worn couches, and eclectic lamps in place of regular overhead lighting. People often came in to buy a single book and would find themselves hours later either engrossed in something they never meant to pick up, or buying an entire stack of novels because they simply couldn't choose. I loved the bookstore almost as much as the library at Little Manor. It smelled like old paper and ink and a little bit of dust but that was just part of the charm. The store was Andrew's proudest accomplishment.

His typewriter sat heavily on the table behind the cashier's desk, which he also manned. Andrew, with money borrowed reluctantly from William (who called anything related to the written word *a dying business, why would anyone not go into radio?*) bought the building, moved into the flat upstairs, and opened shop with only a hundred books on the crooked shelves he cobbled together himself. It was immediately successful, even to my surprise. I thought that after such a war people would want to hole themselves up in their homes and never come out, but it seemed they were more than a little eager for distractions or entertainment. Mostly tourists came in, from London or elsewhere, but Andrew always had his staunch Scottish customers. First they were William's friends, eager to support the brave boy who survived the war, but then the word spread and soon Andrew was making a steady income for the first time in his life. He finally accomplished what he told Maisy he wanted all those years ago; he was his own man. It wasn't a huge amount of money, but it was enough to sustain itself, and Andrew seemed somewhat satisfied with this, yet it was clear he wanted something more. For two years he pounded away at the typewriter all hours of the day, and never told anyone what he was doing,

and then one day he quietly stacked the shelves with a new book, a new book authored by someone named Drew Young. I don't know if he thought the pen name was clever, I certainly didn't, but it did take a while for even William to notice his son had published a war memoir.

On his thirty-third birthday Andrew gave a reading of his book in his little bookstore and so many people came that some had to sit on the floor. Andrew sat on one of the couches, alone, hunched over while he flipped the pages and read in a deep voice. His thirty-third birthday. It's not a remarkable milestone, thirty-three, not by any means. Thirty, more so, but on that birthday he sat alone at his typewriter, dropping the crumbs from the cake Irene made him on the keys. This birthday wasn't special to him, or anyone else, but it was to me. I never got to watch John grow old, as I so desperately hoped I'd be able to, because he died right before this unremarkable birthday. Some sort of fever, or was it a wound that never healed properly? I was surprised to realize that when I tried to recall, I only drew a blank. I had the same feeling I did when I saw Maisy and Andrew move into Little Manor all those years ago—not only had Andrew surpassed me, but now he had surpassed John, the man he reminded me so much of. Andrew could easily be the son John and I never had. He shared John's same dark eyes, height, unruly brown hair. Besides that, though, they shared the same tenacity, the same grip on life that I don't think either recognized himself as being in possession of. John, with his defiance against his father that, although unsuccessful, proved his love for me; Andrew, with his sheer ability to survive not just war but immense heartbreak—and not just survive, but prosper. There he sat, on that lumpy faded floral couch, reading to an utterly engaged audience the words he placed so meticulously on paper. And he didn't write these words for the popularity, either. I know he once wanted to be a writer for that reason, and I think it's why he was unable to find success in his younger years right out of Cambridge. Writing this memoir, he was able to completely let go of any self-

consciousness, and write the words simply because he had no other choice. I could tell from the way he would sit, hunched over the typewriter, his eyes glazed over; I saw that in those moments that for him there was nothing but the words.

“It is hard to explain the fervor that overtook us all on the shores of that dreadful beach when we finally saw the rescue ships,” he read, clearing his throat in between some of the words. “Dunkirk will forever hold an indescribable feeling in all of the brave soldiers that waited so patiently for salvation....”

Andrew’s audience was captivated by his words, and the story itself; many of them had heard about the infamous Battle of Dunkirk, and the evacuation that took place over several days, but Andrew detailed it vividly in his memoir. He described the chaos without reservation: the bombs that fell on ships waiting to rescue the weary soldiers, the unusable docks on the beach, the numerous sick men who couldn’t make it far enough, the water made pink with blood and the bodies that floated on the surface, serving as a grim reminder of the fate so readily available if the allied troops couldn’t come through. It was obvious, from hearing Andrew’s account, how he could have easily been mistaken for dead when he was actually captured. It was clear how it took months for him to be able to reach William, how the system had failed him, how the Germans had broken international protocol time and time again just because they could, because the rules didn’t apply to them in those brutal years. Yet somehow, the tone of Andrew’s book was mostly optimistic. He wrote about the games he and his fellow prisoners would play to pass the time, how they would talk about their families and the girls they left at home. Maisy’s name was never explicitly mentioned; she was simply referred to as “my gal” throughout the memoir. Instead of writing about the humiliation and terror he must have faced, for these facts surfaced later and other writers were hardly hesitant to divulge these gruesome details, he wrote

poetically about the way the sun looked as it set over the water on the beaches of Dunkirk, about the shape of the clouds in Germany compared to those in France compared to those in Britain. I never knew Andrew was so observant, so brilliantly astute in the way he saw the world. His book opened up an entirely new side to him that I was, despite all the horrible experiences that brought me to it, grateful to discover.

When he finished reading the chapter he selected for the event, his little audience cheered and pat him on the back, and then those who did not slowly begin to file out the door lined up at the register with his book in their hands, no doubt hoping for a signature to accompany their purchase. Andrew seemed in a sort of daze, but a happy one—it was the most I'd seen him smile in a very long time.

“I'm so proud of you,” Irene gushed, with a hand on his shoulder as she stood next to him behind the counter. He and Irene had become closer during the years he lived with them in their little cottage. It took Andrew so long to warm up to her probably because of his struggles with William, which never fully disappeared although they both seemed to work harder on their relationship, and because he never wanted to replace his mother, Sarah. He never said this, of course, and he probably had few to no memories of her, but it made sense. His stepsister, Margaret, wasn't there, but sent her regards, according to an earlier phone call I only was half-tuned into. She was twenty-four, then, far from the reserved little girl she was when she and Irene first entered Andrew's life, and she was off trying to be a painter in Paris. She was never really around enough then for me to know her very well, but over time she turned out to be the closest family Andrew had, and to this day she still means the world to him. I know he sees her entirely as his annoying little sister, even though now she's nearly seventy.

“Thanks, I am too, actually. Its pretty fantastic, I think,” Andrew said, grinning. I wanted to roll my eyes but he was allowed to be boastful, no one could deny him that; he earned it. Irene smiled at him and squeezed his shoulder, then went back to helping William clean up the store. After what seemed like an eternity, the last customer shuffled out and William and Irene said their goodbyes, leaving Andrew to close up shop. Andrew collapsed with his head on the desk, elbows flaring out as he massaged the back of his neck and let out a muffled laugh. The bell over the door sounded, Irene or William must have forgotten something because Andrew had clearly put the ‘closed’ sign up after they left—but when he didn’t hear their familiar voices he called out, with his head still nestled under his arms, “we’re closed.” I wasn’t paying attention, I must not have been paying attention, otherwise I would have seen her walk in, but I was focused on something else, my attention wasn’t at the door—

“That’s a shame, I was really hoping you’d sign my copy.”

Every muscle in Andrew’s body tensed but he didn’t lift his head. It didn’t surprise me that even after ten years he could recognize Maisy’s voice immediately.

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He finally sat up straight and looked up at her; I wondered how he kept himself so composed. She was glancing around the bookshop, taking it all in. She held his book in her hands, tight against her chest like a shield. Her eyes finally met his and time stopped. The air between them was pulling, vibrating so I could almost see it. It’s a sensation I am still all too familiar with, one John and I felt all too often—felt for us in that forbidden interaction, the furtive glances stolen down each other’s bodies. It was similar, I imagine, for Maisy and Andrew, the way the eyes struggle to hold and the hands fight not to reach out to grab familiar skin. The warm, still air between the fast beating hearts that stand at a strange new distance—

hearts that are accustomed to beating together, or that at least retain the memory of it, that are now separate, forced to be cordial and remote. Perhaps I was only projecting my own memories onto them in that moment, but it is a strange feeling nonetheless, standing across from one you loved who is no longer yours.

I could never imagine what the pair of them was thinking in that heavy moment in which neither spoke and the world around them seemed frozen. They each held the other's gaze firmly. It made me think back to that first day at school that they fell into mischief with one another, stealing embarrassed looks fraught with curiosity across the classroom. It seemed like a lifetime ago, and in a way it was. As they held each other's eyes steadily in Andrew's little bookshop, my mind raced, swelling with memories, not all of which belonged entirely to me. I remembered what it was like to be a child, before anything mattered and when everything was just beginning. I remembered Andrew and Maisy's beginning; I remembered watching her pine for him and then watching him desperately try to piece back together a life without her. I remembered watching him recover, and watching him read his book out loud, and then she was there, standing in front of him, and thinking that she would break him once again. Yet she didn't break him, I realize that now, looking at the shop and thinking about the life he made without, and despite, her.

"Your hair looks different." Andrew's voice came in sharp and quiet. He shifted in his seat and folded his hands on his lap. I saw them shake.

"It's the fringe," she replied gently, tousling a self-conscious hand through the short hairs spread across her forehead. I noticed a sort of glow about her that I had never seen before. The skin of the back of her hands looked a bit darker, and the roots of her hair a bit lighter. She looked kissed by the sun everywhere but her face, which I could tell had suddenly lost all its color because it seemed paler than I recalled.

“What are you doing here, Maisy?” His tone was trying too hard to be gentle, and it came out roughly. He could barely get her name out.

“Drew Young? Do you really think I wouldn’t know it was you?”

“I don’t know what you think anymore.”

She lowered her eyes and shifted on her feet. He ran a hand through his hair, leaned back in his chair, and sighed.

“I don’t know how to do this,” she said quietly, her gaze on her feet. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have.” He looked right at her when he said it but I couldn’t read his expression. “But you’re here now.”

“Yes, I am. Can I come in?” I realized she was still standing in the doorway. He swallowed hard and nodded. He stood at the same time she let the door swing shut behind her, the little bell tinkling as it closed. The buzz of the street fell away and it was just Andrew and Maisy, alone, together. The faint echo of a siren reverberated against the window, and the clock on the wall ticked, and neither knew what to say or where to go. She stood only a few feet in front of where she just was, and he was only standing in front of his chair. It was like they were stuck in quicksand, and if someone didn’t move soon they would sink fast. I had the fleeting thought that I should leave them alone, but if I were honest with myself, which I try to be, there was no way I was going to miss this.

“Do you want to sit? There’s a few chairs, couches—” His sentence faded out and he gestured to the available seating. She smiled, a forced sort of polite, tight-lipped smile, and walked over to a free chair. I wondered if she made a point to not sit on the couch so he couldn’t sit next to her. I wondered if he noticed the way the lamplight danced on the gold ring on her left

hand. “Water? Tea?” She shook her head, so he slowly made his way closer to her—he pulled up a chair so he was sitting across from her. She folded her hands over her lap, polite, decidedly adult, and utterly uncomfortable.

“I liked the book,” she said, smiling forcefully. Her lips were drawn in a light, thin line, and I noticed the skin above her cupid’s bow was slightly feathered. She certainly was a woman then, but I didn’t need the lines on her face to tell me. The way she carried herself, the tone of her voice; it was all missing the charm of her youth. More than anything else, her accent was weaker, and I took it to mean she stayed in America.

“I’m glad,” Andrew replied, shifting in his chair. He tapped his right heel against the front leg of the chair in a rhythmic *thunk*; Maisy crossed and uncrossed her ankles.

“I was glad to finally know—well, yes, to finally know what happened to you.”

“Yeah? I’m glad one of us had that resolution.” There was distance agitation in his voice that provoked something in her; she narrowed her eyes at him and leaned slightly forward.

“Are you being serious? You never called, you never wrote—”

“You *left*, Maisy. How was I even supposed to know where you were?”

“Kitt knew, he, I told him, I thought—I waited as long as I could.”

“Did you, now? Or did you let my best friend talk you into leaving? Because that’s the story he told me all those years ago. You of all people listened to bloody Kitt and you left. What about the children? Did you even care enough to stick around for them?”

Maisy stood suddenly, cheeks flushed stark against her pale skin.

“Don’t you *dare* talk about the children to me that way. You know how much I cared, how much I loved them.”

“I thought I knew how much you loved me.”

This wasn't how it was supposed to go, I remember thinking. She was supposed to show up, it was years too late but it wouldn't matter, and they would look at each other and fall into each other's arms and all of it wouldn't matter anymore. So what if she left? She came back. She came back for him. Except she was married, and if she didn't come back for him, I couldn't quite figure out why she had come at all.

"You think I left because I didn't love you? You really didn't know me at all, then, did you?" She clenched and unclenched her hands, staring at him, the pain from all those years ago clearly distorting her features. "You were right, maybe I shouldn't have come." She moved past him to try to leave, but he grabbed her by the wrist, gently, but it was enough to stop her.

"I'm sorry," he said, still holding on to her as if he let go she would disappear again. "Please, I don't want to fight, I just want to talk to you."

"I don't know how to do this without fighting," she admitted, twisting her arm out of his grip—but she didn't leave. "But I suppose I can try."

"Brilliant," he said, somewhat sarcastically. He rubbed his hands on his trousers absentmindedly, nervously, as she sat back down across from him.

"I don't really know where to start," she said, sitting rigidly. She turned her head to look out the window as if she were expecting someone.

"How about with when you found out I was alive? No, how about when you left? Yes, let's start with when you left. See, you know everything that happened to me, I made a point to write it all down in a bloody book just so you could know—"

"You wrote the book for me?" she asked, softly. He nodded, not meeting her eye.

“Well, I wrote it for me, too, but yes, I did sort of hope you would pick up a copy. Although I didn’t know where you were, if they even sold these books in America, I didn’t know.”

“You knew I was in America?”

“Kitt told me.”

“Kitt told me, too. That you were alive, I mean, that’s how I found out. And I was so ecstatic, really I was, but I was nervous to get a hold of you. And Kitt didn’t know how to reach you, said you might be at your father’s but he wasn’t quite sure yet, and to wait for you to ring me. And, well, we both know what happened with that.”

Andrew sighed and looked up at the ceiling. Maisy looked at him curiously, squinting, trying to read him. Was he angry with her for assuming he’d call? Did he regret not calling? I couldn’t figure it out, either. I wonder now if she was realizing she couldn’t tell what he was thinking anymore, and if that bothered her.

“I wasn’t sure—I decided it would be best if I didn’t call.”

“Who said that was your decision to make?” Her words sounded familiar; it was exactly what Andrew predicted she might say. Even after all this time she was nothing if not consistent. “You didn’t give me a choice, Andrew. You made the decision for both of us, and that’s not fair.”

“Kitt said you were married.”

“I was—I am. You still didn’t think I would’ve wanted the choice, though? Christ’s sake, we’re not Catholic, it’s the twentieth century, people get divorced. Don’t you think I would’ve wanted the choice?”

“Would you have divorced him? If I called?”

“Oh, don’t do that, Andrew. I don’t know. All I’m saying is it’s not fair. I wanted to hear from you.” She glanced out the window again and twisted the ring on her finger around in circles.

“You’re right,” he said, his manner dropping from defensive to apologetic. “I’m sorry. I was just afraid.”

“I know. I mean, I understand.”

They sat there quietly for a while after that, sometimes hazarding glances at each other but mostly just fidgeting, realizing they had nothing to say. I realized I had been harboring a grudge against her for quite some time, but after seeing her and hearing her reasoning I was beginning to let it go. I had a sort of epiphany, the kind that comes to me often when dealing with people who aren’t Andrew—I realized I knew nothing of Maisy’s life since she left both me and Andrew in the dark. I realized I was biased—that I had seen all of Andrew’s pain in the fallout but none of hers. Not just his pain, either; I felt her abandonment sharply and took it personally. I was upset and hurt at her for leaving, and in my anger I forgot that ghostly girl who floated about the manor watching her world crumble around her. I remembered how hard she took the news of his presumed death, how she labored arduously over the idea of leaving the manor before giving in, doing only what she believed was the right thing for herself, having been convinced by none other than Andrew’s best friend. That’s all any of us can do, anyways, what we believe is the right thing. I can’t blame Maisy for leaving, I don’t, just as I don’t blame John for not coming for me the night I died. It took me a long time to understand maybe I conflated the two situations. After all, many of the same feelings were present: abandonment, fear, loneliness. The feeling of being misplaced, unwanted, and worst of all, unnecessary. So I admit to being one that holds on to resentment—for a while I even convinced myself that John let me die, that it

was his fault I wander and follow and watch and learn about everyone else's lives but my own, my own life that no longer exists even though I still do. That's not the right way to think about it, though, and it's not true at all. He did not let me die, and Maisy did not let herself wither away into the heartbroken mess she so could have easily become. I can't blame her for that. I can't be angry with her for putting herself first above a man she thought was gone forever.

"Does this change anything?" Andrew asked softly, nervously, still not meeting her eyes.

"What?"

"Well, you, and me, and you being here, and you just said yourself that you might have divorced him if, if I hadn't been so stupid and selfish and scared."

"Oh, Andrew, don't do this. Please don't make me do this."

"Come on, Mais," he said, more forcefully and looking at her, finally, with a fire in his eyes. "Maisy, I love you. I always have, I never stopped, I never will stop. Please."

"Andrew—"

"Tell me you don't love me."

"You know I can't do that."

"Then what? Is it him? Is he better than me?"

"He's not *better*. But I love him, too. I married him, Andrew, of course I love him. I'm asking you, please don't do this."

"Tell me why. Tell me why we can't be together, and I'll stop. Just give me a better reason than being married, because that's not good enough for me, Maisy, not after all we've been through."

“Fine, you want the reason? I have a daughter, Andrew. A beautiful, little girl, who I love more than anyone in this entire world, more than you, more than my husband, more than anyone. She is my priority. Not you, not him, not even myself. She is everything.”

I couldn't say I was surprised, but I was taken aback by Andrew's reaction. He didn't necessarily seem sad, or dejected, but looked as if a complete, resolute understanding had taken over his features. It was the one thing that was clear about Maisy, of course, that she was meant to be a mother.

“I'm so happy for you,” he said, and he meant it. He couldn't force a smile, but his words were sincere, and I could tell she believed him.

“Thank you. Her name is Andrea. I named her after a very brave, wonderful person I used to know.”

Andrew swallowed hard, and tears pricked at the corner of his eyes, but he did everything in his power to stop them from falling.

“I do love you, Andrew, and I always will. You have to know that.”

Finally, Andrew mustered up a smile, and it seemed genuine. I could tell, though, that his heart was breaking all over again.

“I know. I love you, too.”

They both stood at the same time, as though they had a mutual understanding that their meeting was over. He reached for her hand and, when she extended it to him, he reached it to his lips and kissed it, gently. The romantic in me still wanted a better resolution than that; I wanted her to say that she would leave her husband, take her daughter and move in with Andrew and they could raise her together and everything would be perfect. Maisy would never do that, though. She knew enough of what it was like to be separated from one's parents. Andrew

wouldn't let her, either; he knew it was like to have an absent father, and he also knew that a stepparent, no matter how wonderful, could never replace the real thing. No, he would never try to take Maisy away from her family now. The moment she told him she had a daughter, it was irrevocably over for them.

Just as Andrew dropped Maisy's hand, the bell over the door sounded once again and a little girl charged in the bookstore, slamming the door behind her.

"Mommy, can we go yet?" she asked, with a whine in her voice that was somehow both grating and precious at the same time.

"Oh, yes my love, soon," Maisy replied, wrapping her arms around the little girl as she jumped into Maisy's arms. Her daughter. Maisy's daughter. She had auburn hair, short and curly, and alabaster skin. The ruffles on her white socks poked out from her red Mary Jane shoes and she wore a green gingham pinafore dress over a white blouse with matching trim. She had pink, chubby cheeks and small rosebud lips, and she looked like Maisy but in a subtle sort of way. They had the same coloring—the girl's eyes were effervescent and sparkling against the matching green of her dress, but they lacked the specks of gold Maisy's possessed. Mostly I noticed, with a sharp pang, that this girl, Maisy's child, looked nothing like Andrew.

"Hi," the little girl said to Andrew, after Maisy swung her around a bit and put her back down on the floor with an exaggerated grunt that made the little girl giggle.

"Hi," he said back. "I'm Andrew."

"I'm Andrea, your name sounds like mine, that's funny, I don't know you, do you know me? Sometimes there are people that say they know me but I'm too little to remember them. I'm this many." She held up three fingers and then frowned. "And a half," she added with a determined nod of her head.

“Of course,” Andrew said, “the half is important.” He didn’t sound condescending the way many adults sounded when they spoke to children. His tone was even and he looked her in the eyes when he spoke to her—did he notice the gold speck was missing?

“I better go,” Maisy said gently, running her fingers through her daughter’s curls.

“Andrea’s due for her nap soon.”

“I don’t need a nap,” Andrea said sharply, and Maisy laughed.

“Mommy says otherwise.”

“Can I go back outside with Daddy?”

“Sure, darling. I’ll be there in a moment.”

Andrea skipped back outside and Andrew watched her leave with a heavy nostalgia in his eyes.

“He’s here,” Andrew said matter-of-factly. “Your husband is here. With your daughter. You should go to them.”

“Yes.” Maisy smiled sadly at Andrew; he tilted his head a bit as if examining her.

“She looks like you. She’s sweet.”

“The sweetest. Precocious little thing.”

“Just like you were.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Maisy said, laughing.

“Remember how you used to chase me around the schoolyard? Always trying to prove you were faster than me.”

“I recall *you* chasing *me*. Even though you knew I always was faster. You’re just bitter.”

“It’s been a while since I’ve chased you, Mais.”

There was a brief moment where I think they both forgot they were no longer eighteen years old having their first kiss on a rock in the woods. I certainly forgot. The awkwardness that had been a steady companion in their interaction since Maisy walked in dissipated with the return, however brief, of their old banter, and everything felt normal, felt right. Maybe, even though it wasn't Andrew and Maisy together again, somehow it was still all right. Maybe they could still be all right.

"I'm here, you know, I mean, I live here, if you ever want to stop by," he said, and she looked at her feet.

"I live in America, still," she said, quietly. "We're here for—well, I suppose I had to—"

"Yes, of course."

"I'm sorry."

Andrew reached for her hand once again, this time just clasping it in his own.

"Don't be."

"I'll write," she said, a single tear falling down her cheek. She smiled through it, still, almost like if she stopped trying to seem okay she would fall apart in front of him.

"That would be lovely. And," Andrew said, letting go of her hand, "it's okay if you don't." All at once, and for the first time, I think, I saw Andrew entirely as a man. He was incredibly more mature than he had been even before this interaction. He was also hardened, certainly, but in a way that seemed to serve him well.

"Goodbye, Andrew."

"Goodbye, Maisy."

I watched her navy blue skirt swing at her ankles as she walked out the door. I watched her black kitten heels cross the threshold. I watched her walk away holding her daughter and her

husband each by the hand. I noticed through the glass after the door closed behind her that she was wearing a white ribbon in the back of her hair.

## Chapter Thirteen

*22 December 1823*

It was the coldest winter Elisabeth could recall. She sucked on her fingertips, cursing herself for forgetting her gloves. Caroline and Mother always chastised her for not dressing warmly enough. Elisabeth liked the cold air on her skin and was reluctant to bundle up the way Caroline did, it was too restricting, but this month was particularly unforgiving. The Brown family didn't usually come to the Manor in the winter, but Mr. Little extended a special invitation to them for the Christmas holiday. They all needed to celebrate John and Emily's engagement, of course. There was not a single fiber of Elisabeth's being that wished to celebrate the fact that the man she was in love with was going to be married in only a few weeks, but there was no way for her to express her discontentment without revealing the three-year long affair she had been involved in. She had to play the part of a dutiful daughter, if not to protect her own reputation, then to shield John from scrutiny. Elisabeth couldn't imagine how Mr. Little would react if he found out his son, the pride and joy of the family on whom all their dependence now rested, was a deviant. Deviant—that's the word he would use, Elisabeth knew. Mr. Little was nothing if a stickler for those more moral societal rules. An affair, while engaged to another—no, that would not do at all. John would be married soon after the new year, and Elisabeth would be thrust into London society, and the world would spin backwards. Elisabeth wanted to drag her feet, to get out of the carriage kicking and screaming, but she knew she couldn't; so she stood in the carriageway at Little Manor letting the biting cold dig into her bones and distract her from the pain in her heart.

“Elisabeth, honestly, you’re going to freeze to death if you keep on this way,” Mrs. Brown said, shaking her head. Elisabeth rolled her eyes at her mother, for which she received a sharp flick on the top of her left shoulder. “Don’t be petulant. Why can’t you be more like Caroline?”

Caroline, who wasn’t there, because she was living in London with her new husband. She was no longer Caroline Brown, but Mrs. Henry Edmund Percy IV; she was refined and rich and the highest standard Elisabeth could be held to. It was a pity the elder sister wasn’t there to revel in her mother’s favor. Mrs. Brown didn’t mean her condemnation to be harsh, but rather a simple statement of how she wished her daughter could be just a bit more similar—similar in the cherished traits, of course.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Elisabeth said, hunching her shoulders, trying to make herself invisible and to shield herself from the gnawing cold. Mrs. Brown tapped Elisabeth lightly at the base of her spine to try to get her to stand up straighter, but Elisabeth was masterful at pretending she could not feel her mother’s subtle corrections. The truth of the matter was, despite her better judgment and trained instincts, Elisabeth was sulking.

“Oh, Edward, Emeline, how dear of you to come, and of course you as well, Elisabeth,” Mrs. Little said as she opened the door on the party and swiftly swept them inside. “Come, now, you all must be absolutely freezing. Do come in. Terribly sorry about the wait, Grigson is simply nowhere to be found.” She was referring to their footman, who often ‘went missing’ in search of a stiff drink or a blushing housemaid. Elisabeth knew of Mr. Grigson’s penchants, for he even once tried seducing her; he was young and tall and handsome, to be sure, and if John hadn’t caught her heart she might have considered bestowing just a light kiss on Mr. Grigson’s cheek. Elisabeth’s motives for the thought were more to make her mother angry than to actually kiss the Littles’ footman, but since she seemed to always belong with John it was a moot point.

“Thank you for having us,” Mrs. Brown said warmly. “Caroline sends her regards, of course.”

“Oh, dear Caroline, how is she?”

“Quite the blushing bride,” Mrs. Brown said, and Elisabeth had to pinch her own arm to stop herself from rolling her eyes. Caroline was far from a blushing bride—she was happy to be wealthy, no question, but her husband was utterly dull, and Caroline looked perfectly miserable to go off to London alone with him. He was kind, though, and Caroline expressed that at the very least she felt lucky to be married to someone kind—but kindness does not equate love. He was affectionate enough towards her, but something about that made it worse somehow. *It’s not his fault I don’t find him interesting*, Caroline said to Elisabeth half-heartedly the night before the wedding. *At least he’s not terrible to look at, and I’m sure I can teach him to have some fun, and maybe I will grow to love him...*

To Elisabeth, the concept of trying to change someone so you can bring yourself to love them was unfathomable. John, to her, was perfect, not despite his faults but somehow because of them. She saw beauty in everything he did, even the way he became frustrated at little things like losing at chess or struggling to unlace Elisabeth’s bodice. She saw passion in his frustration, even in his occasional bursts of anger. She loved the way beads of sweat gathered on the bridge of his nose when he concentrated on something, or the way he absentmindedly tapped his fingers on any available surface when he was thinking hard about something, even though the sound made her flinch. No, Elisabeth could not understand trying to change someone in order to love them. That wouldn’t be love.

“Wonderful, wonderful. Why don’t I let you all get settled, your regular rooms are all ready for you. I would have Grigson take your things up for you—yes, just leave everything

down here, *Grigson!*” Mrs. Little appeared more frazzled than usual; calm and collected was her norm, yet her son’s approaching wedding and the addition of guests and a missing footman served to unravel her demeanor. Mrs. Little flitted off, dismissing her guests with an absentminded wave of her hand, perhaps to find Mr. Grigson or otherwise procure a drink for herself. The Browns politely shuffled upstairs, Elisabeth breaking off from her parents at the top of the stairs to go make herself comfortable in the only room that ever really felt like home. Her parents’ voices, steeped in casual conversation the way they always spoke to each other, faded as Elisabeth turned the clear crystal door knob and pushed open the door to the room she had made her own over the years. Although Elisabeth only stayed at Little Manor a few months out of the year, something about the place felt more comforting to her than her own home.

Sunlight usually poured in through the large window, but it was a windy, gloomy day and the sky left the room a shade of grey Elisabeth had never seen before. The four poster bed loomed in the center of the room; Elisabeth always felt that the bed was too large and imposing, but did secretly enjoy looking up at the white linen canopy and pretending she was floating in the sky, looking down on a snow-covered patch of land. The thoughts kept her cool in the midsummer heat—Elisabeth wondered if she would have to replace her fantasy now that she was here in the colder months. She closed the door behind her and wandered around, re-acclimating herself. She ran a hand delicately over the bedside table, catching a flurry of dust on the tips of her fingers. It was odd, Little Manor was usually spotless. Elisabeth suspected that with all the commotion of the engagement perhaps her room had been overlooked, or skimped on. She couldn’t help but find it fitting, seeing as she felt utterly put aside by the fact of John’s impending wedding. She looked at the wardrobe, which stood opposite the bed, and wondered if she hid inside and didn’t come out if anyone would notice. Elisabeth often felt as though she

could disappear and it would have no impact on anyone. She knew she would be missed, but she wondered what exact positive effect she had on anyone's life, and when she couldn't come up with an answer she concluded that that meant there was no positive effect, and that everyone would soon get over her disappearance and slip back into the routine of their lives with no significant change. She blew the dust off her fingers and coughed as it spiraled up her nose. The wardrobe would be too stuffy to hide in for too long, anyways.

Elisabeth kicked her shoes off and sat in the stiff wooden chair that was situated to the right of the window. She recalled that there was usually a thin blue cushion on the chair, which somehow was missing. She glanced around the room and realized the dark blue rug that took up most of the room was also gone. She slouched and stretched her legs so that her stockinged feet touched the floor and she slid them across the bare hardwood. She didn't think too hard about the missing accouterments; she was too focused on finding John. Yet she felt as though she were glued to the spot, frozen, too afraid to move and encounter him and have everything be different. Elisabeth had a vigorous distaste for change, and it seemed as though her entire world were shifting underneath her and there was nothing solid holding her to the earth. She tried to ground herself by pushing the heels of her feet hard into the floor but the absence of carpeting caused her to slip and fall out of her chair. She sat there, glad no one saw her clumsiness, and laughing at herself, when a knock at the door forced her to gather herself quickly.

"Come in" Elisabeth called, as she smoothed her hair back from her forehead, where frizzy blonde strands liked to stick no matter how vigorously she brushed them back. Too late, she noticed the dust that coated the hem of her skirt in sandy beige streaks.

"I heard you all arrived," said the voice from the shadow of the half-open door. "I would have come to say hello sooner, but I was engaged—rather, occupied with some matters." John

might have caught the mistake in his language but Elisabeth was too happy to see him to notice. As he shut the door behind him she practically flung herself into his arms. She laughed lightly as he deftly picked her up by her waist and swung her so her skirt ballooned and shook dust all across the room. John coughed, which only served to make Elisabeth laugh harder.

“I’m sorry, I fell, and it seems the room hasn’t really been tended to. Not that I’m complaining, of course,” she said quickly, seeing the crease in John’s brow.

“No, it’s not your fault. There have been some—changes—around here lately.”

“Changes?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. I’m so glad you’re here. All of you.”

“Except Caroline,” Elisabeth said somewhat bitterly. As much as she put on a show of being glad her sister wasn’t around to nag and tease her, Elisabeth missed both her buffer and her built-in confidant. There was no longer anyone to distract Mother from Elisabeth’s misdoings; yet this did not prevent Mrs. Brown from comparing the girls, even when they weren’t in physical proximity to one another. Elisabeth still absorbed the usual rebukes, without the comfort of Caroline’s presence—not that Caroline was necessarily comforting, but the knowledge that there was another person in Elisabeth’s circle who seemed to be mostly on her side was certainly reassuring. Besides, Caroline managed to figure out Elisabeth and John’s affair, and had no desire to divulge the secret to anyone; thus Elisabeth found herself with someone older and wiser to confide in about those sorts of things. It was no question Elisabeth felt abandoned, despite knowing how ridiculous the sentiment was. Caroline had no choice but to marry—and neither would Elisabeth, when the time came.

“Oh, shall I write her and tell her you miss her?” John teased. Elisabeth lightly hit her small fists into his chest, smiling despite herself, and he grabbed her tighter by the waist. He

pulled her close to him, so their bodies were nearly touching, and she lifted herself up on her toes to kiss him.

“I missed you,” she said, nestling her head into that crevice in his chest where it fit perfectly. He wrapped his arms around her and sighed.

“I missed you too, more than you know.”

A sudden rap at the door startled Elisabeth and John out of their contentment. They busied themselves with separation, and Elisabeth ran another hand over the hairs that stuck up stubbornly on her head.

“Yes?” she asked, hesitantly. She glanced at John, who was now standing several feet away from her.

“I didn’t mean to bother you, Miss, I have your bags?”

“Oh, Grigson, do come in.”

The doorknob rattled slightly as Grigson struggled to open the door. John’s eyes widened as he remembered that he locked it behind him when he entered. Swiftly, he took one long step to the door, and in one movement unlatched it and stepped back. Grigson stumbled in, his weight having been pressed against what he considered to be a newly tenacious door, and nearly fell over. Elisabeth stifled a laugh and John made a show of looking around with big eyes, utterly innocent, as if he had no idea how he came to find himself in Elisabeth’s bedroom with the door closed.

“I apologize,” Grigson muttered half-heartedly. Elisabeth nodded and watched him gather himself to grab the bags that he put down in the corridor. Elisabeth glanced at John again but he was not looking in her direction; he seemed to be considering something outside the window. Before Elisabeth could turn her head to match his gaze, Grigson deposited her bags at her feet

with a short grunt. It was clear he was either drunk or just woken up from a nap, Elisabeth didn't really care which. She was indifferent toward the perceived respect her elders wanted from the staff. Elisabeth thought it was ridiculous to expect so much of people who's sole purpose it was to make their employer's lives more comfortable. Elisabeth figured if she didn't have to carry her own bags upstairs, it was the least she could do to allow Grigson his complaints.

“Thank you, Grigson.” He bowed his head as if in acknowledgement, but Elisabeth saw his eyes wander toward her breasts. She turned her back to him, choosing to ignore his lewdness rather than spend any more time in his presence trying to correct it—if she were being truly honest, she found his ogling somewhat flattering. John looked at her, certainly, but never in public, and Elisabeth couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness when she realized she could never validate what she and John had with anyone else but Caroline, who was now gone. The footman glared at Elisabeth's back for a moment, wishing perhaps she would give him something in return for his trouble. He had, after all, been woken up from his midday nap just to cater to a girl. When he realized she wouldn't even let him look her way, he left the room in a huff, leaving the door wide open behind him. He was not unobservant, after all, and leaving Miss Brown and Mr. Little alone in a room together with the door closed would have been too generous for his disposition.

“Honestly, why do you even keep him around? He's so—” Elisabeth trailed off as she finally focused on what John had been looking at. A young girl, about her own age, stepping out of a carriage at the front of the house. The window in Elisabeth's room was conveniently stuck in the front facade of Little Manor, so she had a perfect view of the goings-on of life in the Manor—she always envied the master bedroom, though, for looking out on the garden. She had

only been in the room once, when John took her exploring as a little girl, but the memory remained with her. “John? Who is that?”

John continued to look out the window with an odd look on his face, somewhere between consternation and slight interest. The girl had a mop of raven curls piled meticulously on top of her head, in a style that appeared effortless, but one Elisabeth recognized as something that would take multiple servants a long time to put together. She had a warm, medium complexion, which Elisabeth found odd for winter, and wondered if the girl had Spanish blood. She wore a fur stole over her royal blue dress—Elisabeth supposed it was more a gown than anything else. The girl nervously twisted her fingers together and unwittingly looked up at the second story, as if she could feel the pairs of eyes on her. The moment she raised her golden brown eyes to Elisabeth’s window John turned his back to her and looked at the floor with glazed eyes.

“John, who is she? What’s happening?” Elisabeth didn’t really need to ask. The rich color of her fancy dress, the jewels encircling her throat and wrists, the way she stood poised yet on guard—it was obvious this girl was rich, and this girl arrived alone, and this girl was John’s fiancé.

“Emily Grant, I believe. I haven’t seen her in years. I didn’t expect she would look so—”

“Beautiful?” Elisabeth teased, but the bitterness inadvertently crept into her tone. She put a hand on John’s shoulder apologetically, but he only shook her head.

“You know that’s not what I was going to say. I suppose I knew how wealthy she was, otherwise Father wouldn’t press the marriage so adamantly. I just didn’t know—I mean, look at her, with all that finery. It’s ridiculous. Who does she think she is?” John sounded suddenly angry, as if Emily had slighted him somehow by showing off exactly why he and his family needed her. There was no denying, now that she was physically there, practically glittering

compared to the other women she was about to meet, that if the Littles truly needed money, she was their treasure chest.

“It’s not her fault,” Elisabeth said gently, trying to reassure herself as much as John. The only lesson from her mother Elisabeth ever took to heart was to be kind to everyone until they present a reason to not be. Despite Elisabeth’s own stakes and feelings, Emily Grant had not wronged her in any way, and it would be wrong of Elisabeth to have any ill will towards this girl who, despite her looming presence over the last few years and especially last few days, was no more than a stranger. Elisabeth supposed Emily must feel scared and intimidated—after all, she was coming to Little Manor alone, and if all went well, she would never leave. John would inherit the Manor and he and Emily would live out their days in it together, without Elisabeth, who also came to the realization that Emily had no idea that there even was an Elisabeth Brown who had her fiancé’s heart. Elisabeth knew that it would be wrong to flaunt her claim over John, or to even imply it. Emily would need a friend, someone to confide in and help her to feel less lonely, and Elisabeth was determined to be that person.

“I know. I’m sorry I sound so angry. I just hate that it has to be this way. I only want to be with you, Elisabeth.” John walked over and closed the door so they wouldn’t be overheard. Despite the vastness of the Manor, words had a way of traveling through the stone. Sometimes, Elisabeth could hear her parents arguing late into the night from all the way down the hall. “I am going to talk to my father. Tomorrow. I don’t want this marriage.”

“I thought you’ve talked to your father as much as you dared. Besides, the poor girl is already here. What more can be done?”

“I don’t know,” he said, stepping close to her and putting his hand gently on the side of her face, caressing her cheek with his thumb. “But I have to try.”

Elisabeth smiled and leaned up to kiss him. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her back hard, practically lifting her off her feet. They embraced passionately until they found themselves stumbling to the bed, tangled together as his fingers picked at the small buttons on the back of her dress.

“John,” she said breathlessly, “it’s the middle of the day! We can’t—”

“Tell me you want me to stop,” he whispered in her ear. It sent goose bumps up her arms and she grabbed on to him tighter.

“The door?”

“I latched it.”

“But what if Grigson comes back? Or your parents, or mine?” She sighed as he put his lips on her neck, working his way down.

“To hell with Grigson. To hell with everyone.” He deftly undid the last button and slipped her dress off, letting it fall to the floor. She stood in a puddle of pink satin as he stood fully clothed, looking at her with fevered eyes.

“I feel woefully underdressed,” she said, trying to be seductive but having trouble damping down her bubbling giggles that always threatened when she felt nervous. He smiled at her, his eyes crinkling in the corners in that way that always made her feel like the most important person in the room.

“We can remedy that,” he said. She cast her eyes downward in embarrassment but also coyness, knowing how her long eyelashes would look casting shadows on her pale yet flushed cheeks. Irresistible—it was a word he used once to describe her. She would look irresistible.

John cleared his throat and Elisabeth released a full laugh when she looked up to see him stuck beneath his shirt. He had forgotten to undo the ties at the top of the shirt, and the opening

was trapped around his neck. Something stirred within her seeing his exposed chest, but she shook it off in order to free him from the stubborn cloth. Still laughing, she gingerly unlaced and removed his shirt, having to go up on her toes to reach, her hands lingering on his. They both stood there, holding his shirt and each other's fingers, their eyes locked on one another.

“Do you think it’s wise? With—everything—?”

John smiled at her, lifted her by her waist, and laid her gently on the bed.

“When have we ever worried about being wise?”

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Just before sunset, Elisabeth wrapped herself in the furs her mother insisted she wear outside and ventured into the garden. She had been inside all day; after John left her bedroom to *tend to some matters*, she busied herself with unpacking. Two weeks until the wedding—it stared her in the face with each dress she hung in the wardrobe. Every article of winter clothing she put away reminded her that she was there for one reason and one reason only, to see John wed. The wool and gloves and boots seemed out of place in the wardrobe, which Elisabeth was used to seeing house her lighter, summer clothes. It left her with such a feeling of uneasiness she took to her bed for a few hours and lost herself in a book. When it became too dim to continue, and Elisabeth could see streaks of pink filter in through the window, she decided rather than lighting candles she would go watch the sun dip beneath the horizon in the company of whatever flowers were still left. It always helped clear Elisabeth’s head to be outdoors.

She expected she would be alone; no one else would venture out in such cold. Yet when she reached the gazebo that lead to the stairs that led to the maze, Elisabeth froze—not from the cold, but from seeing John and Emily walking, together, smiling at one another, with his gloved hand on the small of her back. Elisabeth suddenly felt her skin become hot, as if a small fire were climbing up the spine of her back and spreading across all of her limbs. At the same time,

she felt an ice-cold sweat break over her entire body. The muscles in her jaw clenched and her hands trembled; she was a mess of contradictions. Elisabeth had never experienced such a powerful, physical reaction to anything before, until she saw the man she loved speaking intimately with another, his hand on her instead of on Elisabeth. Tears pricked at her eyes and then fell. She furiously wiped them away—she could not let her emotions betray her. John and Emily passed behind a tall hedge and then reappeared on the other side, in a clearing, and Elisabeth realized John was circumventing the maze. At least he did her that kindness, to not take Emily to where he and Elisabeth first confessed their feelings toward one another. Elisabeth was unsure if she could handle that, if she saw Emily Grant led by her minuscule waist into Elisabeth's favorite spot. Elisabeth felt certain that, if she saw it, she could simply die. It struck her that if they were not entering the maze they would soon return to the garden, through the gazebo, and Elisabeth would be directly in their path. She could either turn back or remain, and let them pass her. She would smile, and clasp Emily's hand in such a heartfelt manner that the girl would certainly feel Elisabeth's warmth and friendliness rather than the despair that simmered in the pit of her stomach.

Elisabeth worked on fighting the tears that continued to threaten the air of surprise and nonchalance she planned on presenting. She took a few shallow breaths and turned her back to the maze; it would do better for them to happen upon her rather than she upon them, so she did not look as though she was following them. The sky grew darker, and the edge of the horizon was tinged with a lilac-pink that Elisabeth tried to enjoy as she waited for her lover and his fiancé to reach her.

“Elisabeth?” John’s voice startled her despite her anticipation; she jumped slightly, but decided to not be embarrassed, as it would most likely help add to the illusion that she was not expecting them.

“John? Oh, I didn’t think anyone else would be out in this weather.”

“I wanted to show Emily the gardens. It is biting,” he added with a curious look at her. Did he suspect she knew he was there, or did he take her at her word? Elisabeth never was skilled at lying; it was why Caroline could always see right through her when it came to John. “Elisabeth Brown, this is Miss Emily Grant, my—”

“You’re the lovely Emily! I have heard so much about you. It’s such a pleasure to finally meet you in person.” Elisabeth smiled warmly, careful to not make it too broad, and took Emily by the hand, just as she rehearsed in her head moments earlier.

“Pleasure,” Emily said softly. The wind picked up just as the last remnants of color in the sky began to dull, and Emily shook slightly.

“John, why don’t we get her inside? She’s absolutely frozen.”

Emily smiled gratefully at Elisabeth, who felt a sudden pang of guilt over the ill feelings she harbored for the girl despite her best intentions. Emily was just a shy girl alone at a new place, waiting to be wed. It was a position Elisabeth would be in soon herself, she realized, and a wave of sympathy washed over her as she hooked her arm into Emily’s and escorted her back to the Manor, leaving John a few paces behind. Elisabeth could put aside her feelings to be an ally to Emily, but she didn’t think in that moment she could look at John without falling apart.

“Mother and Father so wished they could have accompanied me, but with my little brother so ill they couldn’t make the journey. They said they’d be here by Christmas, I do hope

they come.” Emily glanced back at John, who seemed to be sulking. He kicked up snow with the toe of his boot as he shuffled behind the girls.

“I’m sure they’ll make it as soon as they can,” Elisabeth said, trying to sound as genuinely reassuring as possible. Some part of her wished Emily’s family never arrived, for if her father was not there to make the final negotiations with Mr. Little, the wedding could not take place. It was, after all, more a business deal than anything else. John and Emily had only met twice—once as children, when the engagement was decided upon by their fathers, and once more, years ago, when the Littles joined the Grants in London for a play that was opening at the theatre Mr. Grant owned. Elisabeth expected Emily was feeling quite lost and alone without her family at her side.

The trio made their way indoors just as the last of the light left the sky. John shut the veranda doors behind them and Emily sighed as she took off her gloves and rubbed her raw hands together, trying to warm them. Elisabeth and John looked at each other, fleetingly. There was apology in John’s eyes, but Elisabeth turned her head away from him. Meeting Emily had made it all too real, all too tangible. This was the woman John was going to marry in a matter of weeks.

“I think I’ll retire before dinner,” Elisabeth said without looking at either Emily or John. “I find myself suddenly very tired.” She walked out of the dining room without turning around, and couldn’t help but wonder if John’s eyes were on her back as she left.

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Elisabeth avoided John’s gaze all throughout dinner, and then immediately after excused herself due to a feigned headache. In truth, her head did hurt, but not from the cold or fatigue as her mother suggested skeptically as Elisabeth asked to retire early. Too many thoughts of John

and Emily and the future were swimming around in her head, and she felt as though it could burst. Elisabeth retreated to her bed, slipped into her nightgown, and pulled the sheets up to her chin. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on her breathing. The grandfather clock downstairs reverberated as it chimed the hour, and Elisabeth prayed she fell asleep quickly so the day could just be over. Yet behind her shut eyelids all she saw was John's hand on Emily's back, and other scenarios her imagination decided to elaborate upon. After what felt like hours, Elisabeth sat up with a growling stomach. She had merely picked at her dinner, and she realized with a sharp pang of hunger that she should have eaten more. The room was dark, save for a small streak of light that snuck in under the door. It danced across the bottom of the windowsill and along the walls; then a small piece of paper blacked out the light as it slid under the door. Elisabeth knew it was from John. No one else sent her secret notes at any time of day, let alone after dinner and well after everyone else had gone to bed, or so she assumed from the earlier sound of footsteps and adult conversation that peppered her silent daydreaming. She lit a candle with shaking hands, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from yelling out when a bit of wax dripped on to her finger. She ignored the shadows the light created on the ceiling; Elisabeth was too old to be frightened of such things, yet she couldn't help but feel there were suddenly an infinite pair of black eyes staring at her as she stepped out of bed and slid the paper all the way inside with her toe.

*Library. Tonight.*

That was all he wrote her, and she was furious. How could he suppose that she would just follow his orders, how could he even dare to give her orders at all? Elisabeth resolved to tear up the letter, if she could even call it that, and return to bed. Yet her stomach protested once again and with a heavy heart Elisabeth realized she wanted to meet him, regardless of any

feelings she possessed that day. Her short-lived solitude only served to worsen her heartache and weaken her resolution against being with John after seeing him with another. Elisabeth was hurting, and John knew how to make her feel better, even if he did happen to be the cause. Despite her reluctance, Elisabeth found herself slipping into a dressing gown and slippers, tucking the ‘letter’ into a coat pocket so it could not be discovered, and piling pillows underneath blankets to make it look as though she were sound asleep, just in case anyone came to check on her. It was a habit she developed years ago; no one ever came to check on her, of course, so she had no basis or need for the charade, but it made her feel just a little more sneaky, a little more dangerous—it was exciting to know she was getting away with something.

Elisabeth shuffled down the corridor, careful to avoid the floorboards she knew to be exceptionally squeaky. She wasn’t the most graceful person, but she was very skilled at maneuvering Little Manor with the upmost discretion. She carefully opened the door to the study, and tried to let it click as silently as possible behind her. Yet she wasn’t careful enough, and the door swung shut, snuffing out Elisabeth’s candle in the process. She cursed to herself and tried to find her footing. When she finally crossed the darkness of the study and made her way to the library entrance, she hesitated with her hand on the doorknob—what if John only wanted to meet her to tell her he no longer cared for her? That he discovered some beautiful, marvelous thing about Emily Grant that instantly turned his favor toward her? That could be why he wrote her such a truncated note. Elisabeth’s mind spun as she hesitated by the door. With a deep breath she opened it to find John pacing, his hands laced behind his head, surrounded by lit candles. The entire library was transformed into a warm, illuminated wonderland. He had placed fur wraps on the floor and there was a plate of biscuits and fruit near the lit fireplace. Elisabeth felt as though her heart would explode.

“What is all this?”

John seemed surprised by her, as though he wasn't truly expecting her to come. He tried to smile at her but there were still creases in his forehead that gave away his worry. Elisabeth was not the only one that night, then, with nerves to overcome.

“It's—it's for you. I wanted to do something special, just for you. I know how much you love the library, and I saw how you barely ate at dinner so I figured you'd be hungry. Do you like it? Is it too much?”

Embers from the fireplace danced across Elisabeth's vision as she focused on the fire, hoping the heat would keep her eyes dry. She blinked and turned her head over her shoulder, avoiding John's pleading gaze.

“I don't know what to think, truthfully,” she said. “Any other day I would be absolutely speechless for happiness, but now—now I can't help feel that it all seems so pointless.”

“I know how you feel,” John said, stepping closer to her. She felt the warmth of his body near her, but still didn't turn to look at him. “Today, with Emily, and then running into you, I didn't expect—”

“You didn't expect me to be around. And soon, I won't be. Ever again. Does that suit you?” she asked sharply, finally turning to him, her eyes full of tears despite herself. “Does it make it easier on you that I will soon disappear?”

“You know I love you, Lissy, why on earth would I want you to disappear? There is nothing easy about being apart from you. I can't bear the thought.”

“I don't know anymore, John,” Elisabeth said, sadness replacing the anger in her tone and on her features.

“Let me prove it to you.”

“How?”

John gestured for Elisabeth to sit on the wraps by the fireplace, and she reluctantly complied. He turned to the mantle place and fumbled around for a moment, and when he turned back to her he had a pair of scissors in one hand and something hidden in his other fist.

“What on earth—”

“I have a gift for you, and all I want is one little thing in return, something I hope will prove to you that I never, ever want you to disappear.” He sat down beside her and placed the scissors in her hands. “A lock of your hair.”

“Are you mad?” Elisabeth said incredulously. “If Emily ever found—how could you even suppose that I would? That I could possibly give a physical part of myself to you knowing full well I can never have you again after it?”

“Because I am giving you this.” John opened his hand to reveal a small golden pocket watch, with a matching chain. It was old, and too gilded to be anything John would purchase for himself. “It was my grandfather’s pocket watch,” he continued, when he saw the confusion on her face. “He gave it to me when I was a young boy, before he died. He told me it was special to him because it was a gift from the woman he loved. Of course he didn’t mention whether or not this woman was my grandmother, but I always assumed he meant someone else. This pocket watch, Lissy, is something that, to me, means love goes beyond who someone ends up marrying. Emily might soon have my name, but you will always have my heart. I want you to have it, please, so you will always know.”

Elisabeth could no longer hold herself together; she collapsed in John’s arms and finally allowed herself to cry. His chin rested on the top of her head as he ran his fingers gently through her hair and her tears stained his shirt.

“I believe you,” she said after she could catch her breath. She lifted her head and kissed him on the cheek. “I love you more than you know. But I don’t think I can—after meeting her, I—”

“One more night, after this one,” John said. “That’s all I ask. One more night with you, no Emily, no Father, no wedding. Nothing but me and you.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow. Before her family arrives. It’s our best chance.”

“We can’t meet here, not again. It feels too wrong.”

“It’s always been fine before.”

“It’s different,” Elisabeth said, struggling to convey what she meant. Something about knowing John’s fiancé was just upstairs unnerved her entirely. “Emily, she’s—it’s different.”

“I understand. Where, then?”

“The maze.”

John practically laughed her off before realizing she was utterly serious.

“Lissy, the maze? At night? It’s freezing outside, we’ll catch our deaths.”

“It will be fine. You know I don’t mind the cold, and we’ll just dress warmly. It’s a special place, John.”

“Well, yes, but we can’t—on the snow—”

“Is that the only reason you want to meet with me? To sleep with me?”

“No, of course not!”

“I just want one more night free of everything else, a night to just talk, just us, as if nothing else mattered.”

“Nothing else does.” He took her hands in his and kissed her forehead. “You are the only thing that matters. The maze it is, then. At midnight, as usual.”

“Yes, as usual,” Elisabeth said, and fell into his arms once more.

## Chapter Fourteen

1997

Sometimes the memories of the past can be so vivid it's hard to remember where, or more accurately, *when*, I am. I look at Andrew's wrinkled, tired face and it's difficult to realize that he is dying when just a moment ago I recalled his youth, his vibrancy, even after all the trials of romance and war he lived through. The squeaking of nurse's shoes on linoleum outside the door is a desolate sound. I wish Andrew didn't have to be here, in this place—they call it a home, but what is it really besides a place people come to live out their final days? He's been here almost a year. His nieces and nephews took care of him as long as they could, but Andrew insisted that he didn't want to be a burden and would rather be in a home than dependent on his family. Maybe he wanted the quiet of it, the solitude—maybe he was ready to be alone.

He shifts in his sleep and I wonder if he's in pain. I've seen enough people at the end of their lives to be able to tell when someone is nearing death. Maybe it's morbid, I don't know. If I'm being honest, I'm likely thinking harder about his death than anyone else's because it leaves me with so much uncertainty about myself. Death has become something I feel very distant from, very detached from—it's sad, of course it's sad, but something I eventually began to stop craving or expecting. Yet here I am, facing Andrew's death, and in turn perhaps facing my own. My mind is racing with every possible memory it can muster, as if it knows it is running out of time. Am I running out of time? I don't know if I want the quiet, or if it would be a welcome reprieve from my seeming eternity of watching, listening, observing, but always from a distance. Always separate, never seen, never heard.

I try to shake off my melancholy daydreaming but it is what I know best. I can tinge everything with hope and also sadness, simultaneously. I don't know if I consider it a skill or a

burden. Andrew groans and shifts again and I realize he is waking. That will at least give me something to focus on, unless he drifts back into sleep right away, which he has been doing lately. He pushes himself up shakily with his forearms and shakes his head as if expelling the last remnants of dreams from his mind. He looks around and his eyes land on the television, the bouquet of sunflowers on the bedside table, the light filtering in through the blinds, and then his eyes drift over to the corner where I exist, watching him take it all in. His brow furrows—is there a spider above my head? Is he hallucinating? I begin to worry.

“Who are you?” Andrew is sitting up straight in his bed, straighter than he has in a while—and he is looking right at me. “You’re too young to be a nurse.”

“Wha—what?” My voice is barely a whisper, and I haven’t heard it in over a hundred years. It’s delicate, like I remember, but strange, as if underwater. Hollow but heavy.

“You, who are you? What are you doing in my room? You look familiar.”

Andrew Little is looking straight at me for the first time since infancy and he is speaking to me and I haven’t been spoken to since I died and I don’t know what to do.

“I—I’m Elisabeth.”

“So that’s an answer to one of my questions, Elisabeth.”

He addressed me by name. He is looking at me and speaking to me and saying my name. I feel like if I were able I would faint. There are black spots on the edge of my vision and my head hurts, it hurts like a hundred-year long headache, and I don’t remember the last time something hurt.

“It’s sort of a funny story.”

“Well I’d say I have time, but—” He laughs at his morbid joke, but all I can do is stare. I have the immediate instinct to find a mirror. I feel cold; I’m standing next to an air conditioning vent. I didn’t notice that until just now. He runs a hand through his silver hair.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I say, and he shakes his head.

“Try me.”

“Well, let’s see, I suppose it would be easiest to begin by saying that I’m, well, what you would call a ghost.” I wait to see his reaction; I wait for him to laugh at me, or worse, to yell at me to get out of his room. He must think I’m crazy, I realize. I wonder what will happen when security tries to drag me out and realize they can’t grab on to me, or get me past the doors of the nursing home.

“Really?” He sounds invested, intrigued, rather than incredulous.

“I suppose so, yes.”

“So why can I see you? And talk to you?”

“I’m wondering the same thing. It’s the first time.”

“First time anyone has seen you?”

“Well, yes, but you, especially.”

“Me? How long have you known me?”

I realize I can’t tell him everything. If I told him everything I would admit to gross invasions of privacy that took place over the course of his entire life.

“It’s complicated,” I say, and I know I sound hesitant and untrustworthy. I could laugh at myself—of course I sound untrustworthy, who would believe a word I’m saying? Yet Andrew still seems curious, and not as wary as I would have expected. I’ve imagined this situation so many times, with so many people, yet I find myself at such a loss. I feel like I’ve been thrust on

stage and I don't know my lines, or even what play I'm performing or what part I was cast in. Is this how all human interactions feel? I hate that I've forgotten how to be a person. I should be good at this, great at this. I've seen, studied, interpreted more conversations than anyone, I would assume—this should be so easy for me. I should be able to talk, be able to converse, yet I feel more frozen and uncertain than I have about anything in a very, very long time. Everything I think of to say seems ridiculous and outlandish, and I want to flee, but I am with Andrew now and so I don't know where I would go.

“Try me.”

I take a deep breath—I think—and try to focus my thoughts. This is Andrew, I reassure myself. This is family.

I tell him everything.

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Andrew rubs his temples methodically and I wait for him to yell at me. I wait for him to tell me he hates me, that I've breached his privacy, that I have no right to know the things I do. I shouldn't have gone into so much detail, and I certainly shouldn't have talked so much about Maisy. I can see the faraway look in his eyes that he always gets when her name is mentioned. I wonder which iteration of her he holds in his imagination—the young, vibrant teenager who kissed him for the first time in the middle of a footrace, or the young woman who sacrificed everything to come back to him and to be with him, or the mother who stood in front of him and told him they would never have their happy ending. I see all three of those Maisys, standing next to each other in a line, looking at me, haunting me. I only see one Andrew, and it's not the one before me. Through all his wrinkles and varicose veins I see the boy, the man, who ran around Cambridge drunk with his friends and who wrote a bestselling memoir instead of falling apart

and who loved a woman with every fiber of his being. I only see one John, too, in my mind, the one who held me in his arms and told me he'd never let me go. I make sure I never see the John who married Emily, the John who was a father to a child that wasn't mine, the John that found my body in the snow.

"That's incredible," he says suddenly, startling me out of my thoughts.

"You're not angry?"

"Angry? Why on earth would I be angry?" He seems genuinely confused.

"I—it's—your privacy, your life, and I was there, I watched it all."

"You didn't have a choice, though."

I never thought about it that way before. I never felt truly trapped by or into anything, but Andrew was right—what would I have done differently? Spent a hundred years alone in a corner, blocking my eyes and ears, utterly alone?

"I suppose. Still, I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," he says, and he means it, too. He smiles at me, *at me*, and I think I smile back, I can feel the skin around my mouth stretching wider and the apples of my cheeks lifting. It is such an odd sensation, after so long of no sensation at all. "You're like my guardian angel."

I think I laugh at him; it sounds like laughter, and I feel my throat contract and tighten.

"I'm sorry, it just sounds so ridiculous when you put it that way" I say, trying to explain my outburst. "I've never once thought of myself that way."

"I mean, you watched over me, you protected me—"

"I couldn't protect you, not really."

“In your own way, it sounds like you did.” Andrew is fumbling with his words, trying to convey something I don’t really understand. How can he feel protected by me when I could only stand by when he went to war, had his heart broken, when I couldn’t solve everything for him?

“I think—you always felt more like a son to me.” Hearing the words actually said out loud only confirmed what I know I actually have been feeling all these years, since Andrew was born. How he looked so much like John, how they always seemed so similar to me. “Like the son I would have had with John.”

“John, my great-great-great—you know, let’s not get into that.” He laughs and I do too, and it feels more comfortable this time.

“Yes, John Little. You look like him, you know.”

“Really? That’s kind of cool. Do you know if he ever had a portrait done?” It surprises me that I don’t know the answer. Wouldn’t I remember if John sat for a portrait? Or if I had seen one hanging on the walls of the Manor?

“I don’t recall,” I say, admitting for the first time out loud but also somewhat to myself that my memory isn’t as pristine as I like to think it is. Some things from when I was alive are becoming hazier, the farther I get from that existence.

Andrew falls into a fit of coughing and has to lie back down. I step closer toward him, so I am standing next to his bed. Hesitantly, I put a shaking hand on his shoulder, and try not to recoil at the sensation. He is warm and solid and *human*, and everything begins to tumble around in my mind and I can’t understand why this is happening now, why this is happening at all. As he tries to catch his breath between coughs—it sounds a little more like wheezing—I squeeze his shoulder and realize how frail he is.

“Elisabeth,” he says, as the coughing finally subsides, “how did you die?”

His question takes me aback, and I can't seem to process it. I have never once spoken, obviously, about my own death. Is it morbid to do so? Would it give me some kind of closure?

"Do you miss Maisy?" I ask, changing the subject almost accidentally. I immediately regret my question. How could I ask him that? Why on earth would I ask him that? I take my hand off his shoulder and retreat a few steps back.

"Of course I do. Is it silly to miss her after all this time? But, yes, I do. It's okay," he says—he must have noticed some sadness on my face. "I knew in my heart, that day she came to see me in Scotland, at the bookshop, do you remember? Of course you do. Well, yes, that day, I was so heartbroken and angry and sad and everything a person could be, but I was also so happy for her. When I saw her with her daughter, it kind of struck me that I could never really give her the life she wanted. I wasn't ready to settle, truthfully. I promised her marriage and a family and all of it, and I really did mean those things when I said them, but after the war the last thing I wanted was to try to be a father. My own father—yes, well, I suppose I don't have to tell you what kind of father he was. I suppose I was scared, but also had a little more patience than Maisy did when it came to settling down. I knew in my heart, or at least thought, we'd always be together, so why not take our time? But that's not what she wanted, that's never what she wanted. She waited for me as long as she could. I know that. And I'm so happy for her, even still."

Andrew trails off and I don't know what to say. I am so surprised, not by his eloquence, but by the extent to which he understands everything in a bigger way than I did when I was alive. I think people tend to see the smaller things, the quiet links between events, or else they see no links at all. Patterns only really become available when looking at the big picture, which usually only happens in hindsight. Yet I think back to that day he just described, and it does seem as

though he realized all of those things immediately. Maybe it is an odd thought to have, him being an old man and me being, well, me, but I am so proud of him.

“I suppose I owe you an answer to your question now,” I say.

“You don’t have to,” he says. His voice is coming in weaker, and he closes his eyes. “I’m feeling tired, anyways.”

“It’s fine. Really. I suppose I should tell someone. Who better than you?”

Andrew smiles as he sinks further into the bed. Outside the window, the sky is tinted with the orange and pink streaks of a beautiful, brilliant sunset.

“The Manor was covered in a big, soft, white blanket of snow,” I say. I wait for his breathing to steady as he falls asleep, but it sounds sporadic, and my heart leaps. I think he is dying. He doesn’t look like he is in pain. I come closer to him and put a hand on his forehead. “There was a really beautiful storm, that night.” I decide to keep talking. Maybe my words can soothe him as he passes. Maybe I can finally help him. Maybe I can finally get closure. Maybe—

## Chapter Fifteen

*23 December 1823*

Elisabeth played absentmindedly with the short strands of hair that marked where she haphazardly made a clumsy cut the night before. She praised herself for being smart enough to cut the hair from underneath the top layers so it wouldn't be noticeable, but she didn't count on the spot feeling so odd and prickly. It poked out from her scalp and made her hair stick up in the back, and Elisabeth crankily wondered who began this ridiculous tradition of giving a lock of one's hair to her lover for safekeeping. Yet the knowledge that she was now linked to John, in a way that felt more inextricable than before, comforted her despite her growing sadness.

"Elisabeth, would you stop that? It's unladylike," Elisabeth's mother said, shaking her head in her daughter's direction. Elisabeth placed her hands in her lap and dug her nails into her palm to stop herself from talking back. Everything Elisabeth did appeared to be unladylike. Besides, they were only in each other's company, and Elisabeth didn't see why her manners mattered when simply sitting and sewing, or rather, daydreaming.

Elisabeth stretched her legs out in front of her with a sigh. The day seemed to drag on endlessly; it was only late afternoon, yet Elisabeth's limbs were stiff and her fingers pricked too many times over from her carelessness with the needle. Elisabeth and her mother had been in the drawing room only an hour, biding their time between tea and dinner. Emily was upstairs, going over wedding details with Mrs. Little, and John and his father were conversing in the study. The boredom in the air was palpable. Another slow, grey, winter afternoon, spent lazily going between different rooms in the Manor until it was time to go to sleep, and then the pattern would repeat. Elisabeth missed the freedom of the summer, when she could escape into the gardens or go for long walks into the village. She wouldn't be opposed to doing these things even in the

cold, but it was a particularly blustery day, and Elisabeth hated the way the wind chapped her skin. Her mother would firmly object, anyways. Something about knowing her mother would disapprove made Elisabeth want to gallivant around outdoors in nothing but her shift, but the sound the wind made against the doors and windows made Elisabeth uneasy and she was secretly grateful to be trapped indoors, despite the unrelenting, heavy blanket of boredom that had settled over the Manor and all its inhabitants.

“May I be excused?” Elisabeth asked, no longer able to stand sitting in silence with nothing but the occasional prick of a needle to startle her awake.

“Don’t go outside,” her mother said, and nodded her approval. Elisabeth got up quickly, curtsied gratefully to her mother, and left the room before Mrs. Brown could change her mind.

Once she closed the drawing room door behind her, Elisabeth realized she hadn’t come up with an idea of what to do with herself once she made her escape. She supposed she could retreat to her room to read, but she was nearly finished with the book she brought with her and she couldn’t sneak into the library to retrieve another since both access points, the study and the drawing room, were occupied. She stood with her back against the door, trying to figure out a way to pass the time until midnight, when she could find reprieve from the day’s tedium in John’s arms. It wouldn’t be too difficult to sneak out of Little Manor, especially when no one was expecting her to, especially not in this weather. Elisabeth scuffed the heel of her shoe on the floor and internally kicked herself for not having more self-control. Yet when remembering the fire in John’s eyes the night before when he spoke to her of love and devotion, she couldn’t help but feel as though she was entitled to something, entitled to him. Once more she put her hand to the back of her head and felt the spot where she cut off the lock of hair that she braided for him and that he tucked in his palm so delicately, as if he were holding her soul there.

“Elisabeth?”

Elisabeth didn't need to look up to know that the soft, shy voice that spoke her name belonged to Emily Grant.

“Emily, hello,” Elisabeth said, tripping over herself to stand up straighter. She nearly tipped over trying, but Emily didn't laugh at her.

“I didn't mean to intrude upon your thoughts,” Emily said graciously, and Elisabeth was grateful for the kindness. Emily could have pressed Elisabeth as to why she was slouching against the drawing room door.

“It's perfectly all right, I was just taking a moment away from—well—” Elisabeth shrugged, unsure how to finish her sentence, and Emily nodded.

“I understand,” she said thoughtfully, looking at her feet. “Sometimes it's nice to just get away from it all, let everything be just a little more quiet.”

Elisabeth smiled, thinking how Emily was not too dissimilar from herself.

“Are you enjoying yourself here?” Elisabeth asked, but her thoughts were swirling with more questions she knew she could never ask. *Do you care for him? Do you think he will make you happy? Are you in love with another, perhaps, as well? Have I utterly betrayed you before I even get to call you friend?* She suppressed the urge to press Emily to say anything incriminating, or anything that would make Elisabeth hurt more than she already did.

“Truthfully?” Emily glanced over her shoulder, making sure she wouldn't be overheard, and then looked at Elisabeth evenly. “It's terribly lonely.”

Elisabeth saw the beginnings of tears form in Emily's eyes, and was struck with the sudden realization that she had been hideously self-centered. In all of her thoughts and fears, Elisabeth never once imagined what it would be like for Emily to spend the rest of her life tethered to a

man in love with another—and what this would be like for John, as well. Didn't the two of them deserve to at least try to be happy? Elisabeth didn't want anyone to be miserable, least of all John. Perhaps if she could shoulder the burden herself, take it all in, John and Emily could have some hope of a peaceful and happy life.

“Perhaps when your family arrives it'll be less lonely. And, of course, I want to offer you my friendship—” Elisabeth knew her words sounded stilted and forced, and they were. She knew the only conversation she could have with Emily would be an incredibly painful one, but Elisabeth's heart had opened to the girl, who was so like herself in some ways, and she was prepared to stop being so concerned only with her own pain. “And John? How do you like him?”

Elisabeth's heart sank when she saw the way Emily's face lit up at the mention of John's name. The girl's eyes turned brighter and her lips—which Elisabeth inwardly critiqued as being too thin and wide—spread in a broad smile to reveal perfectly white teeth. Emily's beauty only made the tightness in Elisabeth's chest contract further.

“He's so kind,” Emily gushed, color rising to her cheeks as she heard the excitement in her own voice. “He has taken such pains to make me comfortable these last two days, and he is so handsome, much more so than I was expecting. You know, we've only met twice before, and when we were younger I was so unconcerned with the idea of men's features that it made it impossible to remember whether or not he was striking. Yet—oh, when I saw him walk up to me, right away I knew we could be happy. I just knew it, despite everything.” Emily spoke breathlessly, and Elisabeth nodded and smiled as politely as she could muster, despite the feeling that a rope had been tied around her heart, and someone was pulling it tighter and tighter, trying to squeeze the life out of it. As Emily spoke of her potential future happiness with John,

Elisabeth pictured his bare back pressed against her chest as they lay together on the floor of the library just the night before. She thought about the way it felt when he ran his hands over her body, and when he kissed her, and when he fell asleep for a brief moment beside her and he breathing became even and it felt as though the entire world spun only for the two of them. She thought about never having those moments again, and of Emily having them instead, and Elisabeth's chest tightened once more and it felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her.

"I'm so glad," she managed to say, somehow without giving evidence to her inner turmoil. "If you would excuse me, I am suddenly not feeling well, I think I ought to lie down."

"Oh, of course. Is it the same headache from last night? I hope you feel better. Mother always said a cold cloth on the forehead helps."

Elisabeth nodded, unable to force a smile, and brushed past Emily. She was determined to hold her tears for the privacy of her own room, but at the bottom of the stairs she suddenly couldn't contain it, and choked out a sob. When she heard footsteps near her, she immediately brushed herself off and wiped her tears, thinking of a million excuses why she would be crying in the middle of the afternoon. The footsteps were then accompanied by shouting, which Elisabeth realized was coming from the study.

"You can't be serious!" Mr. Little's broad, angry voice was instantaneously recognizable. Elisabeth's instincts were to retreat upstairs and lock herself in her room, but her curiosity almost always overcame her better judgment, so she crept as quietly as she could toward the study. There was no need to press her ear up against the door—Mr. Little and John's voices were crystal clear, and it was apparent immediately that they were arguing about her.

"I love her, Father," John said. His voice was calm and even but Elisabeth could picture him balling his fists or straining the vein in his neck to keep it that way.

“I thought I raised you to know love didn’t matter.”

Elisabeth hoped that Mrs. Little was still upstairs, unable to hear her husband’s harsh words; although there were never any apparent feelings between the couple, Elisabeth still imagined hearing it out loud would sting.

“Of course love matters. How could it not?”

“You listen to me, John,” Mr. Little said in a tone that raised the hairs on Elisabeth’s arms. She was always a little afraid of him, and knew him to be a harsh, unforgiving man, but to hear the cruelty in his voice, in a conversation with his own son, made her blood run cold. “You *will* marry Miss Grant, if I have to drag you to the altar myself. This family will be ruined if you don’t.”

It all made perfect sense, then. The missing things in Elisabeth’s room, the lack of servants and how Mrs. Little continued to tolerate Grigson, Mr. Little’s insistence on his son’s marriage, John’s disgust at Emily flaunting her wealth—the Littles were running out of money. It probably was why they were having a winter wedding, because they knew fewer guests would make the trip out to the Manor in the cold, and with fewer guests came fewer expenses. No need for garden parties or trips to town or veranda teas for the sake of the Browns, either—no need to put on appearances, for everyone was content to stay shut up indoors until the weather passed. The Littles wouldn’t ask the Grants to pay for the wedding, either, because if they let slip they were hemorrhaging money the Grants could break the engagement and marry their daughter off to a wealthier family. John was right—it was all business.

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you have destroyed this family, and will no longer be welcome as a part of it.”

“Father—”

“Cut off, John,” Mr. Little said firmly, without a hint of remorse. “You will be cut off.”

Elisabeth put a hand over her mouth to conceal her audible gasp. Her first thought was, *no, they wouldn't do that*, and then she realized that yes, of course they would, and it would be entirely her fault. She backed away from the study and ran upstairs, almost tripping over herself until she got to her room, where she shut and locked the door.

Cut off. If Elisabeth continued with John, in any way, she would be the cause of his destruction. There was no way they could love each other, even from a distance. If they were discovered, somehow, or Emily guessed and the wedding was called off, Elisabeth could never forgive herself. Despite her heartbreak, she felt a strange sense of peace in the finality of it all. Shaking from nerves and heartache, she sat down at the little desk by the window and retrieved a new piece of paper from the right-hand drawer. She dipped the nip of her pen in the nearly empty inkwell and began to write John a letter.

*Dearest John,*

*It is with a heavy heart that I write to you, for I cannot meet you tonight as planned, and I never shall meet with you again. I overheard your conversation with your father in the study this afternoon. I know my love will cost you, not only the respect of your family but your name and respectability as well. I cannot allow you to throw away your life for me. I know you love me, and I you, but it is long past time we realize this love will bring nothing but pain and ruin. I wish it did not have to be this way...but there is hope for your happiness yet. Emily Grant confessed to me today that she is completely infatuated with you, and that is only after two days. I imagine after a longer amount of time you could grow to love each other as you and I love one another now. Emily will make you a wonderful wife, as much as it pains me to say so. I beg you, John, be happy, and forget me, for that is the only way you can truly live.*

*Forever yours, heart and soul,*

*Elisabeth.*

She stared the letter as the ink dried, her heart pounding, and a sense of despair tinged with relief flooded over her. She was comforted by the fact that a decision was made, yet the decision itself left her heartsick and exhausted. When she was satisfied that the ink wouldn't smudge, she folded the paper in thirds and wrote John's initials on the side she left facing up. She would deliver the letter after dinner, somehow; maybe slide it under his door when no one was looking. She wasn't certain she could be discreet enough to hand it off to him, or that she would even want to—some lingering feelings of guilt left her wanting almost nothing to do with John, yet wanting him desperately at the same time. The guilt pulsed in her sharply like a heartbeat and she felt as though she couldn't shake it without ceasing to breathe. The look on Emily's face when she spoke of John, the sound of Mr. Little's voice echoing through the thick study door and striking Elisabeth's ears so hard he may as well have screamed them in her face—all of these thoughts left Elisabeth's head pounding. She wasn't sure she could face anyone at dinner. The downstairs clock struck four and Elisabeth knew she would either have to pull herself together soon or make up another excuse to retire early. Although this time the headache wouldn't be feigned, she felt as though it was too generic of an excuse, and someone would become suspicious. Elisabeth could not let it show that she was in any way perturbed by anything, for if Emily were to guess the reason, John would be ruined and Elisabeth could never forgive herself. She knew she would have to come up with something tangible and believable to get out of dinner and the ensuing small talk and sewing by the fire, probably with Emily sitting right beside her and John's voice coming in from the library.

Elisabeth glanced at the candle that sat on the corner of the desk, and remembered a trick she used when she was younger and tried to get out of excursions or boring social gatherings and pleasantries. Very carefully, as to not burn herself, she put her forehead as close to the tip of the flame as she dared. She waited until she felt sufficiently warm, and beads of sweat began to drip from her hairline. She backed away from the candle and put the back of her hand to her head. Elisabeth knew her mother would not question a fever. Before the heat could fade Elisabeth rushed downstairs and back to the drawing room, where her mother seemed to have not moved an inch.

“Mother,” Elisabeth said before she could even close the door behind her, “I don’t feel well. I don’t think I should come to dinner.”

“Oh, not another headache?”

“I feel just a bit feverish. Would you check?” Elisabeth knew if she asked her mother to inspect the illness, Mrs. Brown would be less suspicious. After all, someone who was lying wouldn’t put themselves in a position to be found out.

Elisabeth’s mother, as predicted, put the back of her hand on Elisabeth’s forehead. She squinted at her daughter, as though looking for traces of dishonesty on her person, but the flush on Elisabeth’s cheeks from hurrying downstairs combined with the residual heat from the flame was enough to convince her that yes, her daughter absolutely should get some rest.

“I’m afraid you do feel warm,” Mrs. Brown said. “Go upstairs and rest, I’ll have someone send up some warm broth for you later.”

Elisabeth nodded and, for good measure, added a delicate cough on her way out. She tiptoed upstairs this time, trying not to draw attention to herself. She wasn’t sure if she could lie anymore, about anything. One night of rest and composure should set her on the right track for

the rest of the holiday, she figured, or at least that was what she told herself to ease her conscious. She was surprised—she never felt bad about lying to her mother about an illness before, but something about this falsehood seemed more treacherous. Maybe it was because it involved a bigger secret, a bigger lie, one that filled her with shame and fear and sadness.

As she made her way back to her room, Elisabeth paused by John's bedroom door, listening for the sound of footsteps. He paced when he was nervous or stressed, she knew, and thought maybe the sound of his steps would calm her somehow—like being near him, but not breaking her resolve to end things for good. Yet she heard nothing, and saw no light filtering in from under the door, so she went back to her room with a heavy heart and locked the door so she wouldn't have to face anyone, except whoever would bring the broth her mother mentioned. Elisabeth's stomach growled and she began to regret her decision to skip dinner, but the thought of seeing John and Emily seated near each other, her eyes on him and he totally unaware of her loving gaze, made Elisabeth's stomach turn and pushed away any present thoughts of food. Suddenly weary, Elisabeth undid the buttons on the back of her bodice, slipped out of her dress, and slowly unlaced her corset, relishing each new, deep breath that came with the loosening of the laces. She tugged the contraption over her head, but was too impatient to unlace it all the way and got it stuck on her chest. Trying not to remember the night before, when John became trapped by his own shirt, Elisabeth pulled the corset around so the laces were in front and she could more easily lift it off. With a grunt she tugged at the laces and yanked the corset over her head, the laces tugging at her breasts and nose on their way up. When she was finally free, she threw the thing on the floor and, not even bothering with a nightgown, burrowed herself underneath the oxblood coverlet. As she stared at the drooping canopy above her, she felt her eyes begin to flutter closed and realized she was drifting off. Passing thoughts of needing to get

dressed, needing to unlock the door, needing to give John the letter, flew through her mind too rapidly, and she couldn't hold on to them. They became entangled with images of snow and mazes and fireplaces and soon Elisabeth was dreaming of John as if he were still hers.

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Elisabeth woke with a start. The room was dark, even though the curtains weren't drawn, and Elisabeth realized with a disoriented sort of understanding that she had fallen asleep for a lot longer than she intended to. The sky was a deep blue, with no traces of remaining sunset, meaning dinner was likely either long over or just now ending. Elisabeth stretched and yawned, and then her stomach flipped when she remembered the letter she had yet to deliver. Now would be a good time, she supposed, when everyone was still downstairs. Yet she felt so weighted down by the idea of leaving John in that way, with only ink on paper, she felt as though her limbs were caught in rope and she couldn't move a muscle. Her mind began to race, and suddenly she doubted the concept of the letter in its entirety. If he wrote her such a thing, she would be furious and devastated. How could she do that to him? She would have to speak to him in person, she owed him that much. She listened for some chiming of the clock that would alert her to the precise time, but heard nothing. It was then she remembered the pocket watch John gifted her the night before. She reached over herself to retrieve the watch from the drawer of the bedside table where she had hidden it—she figured no one would come clean her room anyways, remembering the state of it upon her arrival, yet she took the precautions just in case. She and John could risk no chance of discovery, even by a servant.

When she cleared the fog of sleep from her mind enough to read the time, she nearly gasped aloud. Midnight. Elisabeth had slept through dinner, and through the rest of the night as well. Her first thought was that someone might have been worried, seeing as she locked the door

before she dozed off, but her second thought was much more nerve-wracking—it was midnight, and John was waiting for her. He wouldn't wait long, though, not in that cold, he would come try to find her and she couldn't have the conversation she needed to have with him inside the Manor, not with Emily there and the probability that she would be unable to contain the volume of her voice. She expected crying on her end, if not yelling, for sometimes when she was frustrated Elisabeth had a tendency to raise her voice.

She sat up so quickly she gave herself a head rush. With a hand pressed to the crown of her head she climbed out of bed and prepared to dress. Her complete state of undress was a hindrance, and she cursed herself for not taking the time to at least change into a nightgown. She decided to forgo all manner of proper dress for the sake of time, and threw on only a slip and a fur wrap. She did not consider the weather; she cared only that she got to John in time to tell him all that she needed to. He would keep her warm, regardless, and as always, she never minded the cold. Elisabeth slipped on her boots, skipping the stockings, and began to head out when she remembered the trick she liked to do with the pillows and blankets. She knew she would be deceiving no one at this hour, yet couldn't help but become lost in the bittersweet melancholy of it being, most likely the last time she could conduct such a charade. With a half smile, she tucked the biggest pillows underneath the sheets, so it looked like she was still asleep in the bed. Satisfied with her final act of rebellion against losing John and what this meant for her, she unlocked the door and headed out to the maze.

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The wind bit at her as she trudged through the fresh snow. She had slept through an entire winter storm that seemed to still be whirling, although in its final stages. Her cheeks stung and her fingertips grew stiff but she continued on. John was waiting.

“John?” she called out when she felt she was a comfortable enough distance away from the Manor to do so. “John!” The wind carried away her words. She could feel herself shivering as she made her way to the heart of the maze. Everything was so distorted by the snow; Elisabeth was not used to seeing the grounds in the winter, and she felt as though she were walking through a dream. So surreal, so white, and so cold. She listened for him to call back to her but all she could hear was the harsh wind, the ticking of the pocket watch she brought with her, and her own blood roaring in her ears. She didn’t understand where he could be—unless he decided, as she had that afternoon, to not come. She shuddered at the thought, and then continued to shake as her body tried to keep itself warm. She wanted desperately to wait for John, just in case, but the idea of her warm bed was decadent. Of course she would rather find warmth in his arms, but she knew that would be wrong, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that he simply wasn’t coming. Elisabeth decided to wait just five more minutes, and then to make her way back inside if he didn’t show.

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John Little blew on his hands and rubbed them together in front of the library fireplace as the grandfather clock struck one in the morning. It sounded as though it were taunting him. *She didn’t come*, it said, *she doesn’t care*. John had waited half an hour in the storm for her, of course he did, but it wasn’t like her to be late and he was so, so cold. He ventured outdoors for her, he waited there for her, and she didn’t show. John’s first thought, of course, was that she didn’t love him anymore, but he remembered the way she looked up at him last night with her big sea-blue eyes and realized there was no way that could be true. He fiddled with the lock of her hair he stuck in his pocket, and thought about what to do. He figured the entire household would be sound asleep, enough so that he could probably go to her room, rouse her if she weren’t

awake, and demand to know why she left him waiting alone in the cold. John sheepishly realized he could never demand anything of her, but was at least determined to gently ask her why.

John knocked on her door and was surprised to find it opened at his touch. *She must have left it ajar for me*, he thought, with a glimmer of hope that was immediately distinguished when the light from his candle illuminated her silhouette underneath the covers. So she had slept through their meeting after all. He momentarily thought about waking her, shaking her from her slumber to yell at her, *don't you know I don't want this?* Yet before he could act on the impulse, he caught out of the corner of his eye his initials, scrawled in Elisabeth's hand on a fresh piece of paper, sitting in the center of her desk as though it was waiting for him. He opened the letter and read her goodbye. *So I will not wake her, then*, he thought, not necessarily angrily but with a heavy heart leadened with such a mix of emotions he could not decipher them all. *I will leave her, as she asked me to*. John hesitated by the door, her letter in his hand, and thought once again about just placing a delicate kiss on her cheek. Yet his flux of emotion prohibited him, for he knew if he reached out to her in that moment it would only make the separation that much harder. He decided to let her sleep, and maybe the next day they could have a discussion. *Yes*, he thought, as he closed her door behind him, *tomorrow we will talk*.

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Elisabeth turned to her left and began walking back to the Manor.

*Or was it to the right?*

She was, for the first time since she was eight years old, unsure which way she had come. She'd always known the maze like the back of her hand, but the snow disoriented her and the maze seemed suddenly much taller and more treacherous than it ever had before. She blinked

quickly, struggling to keep her eyes open. Why was she so tired? She checked the pocket-watch again, and was surprised to see it still read twelve. In a brief moment of clarity, despite the fogginess that seemed to have reached into her head, she realized the watch was broken. She had no idea what time it was. It could be too early for John to come meet her, or she could have already missed it. Elisabeth laughed out loud at herself, and chastised herself for rushing to conclusions. Of course he didn't forget about her, she just relied on an old, fault pocket-watch when she should have just waited for the consistent, reliable chime of the grandfather clock to let her know the time. She was even more determined to go back inside now that she realized her ridiculous mistake. Yet she was still so turned around, and so tired—relieved though, that somehow the cold stopped biting, and she even began to feel a bit too warm. Despite her better judgment she shrugged the fur off her shoulders and let it drape by her elbows. As she walked through the maze she happened upon a very comfortable looking spot of untouched snow.

*Maybe if I just sat down, for a moment.* After all, she no longer felt cold, and she was comforted by the fact that John had not forgotten her. Elisabeth lay herself drowsily down in the snow and closed her eyes.

*Only for a moment.*

## Afterword

This project began as a short story for my fiction workshop my sophomore year of college. My peers, and my advisor, Porochista Khakpour, who was also my professor for that class, knew that the world I had created didn't belong within the confines of those twelve short pages. With comments from my classmates, and meticulous outlining with my advisor, I was able to come up with a fully-fledged outline for the story I knew I needed to write. I began slowly writing chapter after chapter, knowing what needed to happen plot-wise but struggling to really find my narrator's voice, and the right pacing for the story. I was, after all, taking on something really tricky: how to tell the story of two people through the eyes of a ghost, who isn't able to interact with either of them. I even had a few classmates suggest I get rid of my spectral narrator completely, but those comments only made my conviction about my narrator stronger. She had to be there because, well, *she* was the story. Without her, there would be nothing.

The summer before my senior year, I had the opportunity to study abroad at Cambridge University for six weeks. I know that without this experience, this novel would not be half of what it is now. I was able to traverse the streets of London, explore castles in Edinburgh and Dover, live in dorms at Cambridge, sit in pubs and really *listen* to how people talked to one another—I was able to inhabit the world I was trying to create. I became like Elisabeth: I watched, I listened, I observed. And I wrote. I wrote on buses and trains and in theatres and in pubs. I wrote under a willow tree on the bank of the River Cam, took notes while walking the cobble-street roads of Cambridge, allowing myself to try and maybe get a little bit lost. I tried to capture everything: the animals I saw, the flowers, the way the clouds looked (they were different in London than they were in Cambridge and than they were in Scotland), the different

colors in the sunsets. These are the details I hope make this novel as special to a reader as it is to me.

Of course, I could not have written this novel without a myriad of inspiration garnered from books I've read all throughout my life. I've always been interested in historical fiction, and read the genre since I can remember. Kate Morton, an Australian author who has written some of my favorite books, was a major inspiration for the idea to write about multiple different time periods. A book I read during my travels in the UK, called *Everyone Brave is Forgiven*, by Chris Cleave, inspired the mood of the middle few chapters, which I wrote while I was immersed in his book. The classics, too, were crucial in my understanding of a certain gothic trope that I tried to capture, but also to twist and turn into something modern and unique. *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Tess of the d'Urbvilles*, among others, all held inspiration. Edith Wharton, Jane Austen, as well as modern authors such as Markus Zusak (who wrote *The Book Thief*), Angela Carter, all contributed in their own way to the creation of this story. It is my firm belief that all writers are inherently voracious readers, and without these books, and many, many others, I would not have had the tools and inspiration to fully write this book. It's not just books, either. The movie *Testament of Youth* (which also happens to be a book) lent to me the early 20<sup>th</sup> century picture of Oxford—which was my plan for Andrew's school before replacing it with Cambridge—that inspired me to write chapters about Andrew's collegiate life. *Pride and Prejudice* (again, a movie based on a book—perhaps there is a theme here) visually captured the English countryside so vividly for me, I watched the movie multiple times while writing just to really get the sense of the landscape I wanted to depict.

I had a myriad of influences for this novel, but my favorite story is when I was in Dover with the rest of my new friends who were also studying at Cambridge. Before we hiked the

white cliffs and dipped our toes in the sea, we toured the secret World War Two tunnels. I happened to be particularly stuck on a crucial plot point at the time I explored the tunnels. I could not figure out how Andrew could be presumed dead to Maisy for so long. My research told me that, although things were chaotic, the Germans were particularly organized when it came to their prisoners of war. I initially had Andrew captured later on in the war, to explain away some of the miscommunications, but that left Maisy alone at the Manor for more time than I was comfortable with. In those tunnels at Dover, however, I was struck by inspiration when a tour guide told us that the main operation they conducted in those tunnels during the war was rescuing British soldiers from Dunkirk. Flashes of images from *Atonement* came to me as I recalled the chaos, the destruction, at the Battle of Dunkirk. It was earlier than I wanted Andrew to be captured, but in those tunnels something clicked and I knew what needed to happen. That was when I knew the only way Maisy would leave is if someone told her to, and that someone had to be Kitt. Thus, one of my favorite chapters arose, and my final plot hole was sealed, none of which would have been possible without that tour of the secret Dover tunnels.

This novel is exceptionally special to me. It is two years in the making, and is filled to the brim with literary and cultural inspiration that I tried my very best to weave into the story without inundating it with random, unimportant details. Historical fiction is tricky—one can easily fall into the trap of telling too much, or not enough. I strove for balance, and all I can hope is that the reader feels not just the atmosphere of the various historical times, but also Elisabeth's own feelings and experiences. Maybe this novel makes its readers feel a bit like ghosts themselves—observing, learning, experiencing, just a touch removed from the reality of it all.