



# The Haunted Hotel (Crawshanks Guide to Mischievous Spectres & Spirits #1)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Have a frightfully good stay...

Morgan Ashton-Drake hasn't given his ancestral home in Yorkshire a second thought in decades. He has a great life in the States, running his stepfathers hotel empire with his brother. So what if he's all work and no play. He's not missing out on anything important.

But when a suspicious death and rather public scandal at his childhood home forces Morgan to return to England for the first time in years, he's not keen to confront his past. What he didn't count on was the seriously cute little blonde disaster who seems to be single-handedly running his eccentric grandfather's hotel.

Ellis Sparks has worked at the Ashton-Drake Manor House Hotel since he was sixteen and he loves it from the bottom of his soul. Always the eternal optimist, he's never met a frown he can't turn upside down; that is, until he meets Morgan Ashton-Drake, the grumpy grandson of his employer.

With the hotel in danger of closing, and convinced Morgan is the only one who can help to save it, the resident ghosts decide to try their ghostly hand at a little matchmaking as an incentive to get him to stay. After all, how hard can it be to get a grumpy workaholic to fall in love with a twinkly ray of sunshine?

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“I ’m sorry, no comment.”

I look up and see my best friend, Rosie, slam the phone down with a little more force than necessary.

“Are you okay?” I ask in concern.

“Urgh, reporters... again.” She grimaces. “I’ve lost count of how many calls I’ve taken. There’s only so many ways I can say no comment and remain polite and professional. I’m actually thinking of switching to saying I don’t speak English in a variety of different accents and languages, just to freshen things up a bit.”

I grin. “You don’t speak any other languages.”

“That’s what Google Translate is for. Although,” she muses, “I don’t think it’s very accurate. When I went to the Costa del Sol with Mum and Dennis last summer, I tried to ask the waiter what the specials were, but I think I ended up asking if his goat could water-ski.”

“I bet there’s a video of that somewhere on YouTube,” I offer thoughtfully.

Her brow crinkles. “What, of me butchering the Spanish language?”

“No, a water-skiing goat,” I reply. “You’d be amazed at what you can find on YouTube.”

“Amazed, or slightly traumatised?” Rosie cocks her head. “Somewhere buried deep down in its dark depths is a video of Dennis in his glam-rock days circa 1978.”

“Seriously?”

She nods and grins wickedly. “I’m talking full-on four-inch platform knee-high boots, a shiny unitard, and shoulder pads he’d have to turn sideways to get through a doorway while wearing. Honestly, you’d never think it to look at him now. I mean, he barely has three hairs left in his comb-over, and the man does love an argyle cardigan.”

I snort and grab my phone. “Oh my god, I have to see.” I just can’t picture Rosie’s sweet stepdad rocking out like he’s Slade.

The phone rings again and Rosie picks it up before I can reach it. “Good morning, this is the Ashton-Drake Manor House Hotel. How may I help—” I watch as her eyes narrow and her lips thin. “No comment.” She slams down the phone again and huffs out an annoyed breath. “We’ve already made statements to the police and the press. Why won’t they leave us alone?”

“I know,” I say as I rub her back soothingly. “They will eventually lose interest when something more interesting comes along.”

“Something more interesting?” Rosie stares at me. “Ellis, we live in North Yorkshire with nothing but the moors and a tiny little village full of meddling gossips for company. Nothing interesting ever happens around here. Trust me, they’ll be banging on about this fiasco for decades. It’ll go down in history. In fact, I’ll be surprised if they don’t add it as an addendum to the Doomsday book.”

“Your glass is really half empty today isn’t it, petal?” I hum and continue to stroke her back.

“I wish my glass was more like yours.” She sighs. “Yours isn’t just half full, it’s overflowing with rainbow glitter, fluffy clouds, smiley face emojis, and Care Bears.”

I snort. “Must be a really big glass.”

“How can you be so calm about everything?” Rosie blows out a frustrated breath. “The first annual murder mystery weekend was supposed to be a fresh start for the hotel. A chance to bring in some paying guests. Instead, we got a troupe of actors who didn’t give us a penny and almost ate us out of house and home, not to mention the fact that one of them ended up dead and stuffed in a hidden cupboard. Oh, and we mustn’t forget the icing on the top of a very crappy, almost bankrupt cake—we now seem to have a whole hotel filled with ghosts.”

“I think the ghosts were always here, only now we can see them,” I point out.

“What are we going to do, Ellis?” Her dark eyes fill with worry. “We’re supposed to be trying to save this place from closing, but all we’ve done is make things worse. Who’s going to want to come and stay here now? We can’t even keep staff, let alone guests.”

“We’ll figure it out, Rosie. I promise.”

I wish I could make her feel better. I know things look dire right now. After all, the hotel is still in very real danger of closure. There’s just no money left. Every year the beautiful old estate falls more into disrepair. The owner, Mr Ashton-Drake, now into his eighties, lives up on the fifth floor and never ventures out of his rooms. Over the years, managers have come and gone with alarming frequency, as have staff. There’s only a handful of us left now, but those of us who are still here love this place. I’ve worked here ever since I was sixteen years old and Rosie’s been here since she was eighteen, and neither of us can imagine being anywhere else.

We'd been trying everything we could think of to bring in more guests and, more importantly, more money to keep this place going when Rosie and I came up with the idea of the murder mystery weekend. I had imagined an awesome weekend with a packed hotel full of elegant guests who looked like they'd just stepped out of the pages of an Agatha Christie novel. When, in reality, we got eight guests and a dead body.

A real dead body .

I do feel sorry for the man who died, one of the actors from the murder mystery troupe. I mean, accidentally impaling yourself on a carving knife while practicing Macbeth's soliloquy in secret is probably an embarrassing way to go. But despite Professor Plume's untimely death, I have to say, it was an epic weekend.

Why?

Because we discovered we have ghosts ! Real, actual, honest-to-god ghosts! There were hints and whispers over the years, yes, so many weird happenings that previous guests have commented on in the overabundance of one-star reviews we've managed to accumulate on TripAdvisor, but now the ghosts have finally decided to show themselves to us.

It's pretty thrilling—proof that life after death exists and that it exists here right in these walls. And I do mean literally in the walls. One of the other things we discovered during the murder mystery weekend was a whole host of hidden cupboards, bolt holes, and concealed passageways.

I just need to figure out how to make this all work to the hotel's advantage. There's got to be a way to turn this into a selling point enticing enough to make potential visitors ignore all the negative reviews.

Unfortunately, there's been so much to do over the past week, what with investigations and police coming and going, that I haven't really had a moment to think. We also needed to take care of the remaining guests, making sure they departed safely and weren't going to sue us for mental distress or something equally unpleasant and costly. It all led to a rather packed few days.

Things have finally settled down—other than the constant barrage of phone calls from reporters—but now we're now left with an empty hotel and no idea where to go from here.

I hear Rosie sigh next to me and glance over at her. She's leaning on the reception desk, her chin propped on one hand and the fingers of her other hand tapping out a mindless staccato as she stares forlornly at the deserted foyer.

"I suppose we should take the tree down since we're past New Year's now," she says without much enthusiasm as she glances at the rather sad looking Christmas tree.

"Don't worry, I'll do that," I offer. "Why don't you finish up the paperwork in the office? I'll keep an eye on reception while I start boxing up the decorations."

"Great," she mutters sourly, pushing her round glasses up from where they've slid slightly down her nose. "I can dodge phone calls from the debt collectors and the bank instead of the press."

I give her a small smile. "It'll be okay, Rosie. You'll see."

She sighs again and nods before disappearing through the doorway behind the reception desk and into the office.

"Ah, there you are, Ellis," a voice calls out, and I look across the lobby to see our one and only remaining guest from the murder mystery weekend.

“Good morning, Mr Pennington.” I give a professional smile. “Checking out?”

“What?” He shakes his head as he scurries across the large space and stops in front of me. “No, no. Actually, I’d like to extend my stay.”

“That’s wonderful.” I beam at the small, skinny man. He’s in his thirties, with sandy-coloured hair and a quirky dress sense. My eyes skim over his yellow-checked trousers and bright purple shirt.

Mr Pennington is a horror fiction writer, quite a successful one too, although from what I hear, he hasn’t published anything in the last couple of years. When he first arrived at the hotel just before Christmas, it was with an old-fashioned typewriter tucked under one arm, several suitcases, and a raging case of writer’s block.

He’d seemed subdued and a little deflated if I’m honest. Dressed in much more sombre colours—still with garish patterns, but definitely a more monochrome colour palette—he’d dramatically moped about the hotel like he was Lord Byron. But ever since the whole “murder” incident, he’s perked up enormously. He’s even stopped fainting every time he sees one of the ghosts now.

“I’m writing again, Ellis,” he gushes excitedly, waving his hands about. “The stormy skies have cleared, and I can finally see clearly again. The words and ideas are overflowing in my mind. I need to work, and this is just the place to get those creative juices flowing. It must have been serendipity that brought me here.”

“I thought it was the winter getaway discount.”

Mr Pennington laughs and slaps his hand down on the reception desk. “Ellis, you’re so funny. Anyway, in addition to my own room, I’d like somewhere I can write. I don’t like to work and sleep in the same place. I was thinking maybe the study,” he says.

“You want to work in the room where Professor Plume died?” I reply.

Hmmm, maybe we could host a horror writers retreat or something I think to myself. In fact, if it’s stimulating and creepy ambiance writers want to get their creative juices flowing, perhaps we could pinpoint all the places on the estate bodies have been discovered. I mean, there’s the orchard where Edwina Ashton-Drake froze to death protesting woman’s rights to vote. The window the punk rocker Skid fell out of. The grand ballroom where Leona Falberg-Black died, crushed by a falling stage light when they tried to set up a temporary film studio back in the thirties. I grab a pen and, not seeing a spare piece of paper, scribble a note to myself across my palm, feeling a surge of excitement. Things are looking up already.

Mr Pennington, seeing that I’m lost in a thought tangent, clears his throat. “So, may I? Use the study, that is? I have a feeling that it’s just the place to create my next bestseller.”

Rosie pokes her head through the doorway and fixes her gaze on Mr Pennington. “It’ll cost you extra. The study is part of the private areas and is off-limits to guests. But if you’d like to hire the space to work in, I’m sure Mr Ashton-Drake wouldn’t object.”

“But of course, dear lady,” he declares expansively. “I would be more than happy to compensate—”

“Excellent.” Rosie emerges fully from the office and claps her hands in delight. “Then, if you’d like to follow me, I’ll show you the section of the study you can work in, and we can discuss the price. Although, as it’s technically still a private part of the house, there will be things in there we’d prefer you didn’t touch or move.”

He throws his arm out flamboyantly and almost bows as Rosie passes by. “Absolutely. Please, lead the way.”



He really is a very odd man. It's like someone's turned up a dial on him somewhere. He's gone from mopey greyscale to ostentatious clashing colour, and his personality's been cranked up to match. Still, if he's happy and a paying guest, I'm certainly not going to complain. I wonder if he knows any other writers he might want to recommend the hotel to.

After watching them cross the lobby and head through one of the doors towards the study, I turn back to the desk, trying to remember what it was I was supposed to be doing.

Oh, yes, the Christmas decorations.

"Ellis!" another loud voice bellows.

I jolt in surprise; for an almost empty hotel, it certainly does seem to be busy this morning. Spinning around, I find two of the resident spirits looking at me eagerly. A little thrill runs through me, and I wonder if I'll ever get used to not only knowing ghosts are real but also having them just manifest whenever and wherever.

"Beatrice." I grin at the short, plump woman wearing tweed plus twos with knee-high checked woollen socks and sensible lace-up shoes. Her rather ample chest is barely constrained by a beige knitted sweater, a white shirt collar folded neatly over the neck. She's also wearing a tweed jacket with brown leather elbow pads.

Her short, wiry grey hair is sticking up all over the place, making it look as if she'd been electrocuted, which I know for a fact she wasn't. Beatrice Ashton-Drake died in 1972 from a heart attack; in fact, her portrait hangs along the east stairwell.

"I told you to call me Bertie, lad," she booms heartily.

"Bertie." I nod, my mouth a permanent smile by now. Seriously, I must look like The

Joker, but I can't help it. I'm talking to a real live ghost in her ancestral home. An ancestral home where I live and work. It's so exciting!

"Oh, look. The twinkly little ray of sunshine is almost speechless, Bertie." Roger cackles in delight. "Fleshies are such fun! Who knew?"

"Why do you call us fleshies?" I ask curiously.

The ghost known as Roger lights a long, slim cigarette and inhales, then exhales an elegant stream of smoke and says in a soft, posh accent, "well, it's pretty self-explanatory, darling."

He hops up and perches on the edge of the reception desk, one leg crossed demurely across the other. Although there is nothing demure about Roger. He's wearing tiny white shorts, which are barely more than hot pants, and his white socks, matching his white tennis shoes, are folded neatly just beneath his knees. He has a lemon-coloured sweater wrapped around his shoulders and its arms are knotted in front, over a white collared short-sleeved shirt.

He's a very pretty man, his pristine short blond hair parted neatly to the side and a matching blonde moustache gracing his upper lip. He also has a tennis racket in one hand, propped against his shoulder.

Roger had been a tennis instructor at the estate, and had died back in 1954 when he choked to death on a Swedish meatball.

"What can I do for you both?" I ask politely.

"We have an announcement to make." Roger waves the hand holding his cigarette airily. I'm glad the cigarette ash is as incorporeal as he is. "Bertie, do you want to do the honours?"

“Why, thank you, Roger. I would rather.” Bertie grins at the skinny man before turning to me. “Ellis, as Roger and I are the self-appointed representatives of the resident ghosts here at Ashton House,” Bertie begins.

“The Ashton-Drake,” I correct.

“Pfft.” Bertie scoffs. “That may be what my nephew called it when he opened it as a hotel, but it’s always been Ashton House... and don’t interrupt, lad.”

“Sorry,” I say contritely.

“Now where was I?” Bertie frowns.

“Self-appointed representatives.”

“Ah yes, marvellous. Thank you, Roger.”

“You’re welcome, Bertie.”

“Anyway, as I was saying,” Bertie continues, “as the self-appointed representatives of the spirits and spectres of Ashton House, Roger and I have designated you as our living liaison to the spirit community here in the house and grounds.”

“Really?” I reply, the exhilaration bubbling over and making me want to dance on the spot like an over-excited two-year-old. “And what exactly does a living liaison to the spectres and spirits of the house and grounds actually do?”

“Oh, um.” She turns to Roger, who shrugs and looks a bit bewildered, as if they hadn’t quite planned that far ahead. From what I’ve seen and heard recently, this seems to be on par for this spectral double act. “Yes, well.” She waves one hand nonchalantly. “We’ll figure that all out. What do you say?”

“Uh, yes? I guess?” Although I’m not really sure what I’m agreeing to, it’s so cool. I mean, how many people can say they are the living liaison to an estate full of ghosts?

“Splendid.” Bertie slaps her thigh. “Now, first order of business on today’s agenda. Save the hotel. It has been brought to our attention that this place may not be doing too well. Financially, that is. Having run this estate myself while I was alive, I am well aware of the cost of keeping up a property of this age, size, and historical significance. However, it cannot be allowed to fall to rack and ruin. Therefore, we need a plan posthaste.”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to do, Bertie,” I reply with a sigh. “It’s easier said than done.”

“Nonsense, boy.” Bertie’s tone is brusque as she rubs her hands together. “Now, Roger and I have come up with a plan.”

“A brilliant plan,” Roger emphasises with an eager nod.

“A brilliant plan,” Bertie agrees. “We need something to draw in guests, and what’s more exciting than the idea of staying at a real haunted hotel?”

“As awesome as that sounds—and seriously, it sounds epic—I’m not sure, Bertie,” I muse. “I mean, isn’t there a reason you’re not supposed to show yourselves to the living? Won’t you get into trouble?”

“Pfft,” Bertie sniffs. “No...” She pauses and frowns. “At least, I don’t think so. Besides, we’re not planning on showing ourselves to just anyone willy-nilly. I mean much more subtle stuff. Flying crockery, rattling chains—”

“Ghostly moans.” Roger winks.

“Ghostly moans.” Bertie nods. “Roger’s been practicing.”

“I’m sure he has.” I snort, then chew my lip thoughtfully as I study the mismatched spectral duo. “I suppose we could, it is a good idea, but it’s a bit of a fine line.”

“What is?”

“Well,” I shrug. “I get the whole ‘titillate them with a whiff of the paranormal,’ but we don’t actually want anyone to have a heart attack or leave here fully traumatised and ready to sue.”

“Killjoy.”

“Also, we have to actually get guests here in the first place,” I murmur to myself as I start churning over various ideas in my head.

“That’s where you come in, Mr Liaison.” Bertie beams. “You get them here, lad, and leave the rest to us.”

“You won’t scare them too badly though, will you?”

“Pay attention, lad,” Bertie huffs. “We want them to be talking about their stay. You know, spreading the word.”

“Hmm,” I hum a little worriedly at the level of Bertie’s zeal.

“I thought you were supposed to be the optimistic one?” Bertie huffs loudly and rolls her eyes. “Maybe we should’ve chosen the chubby girl.”

“Don’t call her that,” I admonish her. “That’s really rude, and Rosie’s beautiful just the way she is.”

“I know that,” Bertie replies with a wink. “Trust me, I like a girl with an ample backside to grasp onto.”

“Uh, I think we’re getting a little off track here.” I shake my head. “Bertie, I am an optimist. I’m certain we’ll figure out a plan to save the hotel, but right now, I can’t just magic fresh guests out of thin air for you to scare. We can barely afford to keep the electricity running. There’s no money for a marketing campaign to bring in new visitors.”

“Well, that’s up to you to figure out. I have the utmost confidence in you.”

“But I—”

Bertie and Roger wink out of sight before I’ve managed to complete my sentence, and I find myself talking to an empty lobby.

I blow out a breath. Okay, then. I shake my head and laugh; I guess I might as well busy myself with taking down the Christmas tree and giving the lobby a good clean. Hopefully, the distraction will help me think up some new ideas for filling the rooms because we really are running out of time. With the creditors practically banging down the door, I need to come up with a plan.

I mean, it’s not like the solution to all our problems is just going to come strolling through the front door.

The cab—or rather, taxi—pulls up to my destination and I lean forward in my seat to hand over a few bills, notes, whatever the Brits call them. The driver thanks me and launches into yet another convoluted story involving a previous passenger, and I can't get the handle on the door open fast enough. If I have to sit through one more inane conversation with the man, I may lose the will to live.

Flinging open the door, I hustle out as quickly as possible. My foot is immediately submerged in freezing wetness. Looking down, I grimace at a pothole in the driveway that is filled with a muddy, snowy slush—and that I'm now standing in. My teeth grind as I clench my jaw against a fresh wave of irritation. I don't need a mirror to know the glower that has cowered entire boardrooms has once again graced my features.

Annoyed that my favourite Ferragamos are now ruined thanks to the poorly maintained driveway, I reach back into the cab and retrieve my suitcase, garment bag, and laptop case. Shutting the door, I cut off the driver, who is still mid-sentence and doesn't seem to require my input in the conversation. I turn toward the entrance and look up at the hotel.

The cab pulls away and I suck in a sharp breath at the sudden chilly slush splattering the back of my pants and cashmere overcoat. Momentarily closing my eyes, I draw in a slow breath and search for the little patience I had which I seem to have left behind when I boarded my flight at JFK.

The wind tugs at my coat and my feet are damp inside my ruined shoes, but I don't

head inside, not yet. Instead, I take a moment to look around. The hotel is surrounded by fields and edged in the distance by towering trees and woodland. A thick, pristine blanket of snow covers the grounds, creating a picturesque view.

Everything is so still and silent.

For a moment, I wonder idly when I last stopped and took a breath. The truth is, I can't remember. Eighteen-hour workdays seven days a week have been my norm since my twenties, a work ethic deeply ingrained in me by my late stepfather. He'd been a good man—a workaholic, sure, but a good man, nonetheless.

My body shivers and I frown. It's not even that cold here. After all, living in New York City most of my life, I'm used to winters a helluva lot colder. I may not have been born there, but my mom was and it's the city where I grew up.

Speaking of where I was born...

I tear my gaze away from the scenery and once again stare up at the hotel. It looks a bit like a castle. Directly in front of me is a set of stairs that lead up to a huge oak door surrounded by a stone archway. To the right of the stairs is a statue of a knight riding a horse. His sword is raised high, although it's difficult to make out the details as, like everything else, he's covered in a deep layer of snow.

To the left of the stairs is a lamppost that looks like it's been pulled from the pages of a Dickens novel. Not that I've ever actually read one. The hotel—and I use that word very loosely—is at least five storeys high with square turrets at either side.

So this is the place I came into the world.

It's strange knowing that I was born and lived the first six years of my life here. I have no memory of it at all. Although, it's no great loss. I can't imagine anything



profound happened to me in those early years. Sometimes I wish I could remember my birth father and the time I spent here with him and my mom, but there's nothing. My earliest memories are of my life back in the States.

After my dad died, Mom moved us back to New York where she was from. A year later, she met and married my stepfather, and two years later, my brother Warren was born. I'd thought maybe being here would jolt some kind of memory but apparently not. There's nothing, not even a hint of familiarity or a vague sense of *déjà vu*.

Shaking the thoughts from my mind, I reach for the handle on my suitcase and remind myself I'm not here to take a stroll down memory lane or rekindle a nonexistent love for a drafty old wreck of a house and the bleak English countryside. This is not the opener of a Hallmark movie. I'm here for one purpose alone: to see my grandfather and find out what the hell is going on in this place.

To be honest, I'd rather just ignore this side of my family tree as I have done for the past thirty three years. They've shown no interest in me and the feeling was entirely reciprocal until now. Why couldn't my grandfather just retire quietly and hunt some foxes or whatever the eccentric British upper classes do instead of causing scandals that manage to travel across the Atlantic and have the press knocking down my door for a juicy scoop?

I don't know how the hell they managed to connect the dots and put my name together with a failing hotel, a notoriously eccentric family, and a run of scandals and suspicious deaths that date back decades, but they did. Not good publicity for the hotel empire that my brother and I inherited from my stepfather.

I'm really not a sentimental person, and I feel no responsibility towards a family I may be descended from but have no real ties to. In fact, I'd rather not be here at all. God, I can't think of anything worse than rattling around in an old castle with nothing but the nearby grazing sheep and horses for company.

I shudder at the thought.

At the very least, I require a hint of civilisation, and this place? Looks and feels like the back of nowhere. Sighing heavily, I grab my suitcase and bags. Heading up the stairs, I try not to grimace as my soaked feet squelch inside my ruined shoes. When I open the door and step inside, it's to find the foyer surprisingly warm. I'd expected it to be cold and drafty. It looks as run-down as the outside of the building and has a slightly musty scent to the air like all old buildings in the UK seem to.

The foyer is huge, more like an entrance hall, with vaulted ceilings and wooden beams from which hang rather dusty... well, I can't call them chandeliers since there's not a single crystal in sight nor do they in any way have the elegance you'd expect in a hotel lobby. These look like they've been transplanted from a medieval hall. Huge circular frames made of heavy black metal with fake candles sitting atop them, strung from the high ceilings and beams by thick chains.

Tied between two beams and drooping slightly in one corner is a large banner that reads "Welcome To The Ashton-Drake Manor House Hotel's First Annual Murder Mystery Weekend!" I scowl at the reminder of the latest scandal.

Still, I'm not here to critique the décor. I'm here to see my estranged grandfather.

The floor is flagstone and covered by fraying rugs so worn that the pattern is no longer discernible. Directly up ahead, some distance from me, a rather grand-looking staircase leads to a small landing where an enormous Tudor-era portrait hangs on the wall. The staircase then splits in two, curving to the left and right and out of sight, and a tall, gleaming suit of armour stands on a wooden plinth tucked into the corner at the right-hand side.

To my immediate left is a reception desk. I'm about to head in that direction when I hear someone humming a Christmas song, which is weird and kind of annoying

considering it's now the second week of January. I turn in the direction of the happy humming and find a sofa and chairs littered with open boxes spilling over with Christmas decorations. Beside the mess is a large Christmas tree, and propped in front of that is a tall ladder with a rather slim person in a white shirt and black pants and vest—who I'm assuming is a member of staff—standing at the very top. My shoulders stiffen when they teeter rather precariously while attempting to unwrap a string of fairy lights from the tree's spindly upper branches.

Dropping my bags beside the front desk, I cross the floor quickly to the foot of the ladder. Now that I'm closer, I can see that the person is, in fact, a young man with very curly blonde hair. He's balanced on the very top rung of the rickety old ladder, his arms full of twinkling fairy lights. My stomach clenches as I watch him reach up even further and attempt to untangle more wire from the tree.

“Hey!” I call up at him.

He glances over his shoulder and I just have time to register the bluest eyes I've ever seen when the ladder sways alarmingly. The pretty man yelps as he windmills his arms sending the winding loops of fairy lights flying haphazardly into the air.

Instinctively, I stumble forward, holding my arms out as he falls backwards. The ladder shoots in the opposite direction and crashes into the tree right when he lands in my arms.

I look down, and register that he's even prettier close up.

He's somewhere in his twenties, I'd guess. Too young for me. Shame, I think to myself. Those deep ocean-blue siren eyes, framed by darker blonde lashes, are wide as he stares at me. His skin is fair and he has high cheekbones and a full, pouty mouth just begging to be kissed.

“Wow, you’re really strong,” he says brightly and those sinful lips curve into a wide smile.

I blink slowly. It’s like being blinded by the sun.

“I... er.” My brain seems to have short-circuited.

“Welcome to the Ashton-Drake Manor House Hotel.” He continues to beam from my arms. “How may I help you?”

“Looks like you’re the one who needs help.” I scowl at the few flashing fairy light strands that somehow ended up wrapped around him.

“Thank you for catching me,” he says happily. “That was very kind.”

“Kind?” I feel my scowl deepen. Is this kid for real? “You could’ve seriously hurt yourself. Where’s the rest of the staff? Where’s the manager? You shouldn’t have been up that ladder on your own without any help. That’s got to be against regulations.”

“It’s fine.” He shrugs. “It’s not the first time I’ve fallen off the ladder. Last time, the sofa broke my fall, and the time before that, I was only halfway up so it didn’t really hurt all that much, although I did end up with a really big bruise on my—”

“Where’s the manager?” I demand again as I cut him off. If this is the way they run this place, no wonder there are so many accidents and scandals. I look around, expecting one to magically appear, and it’s then I realise I’m still holding him in my arms.

I clear my throat and carefully set him on his feet.

“What?” He blinks, registering my curt tone and question. “Oh, we don’t have one.”

“You don’t have a manager?” I repeat slowly and he nods.

“The last one was Mr Lance. He left just after Christmas, refused to work under these conditions. Apparently.”

“What conditions?” My eyes narrow suspiciously, but the tiny blonde man just shrugs.

“I don’t know, he didn’t say,” he replies, clearly unperturbed by the lack of manager or explanations. “I’m Ellis.” He holds out his hand.

Despite my irritable mood, my manners have me reaching out and I clasp his warm hand in my much larger one.

“Morgan Ash—” I trail off as I catch a glimpse of something and turn his palm up to read the words scribbled across his skin in pen.

Dead bodies

I glance back at him and raise one eyebrow.

“Oh.” He laughs. “Just an idea.”

“Just. An. Idea.” I repeat slowly. “For what?” I ask in incomprehension.

“The hotel.” He blinks slowly as if it should be obvious. “For extra income.”

“What are you gonna do?” My brow creases in confusion “A serial killers convention? Turn one of the fields and the woodland into a cadaver farm?”

He stares at me. “I don’t know what that is.”

I shake my head. “Never mind.” Given everything that’s happened here recently, I’m not sure I’d like any answer he offered. The best thing to do is speak with my grandfather as soon as possible and then get back on the next flight to the States. “Look... Ellis, is it?”

He nods and then his gaze tracks over to my bags set neatly beside the desk. “Are you checking in?” He brightens.

“Uh, yes.” I frown. “But, I came to see—”

I’m cut off once again when Ellis, forgetting he’s still wrapped in twinkling fairy lights, moves towards the front desk. Before I can open my mouth to say anything, his feet tangle in the wires. He trips and falls, disappearing behind the plush armchair with a loud oomph as he hits the floor. Unfortunately for him, one string of lights is still attached to half of the tree. I watch wordlessly, my mouth falling open as it topples over and lands straight on top of Ellis.

God damn, is this guy always this disaster-prone? I’m surprised he hasn’t accidentally burned the place down. Although that would solve one of my problems.

I grab the tree and pull it off him, propping it back upright before I reach down for him. “Are you okay?”

Ellis scrambles to his feet and brushes the pine needles from his uniform, then unravels himself from the lights. “Whoops,” he says with a small self-deprecating giggle that I should not find charming. “I’m fine, thank you, no permanent damage.”

I shake my head incredulously; it didn’t even dim his smile. Ellis tosses the lights at the foot of the tree and then heads across the lobby, leaving a trail of glitter and tinsel

in his wake.

“There now.” He scoots behind the desk and opens a large book. “Let’s get you booked in.”

“With that?” I eye the ledger. “You don’t have an online booking system? What is this? The Dark Ages?”

“You’re such a kidder.” He chuckles. “We do have a computer, but it’s not working at the moment.”

My gaze follows the direction he’s pointing and I’m not surprised it’s not working. It’s a squat, boxy thing that’s yellowed with age.

“Jesus, where the hell did you find that?”

“We did have a more up-to-date one,” Ellis replies. “But it got broken last week when the...” he trails off and shakes his head. “Uh... you know what? Doesn’t matter. It was broken by accident along with quite a few other things. We found this one, so we figured we’d use it temporarily.”

“You found it?” I stare at him. “Where? 1986?”

“In the attic, although we haven’t been able to get it to work yet.”

“No kidding.” I shake my head and sigh. “Look, I’m here to see my grand—” I break off as the coffee cup which had been sitting on top of the desk suddenly moves. By itself. It skids across the polished wood and stops in front of Ellis. “What the...?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” Ellis waves his hand airily. “It’s just the ghosts.”

“Ghosts?” I reply, considering his words and then shake my head. “Cute gimmick, but I don’t think it’ll help you much from the looks of this place. Is it always this empty?” I ask and look over my shoulder once again at the silent lobby.

“Hmm, sometimes but not always.”

“Never mind,” I mutter, and my eyes once again fall on the cup, which now turns in a slow circle. “What are you using on that mug?” I lean over the desk to study it more closely. “Magnets?”

“Do you mind?” Ellis sighs.

“Excuse me?” My eyes narrow at his tone.

“Oh, not you,” he clarifies. “I was talking to Roger.”

I once again look over my shoulder in case someone has entered the room without my knowledge, but there’s no one. Just me and the quirky little blonde.

“Who’s Roger?”

“The tennis instructor,” Ellis replies.

“You have a tennis instructor?” I frown. “Do you even have a tennis court here?”

“Well, no,” Ellis admits. “If I’m being honest, not since 1963.”

“Jesus. I must be more jet-lagged than I thought because I’m not following at all.”

“Do you have a booking?” Ellis lifts his pen and clicks it.



“Uh no,” I murmur, mesmerised as I watch the mug slide back and forth in a lazy figure eight across the counter. “Sorry, could you switch that off or whatever?” I scowl. “It’s really distracting.”

Ellis glares at something, I’m not sure what, but the mug grinds to a halt.

Weird.

“Well, it’s not a problem if you don’t have a booking,” Ellis says brightly. “We have plenty of lovely rooms to choose from.”

“I’m sure you do,” I reply, “but actually, I’m here to see my—”

“Name?” Ellis asks.

“Morgan Ashton-Drake.”

“Oh!” Ellis gives a merry laugh. “What a coincidence. The owner of the hotel has the same name.”

“How ’bout that,” I say flatly.

“I mean, it’s a very unusual name,” Ellis continues. “What are the odds?”

“Pretty high I’d say.” My tone is dry. “I’m here to see my grandfather.”

“That’s nice,” he smiles sweetly. “Is he local?”

“My grandfather, Cedric Ashton-Drake,” I prompt.

“Mr Ashton-Drake is your grandfather!” Ellis exclaims, finally connecting the dots.

“That’s wonderful. How lovely! He’s going to be so happy to see you!”

We stand in silence for several long seconds with him smiling at me, and I find myself inadvertently losing my trail of thought again.

“So can I, then?” I finally ask.

“Can you what?”

“See him,” I clarify.

“Oh no.” Ellis shakes his head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Why?” I exhale sharply, getting more frustrated by the moment. He may be pretty as hell but right now I don’t have the patience for this.

“He’s taking a nap.”

I glance down at my watch. “At ten thirty in the morning?”

“Mr Ashton-Drake keeps…” Ellis twists those tempting plump lips, searching for the right word. “Unconventional hours,” he finishes.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Fine. Can you just give me a room, then? It’s been a long flight and I’d like to wash up.”

“Wash up what?” Ellis asks.

I sigh. “Myself.”

“Of course,” he replies. “I’ll give you our nicest room. It’s got a beautiful view of the

moors and with all the snow, it's so picturesque right now."

"Great," I say with little enthusiasm. "Is there someone who can take my bags up?"

"Oh, that'll be me." Ellis darts out from behind the desk and hooks the garment bag over his shoulder, then reaches for my suitcase and starts dragging it towards the staircase.

"I thought you were on the front desk?"

"I am," he says. I shake my head, too weary to question it.

"Oh, mind Brad. He has a tendency to fall over at random moments," Ellis says as he struggles with my case, hauling it up the first few steps like it's filled with bricks.

"Who's Brad?"

"That's Brad." He nods towards the suit of armour on the plinth.

"Uh-huh," I murmur.

"Well, his name's not actually Brad. His name's Sir Devron Penhalen. He gets really grumpy when we call him Brad, but it's a habit. I've worked here over ten years, and it's what we've always called him. We only recently found out his actual name, but some habits are hard to break."

"It's a suit of armour," I say slowly.

"Yes."

"Not an actual person," I point out. "It once belonged to a person. Giving it a name

would be like naming your pants and vest.”

He chuckles and heaves the suitcase up another step.

“Here, let me.” I trot up the first few steps and take the case off him. “Don’t you have an elevator here?”

“You mean a lift?” Ellis asks, then shakes his head.

“What do you do for disabled access for guests?”

“People tend to leave here in a wheelchair rather than arrive in one,” interrupts a gruff female voice with a heavy Scottish accent.

I glance over my shoulder and see a small, plump woman in chef’s whites march through the lobby, gripping a meat cleaver in one hand and a burlap sack in the other.

My eyes widen and I’m almost afraid to ask.

“Stew and dumplings tonight, Ellis,” the woman says briskly, and doesn’t even spare us a glance as she opens another door and heads through, leaving us once again alone.

“That’s Aggie, she makes the best dumplings!” Ellis grins. “You’re in for a treat tonight.”

“This place is crazy,” I mutter.

“Come on.” Ellis starts up the steep stairs, still clutching my garment bag, and I follow behind him with my suitcase and laptop bag.

By the time we’ve reached the fourth floor, which is apparently where my room is

located, I'm almost wheezing.

"Are you sure you don't have an elevator?" I lean against the polished mahogany banister to catch my breath. I'll say one thing for the staff. The place may be run-down and firmly lodged in a previous century, but it's ruthlessly clean. Not so much as a spiderweb or speck of dust anywhere.

"Sorry." Ellis shakes his head. "We do have some disabled access rooms on the ground floor, but the rest of the house is accessed by stairs only."

"Is it much further?" I push myself up and extend the handle on my case so I can wheel it to the room.

"Just round the corner."

After a moment of twisting hallways decorated with faded silk wallpaper and dull-looking portraits, we arrive at room 419.

"Here we are. This is the block of rooms we use as honeymoon suites," he announces proudly.

"Excuse me?" My brows rise.

"They're the nicest rooms we have and the ones with the most up-to-date bathrooms." He leans in closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "They even have whirlpool bathtubs."

What is this? 1998? Who even has whirlpool baths anymore? That's what hot tubs are for.

"Uh, thanks." I watch him unlock the door, but when it swings open, my heart jolts in

shock as we come face-to-face with a giant of a man.

He looks like an ex-marine. His stoic face is clean-shaven and his head is bald. He's wearing black pants and a black polo shirt with a name tag, and weirdly enough, he also has a little white frilly apron on, the kind of thing that would be part of a sexy French maid's outfit. In his hand is a fluffy pink duster.

I lean in a fraction to read his name tag: John, the Maid.

The scary-looking guy gives me a slow once-over, starting at my face and traveling down my body. His eyes narrow as he takes in my damp coat and its mud splashes from the puddle to my soggy shoes, which leave a damp imprint on the carpet. His eyes narrow further.

"There you are, John," Ellis greets him warmly, as if the man doesn't look like he's about to murder me for dirtying the floor. "This is our newest guest, Mr Ashton-Drake. He's Mr Ashton-Drake's grandson. Isn't that exciting!"

John the maid growls in my direction and I find myself wanting to take an involuntary step back. "I'll be watching you, four-one-nine."

Before I can say anything, he strides past us and down the hallway.

"What the—" I mutter.

"That's just John." Ellis lets himself into my room, leaving me to grasp at the door so it doesn't swing shut in my face. "He doesn't tend to remember names, just room numbers, but he's a sweetheart. Just don't drop crumbs on the bed or leave toothpaste smeared on the sink and he's as sweet as a baby."

I glance around at the room and I'm forced to admit it's not terrible. I mean, yeah, it's

dated and very, very British, but it's got a kind of quirky charm to it, I guess, with its huge wooden-framed bed and plush bedding, polished dark wood furniture and pale green walls. There are fresh flowers on the dresser and a light lemony scent to the air. There's also a huge fireplace.

"Well, I'll let you settle in." Ellis lays my bag on the bed and heads back towards the door. "Lunch will be served in an hour and a half if you're hungry. Aggie's sandwiches are the best. Today it's beef with her homemade horseradish sauce. That's a spicy, peppery sauce, by the way."

"I do know what horseradish is." I barely resist the urge to scowl.

He grins. "Well, Aggie's is the best."

"So you said."

"Anyway, I'll let you unpack. If you need anything else, let us know." He pauses at the door and turns back to me. "Oh, and don't worry if the furniture moves."

"Why would you be moving the furniture?" I ask, but he's already gone and the door is slowly swinging closed with an ominous creak.

"This place is crazy," I mutter to myself.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:30 pm*

3

“Did you see that?” I say rather gleefully as I look down at Roger, who is also peeking around the corner with me. “A fresh one to practice on.”

“I certainly did see him.” Roger hums in appreciation. “Hel-lo, Daddy.”

“Roger, will you stop thinking with your... tennis racquet?” I sigh. “This is serious.”

“So am I,” he says in delight. “I wouldn’t mind playing a few sets with him. He looks like he knows what to do with a pair of balls if you know what I mean.”

“Unfortunately, I do,” I grumble, watching as Ellis disappears down the hall, leaving my great-great-nephew in one of the rooms with a fancy bath. “He grew up handsome,” I mutter. “I’ll give him that.”

“What was that, Bertie?” Roger asks as the hallway swirls and disappears. Moments later, the library solidifies around us. I’ve got to say it’s a jolly handy way to travel, unlike when we were alive and had to walk everywhere. Dashed inconvenient.

“I said he’s nice-looking for a chap. Unlike my other nephew, Clifford—the man looked like a bad tempered possum. A drunk one at that. Still, at least Morgan is descended from Cedric, who was much more agreeable. Morgan’s mother was a looker, too, if I recall. Pretty young American thing, smashing backside.”

“They came along after you died, didn’t they?” Roger hops up onto the desk and lights a cigarette.



“That’s right.” I scratch my chin. “Shame what happened to Morgan’s father.”

“I remember that,” Roger nods, uncharacteristically sombre. “Shame,” he agrees.

“I wonder why he’s back,” I muse. “Haven’t seen the boy since he was small. After what happened to Elliott, Morgan’s mother, Lilian, whipped him back to America faster than you can say immigration.”

“Do you think he’s come to save the hotel?” Roger brightens. “He looks like he’s got money.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Darling.” Roger breathes out an elegant stream of smoke. “I can sniff out a sugar daddy at twenty paces. Trust me, Morgan comes from money and it’s certainly not from this side of the family.” He purses his lips, his thin moustache wrinkling. “What do you remember of his mother?”

“She was from America, working-class family.” I cast my mind back. “She wasn’t a bad sort but make no mistake, she was looking to marry up. I believe she did love Morgan’s father, but I suspect there was some calculation there, at least in the very beginning.”

“Hmm.” Roger taps his fingers along his thigh. “Maybe Ellis can convince him to invest some money in the place. After all, as the only remaining heir, he is going to inherit when Cedric’s time comes.”

“Ellis?”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Bertie. I swear, if it doesn’t have a bum like a beach ball and a cleavage you can ski down, you don’t pay attention, do you?”

“I resent that implication.” I sniff. “I’ve met plenty of lovely fillies who’ve been a bit more on the skinny side.”

“Name one.”

“This isn’t about me,” I remind him. “Now what do you mean about Ellis?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Roger muses. “But honestly, Morgan looked at him like he was the last square of chocolate and he’d run out of ration tokens.”

“What?”

Roger sighs. “He fancies him.”

“Are you sure?” I eye him suspiciously.

“Oh, trust me. I know when a man’s interested, and our little ray of sunlight is a delicious treat. We just need to figure out how this can work to our advantage.”

“That’s awfully devious, Roger.” I chuckle.

“Why thank you, Bertie.”

“A-hem.”

We both turn at the unexpected sound of someone clearing their throat. I blink in surprise to find a tall, broad fellow wearing a brown pin striped suit and standing by the closed door to the library. His hair is medium-brown and he has a nice-looking if unremarkable face. There’s a clipboard in one of his hands and he has a brown leather satchel hooked over one shoulder by a thin strap. His form flickers, momentarily transparent, before he re-solidifies.

“Who the devil are you?” I scowl at him. “This is private property. We can’t have just any old spirits wandering around the place willy-nilly.”

The intruder raises a subtle brow and tuts disapprovingly. “I’m from the Bureau of Domestic Hauntings,” he announces. “Stanley Fitzgerald Longbottom.”

“Roger Palmer... Bossy Bottom,” Roger introduces himself with a saucy wink.

“I know exactly who you are, Mr Palmer,” Stanley says as he withdraws a pen from his breast pocket. “And you too, Miz Ashton-Drake.”

“Bertie,” I correct.

“Indeed,” he murmurs. “I’m afraid I have to inform you that you are in quite a bit of trouble.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It has come to the Bureau’s attention that, on the night of the thirtieth of December, you and the other ghosts residing here at Ashton House did, in fact, expose yourselves.”

“Ooh, that does sound ever so naughty when you put it like that.” Roger licks his teeth gleefully.

“You have broken article three-fourteen, sub paragraph six-b, in reference to the bylaws governing interaction between corporeal and noncorporeal entities.”

“Pardon?” I blink.

“You let the living see you,” he elucidates, his dark brows drawing down in

disapproval.

“Oh, that.” I shrug. “I’ll admit in the spirit of things we may have got a little carried away.”

“A little carried away?” he repeats. “You showed yourself to no less than”—he glances down at his clipboard and flips up the front page, scanning down the notes beneath it—“nine guests, five actors, and four members of staff. Not to mention the destruction of property.”

“It was technically my property,” I reply.

“Not anymore, it’s not,” he states. “The moment you died, it passed to your next of kin. There are rules for a reason. Do you have any idea what would happen if everyone knew about the existence of the spirit realms?”

“Less séances?” I offer.

“I’m afraid you are now under a full investigation. All of you,” he adds, staring at Roger, who has simply lit another cigarette and is watching in amusement.

I scoff. “What do you mean investigation?”

“I mean there are laws governing our interactions with the living, laws all ghosts must adhere to. You’ve already broken several of them, and I’m here to ascertain the level of damage done. I will be conducting a full audit of the house and its deceased residents.”

“I say,” I splutter indignantly. “You can’t do that.”

“I can assure you I do have the necessary authority,” he says in a tone that brooks no

nonsense.

“And what happens if we don’t pass your little audit?” Roger waves the hand holding his cigarette nonchalantly.

“Then all the spirits will be banished from the house and sent directly to the afterlife. The house and its grounds will remain an inactive black zone, which means no further hauntings within its boundaries will be permitted for a period of no less than one hundred years, after which time a review may be requested but not necessarily granted.”

“I say, hang it all. That’s jolly unfair,” I protest.

“Then I suggest you cooperate with my investigation and stay out of any further trouble.”

“When you say trouble...” Roger smiles.

“Roger,” I hiss, sending him a warning glare before turning back to Stanley Gerald Fitzbottom or whatever his name is. “What exactly does this investigation entail?” I ask suspiciously.

“I shall be residing within the house for the duration. I shall also be interviewing all the resident ghosts and reviewing all interactions with the living.”

“Until when?” I narrow my eyes.

“Until I’m satisfied I have the full picture of just what is going on within these walls,” he answers. “Then I shall be writing a report and submitting it to my superiors. Whether it recommends that you be allowed to remain here or be relocated to the afterlife is entirely up to you.”

“Fine,” I say with a grudging huff. “Roger?”

Roger flicks his cigarette and before it can hit the floor, it winks out of existence. He hops nimbly down from the desk and skips over to my side.

“You know me, Bertie darling. I promise I’ll be on my best behaviour.” He gives Stanley a slow sultry smile. “I’m always a good boy.”

“Good lord.” I roll my eyes.

“I’m glad that’s settled,” Stanley says. “Now, then.” He returns his attention to his clipboard. “I’ll need to see a copy of your license.”

“License?” I blink.

“Your license to haunt?” His pen is poised above the paper as he stares at me. “All properties must have the correct licensing before any ghosts take residence.”

I stare blankly at him and he tuts again.

“No license,” he mutters and writes something on his clipboard, then looks back up at me. “Who is your union rep?”

“Our what?”

He shakes his head and clucks his tongue. “No Union rep-re-sent-a-tive.” He mouths the words as he writes slowly.

I glance across at Roger.

“Right.” Stanley flips the page over and scans down his list. “Could you tell me

where I can find a... Miss Edwina Ashton-Drake?"

"The orchard," both Roger and I chorus.

It was, after all, where my aunt Edwina died back in 1902. Fired up by news of Emmaline Pankhurst and the suffragette movement, she decided she too was going to protest women's rights to vote and whilst an admirable sentiment, her execution of her convictions lacked a degree of planning and common sense.

She embroidered herself a sash and took herself off the orchard where she chained herself to a tree on the farthest side of the property. However, it was, in fact, the dead of winter and rather unfortunately for her, she neglected to tell anyone she was protesting. They found her two days later frozen to death. Back when I was alive and ran the estate, she had an awful habit of constantly turning the heating up.

"Excellent." Stanley nods, clicking his pen closed and tucking it back in his breast pocket. Pinning the clipboard under one arm, he reaches into his satchel and withdraws an absolutely bloody enormous leather-bound tome. This, he hands to Roger, who stumbles under its weight, collapsing to the floor like my mother after a few too many sherries.

"There must be over a thousand pages in that thing," I mutter as I turn to look at Stanley.

"Ten thousand, four hundred and seventy-six, to be precise," he informs me.

"Is that Mary Poppins' bag you've got there?" I eye his satchel, wondering how on earth he managed to fill that impossibly thick volume inside. Honestly, the book is the size of three doorsteps stacked atop each other.

"That is the complete volume of laws and guidelines regarding the conduct of spirits

and their interaction with the living world.”

I gape at him. “All ten thousand, four hundred and seventy-six pages?”

“Yes, so you’d better get reading.” He nods. “I’ll return later, once I’ve spoken with Miss Edwina.”

I open my mouth to respond, but he’s gone.

“Help, please,” Roger wheezes.

I glance down at him lying on his back on the library floor, the heavy doorstep of a book pinning him by the chest. His face has turned pink.

I manage to shuffle it off him and it drops to the floor with a thud.

Offering my hand, I help Roger climb to his feet. My brow furrows in worry. How on earth are we supposed to draw in new guests to a haunted hotel if we’re not allowed to actually haunt it? How are we supposed to save our home?

“I say, Roger,” I murmur. “I think we might be in a spot of bother.”



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:30 pm*

4

I dart down the corridor and around the corner before I let myself collapse back against the wall. With a shaky laugh, I lift my hand to my chest and feel my heart hammering against my rib cage.

Oh my goodness, Morgan Ashton-Drake is so handsome and so strong. He caught me in his arms like I weighed nothing... and those dark dreamy eyes of his. I had to fight to remain professional when all I wanted to do was cling onto him like a koala.

I wonder how old he is. There's grey at his temples, highlighting his dark hair like a personal accent. There's a few lines on his face too, especially between his eyebrows, which makes me wonder if he always looks so serious, if he ever smiles. I'd love to see his smile. I'll bet it's gorgeous, that it would light up his whole face.

I have to tell Rosie everything immediately. I dart down the stairs, taking them almost two at a time all the way down to the ground floor, but my heel slips on the last few steps and I stumble, flailing my arms to keep my balance.

My hand catches Brad and a painful jolt shoots up my arm. A loud clattering sound fills the air as the suit of armour collapses and the metal parts are sent skittering across the floor.

"Dost thou mind?" an indignant voice snaps, and I turn my head to find Sir Devron Penhalen, a spirit who once dined at King Arthur's Round Table (or so he says). His short dark hair is cropped closely to his head and he has a neatly trimmed beard. A deep blue velvet surcoat covers his gleaming chain mail.

“Sorry, Br—Sir Devron.” I wince as I look at the pieces of armour on the floor. “I didn’t mean to. I lost my balance.”

“Thou shouldst conduct thyself with a little more decorum, young Sparks. Why, in my day, squires were seen and not heard.”

I don’t know why he insists on referring to me by my surname, but I kind of like it. It may just be a habit of the time period he’s from, but it makes me feel... I don’t know, included? Like the spirits of the house don’t see me as an outsider but instead as someone who loves this place as much as they do, even if I wasn’t born into the Ashton-Drake bloodline like so many of them were. Also, unlike them, I still have a pulse. I feel this strange sense of camaraderie with the ghosts of the house, even though I’ve only been able to actually see them for the past few weeks. It’s all still a bit new to me.

I’ve worked here since I was sixteen and I’ve always believed that the place was haunted, even when I was mocked by former friends and acquaintances. There was just something about this house, something very special. I’m so happy that they’ve finally decided to reveal themselves. I’m still learning all of their names and stories, but every day is now an exciting new adventure.

“Er, yes, sorry, Sir Devron.” I nod, backing away from the intimidating ghost in chain mail and carrying an enormous broadsword strapped to his back. Honestly, I don’t know how he ever lifted the thing when he was alive—it’s bloody huge.

Not that I’m afraid of him, I’m not. Sometimes I have a hard time understanding his archaic speech and idiosyncrasies, and he’s also a little surly, but he tells the best stories. I don’t know how true or overly embellished they actually are, but they are fascinating.

“Very well then, boy, go on about your duties.” He waves his hand toward me

absently and walks back towards his plinth. As he climbs up onto it, the scattered pieces of metal slide back across the floor. They reassemble themselves back into a full suit of armour and Sir Devron disappears inside them.

Grinning to myself happily, I turn and dash across the lobby, around the front desk, and towards the office behind.

“Rosie!” I yell as I burst through the door. My best friend jolts in shock, spilling her coffee down her pristine white blouse. “Oops.” I wince.

She simply rolls her eyes and plucks a tissue out of the box on her desk, then dabs at the wet patch with a sigh.

“What’s got you all excited this time?” she says absently as she licks the tissue and scrubs it over the spreading stain a little more viciously. “Has Aggie been baking her toffee cookies again?”

“No,” I grin, although now I’m thinking about those cookies. Maybe I can get Aggie to—

“You look like you’ve drifted off on a tangent again.” Rosie gives up on the stain and tosses the wrecked tissue in the bin. “Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to live inside your head. I imagine it’s a cross between Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory and The Labyrinth .”

“Is David Bowie at the centre with his skintight pants?”

Rosie snorts. “Knowing you, probably.”

“In all honesty, when I was six, I did want one of those big white floofy dresses that Jennifer Connelly wears.” I murmur.

“Didn’t we all,” Rosie mumbles.

I nod. “To be fair, I also really wanted to dance with David Bowie.”

“Was there a reason to this conversation? Because the Christmas decorations still need to be taken down and put away.”

“Yes there is! You will never guess what just happened!” I say excitedly.

“You knocked over Brad again?” she says, shrugging when I stare at her. “I heard the clatter but honestly, we’ve all done it so many times now, it’s hardly exciting news. Plus, now we know about the ghosts, we have the added bonus of Brad being able to put himself back together.”

“Sir Devron,” I correct. “You know he hates to be called Brad.”

“Fine, Sir Devon.”

“Devron.”

“Whatever.” She shakes her head.

“Anyway.” I wave my hand and change the subject. “No, that wasn’t what I came to tell you. We have a new guest.”

“We do?” She blinks. “A paying guest?”

“Well, no. Maybe?” I frown. “I’m not actually sure.”

“Ellis.” She sighs. “You can’t just let people stay here for free. It’s fine if you want to upgrade them, but not charging them isn’t going to keep the creditors from shutting

this place down.”

“I know that, but this isn’t any old guest.” I practically dance on the spot. “His name is Morgan and he’s really dreamy, and older than me, although I don’t know how old, but he’s bloody gorgeous and really strong. He didn’t even break a sweat when he caught me.”

“Caught you? Bloody hell, Ellis, what have you been up to now?”

“I fell off the Christmas tree.”

She stares at me.

“Okay, not the actual Christmas tree, the ladder. Then he caught me, then he put me down, and then I tripped over the lights and he picked me up off the floor.”

“So let me get this straight. A gorgeous older man caught you when you fell off the ladder, then picked you up off the floor when you tripped over the lights, so you decided to give him a free room for the night?” she asks, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“I don’t know how long he’s staying, but he’s Mr Ashton-Drake’s grandson!”

“What?” Rosie’s frown becomes more pronounced. “How do you know he’s Mr Ashton-Drake’s grandson?”

“Well, he said so,” I answer. “And his name is Morgan Ashton-Drake.”

“Didn’t you ask to see some ID or other proof? How do we even know he’s telling the truth? It could be a scam. Especially after everything that’s happened recently. He could be an undercover reporter, out to expose the hotel and us.”

“Expose us for what exactly? Have you been watching Netflix documentaries again?” I ask suspiciously.

“That’s not the point.” She shakes her head. “These are valid concerns. You’re too sweet and trusting for your own good, Ellis,” she says, her eyes filled with affection and her voice laced with exasperation.

“And you’re too mistrustful. And a little prickly.”

“That’s why we’re best friends. We balance each other out.” Rosie smiles. “But my point still stands. Don’t you think it’s a little suspicious that we’ve both worked here for over a decade and there’s been no mention of a grandson at all? How do we know he is who he says he is?”

“It’s not like we can demand a DNA test.” I roll my eyes. “And I’m not surprised Mr Ashton-Drake doesn’t talk about his family. We both know how hard his son’s death was for him. Besides, he has lots of photos in his room.”

“That means nothing.” Rosie sighs. “I’m just saying I don’t want someone coming along and upsetting Mr Ashton-Drake. He’s been through enough. I don’t know who this stranger is or what he wants. Why’s he here? And why now?”

I shrug. “He just said he was here to visit his grandfather.”

“I don’t like it.” She scowls and it’s adorable, like a grumpy little chipmunk.

It’s one of Rosie’s most endearing qualities, and I don’t mean making expressions like little furry animals. I mean the way she’s so protective of the people she cares about. There may not be much staff left here at the hotel, but those of us who are still around have been here for years. We’re a family, and as a family, we’re very fond of Mr Ashton-Drake, who may be a bit eccentric but is really sweet.

“Have you told Mr Ashton-Drake yet?”

“No. I went up earlier to take him his morning tea, but he’s having a nap. You know how impossible he gets when he’s tired. I’ll pop up and see him in an hour. That should be enough time.”

“Fine,” Rosie huffs. “Come on, I’ll help you take down the rest of the decorations. Can’t have you falling off any more ladders and into the arms of handsome potential con artists.” She pushes her chair back and stands. “Wait, was he handsome?”

I say dreamily, “Absolutely gorgeous.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Rosie shakes her head, a small affectionate smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “I’m going to have to tie a piece of string to you or you’ll be floating up to the ceiling like a balloon.”

“What?” I blink. “It’s not like I’m going to do anything. He’s Mr Ashton-Drake’s grandson, after all.”

“So he says,” Rosie mutters.

“It’s just that I’ve barely left the hotel in months.” I shrug. “It’s not often tall, sexy, American strangers come to stay. Can you blame me for appreciating a stunning silver fox when I see one?”

“Silver fox? Jesus, that’s like your kryptonite. Are you sure you don’t have some latent Daddy issues?”

“Don’t we all?”

“Fair point.” Rosie purses her lips and nods. “Wait, did you say he’s American?”

“Mm-hmm,” I hum. “That accent.”

“Oh my god, are you in heat? Any moment now, I’m going to have to fetch the garden hose and spray you down before you combust.”

“What?” I pout. “I’m allowed to look. It’s not like I’m going to be touching. He wouldn’t be interested in me anyway.”

“And why not?” She fists her hand on her hip and fixes me with a fierce look. “What’s wrong with you? You’re the kindest, sweetest, most loyal man I’ve ever known, and despite you absolutely not being my type and being my bestest friend in the whole world, even I can see you’re bloody gorgeous.”

I smile at her affectionately, and a warm feeling pools in my stomach. “I know, but I can’t imagine he’d be staying. Besides, I get the feeling he’s used to suave, sophisticated men, not hot blonde messes who trip over their own shoelaces half the time.”

“You listen to me, Ellis Sparks,” she says in a firm tone that reminds me of my mum. “You’re amazing and one day, the right man is going to come along and sweep you off your feet.”

“I hope so.” I sigh. “But right now I’d settle for someone who can give me a decent orgasm... in fact, at this point, I’d take even a half-decent one.”

“The bar seems to be set extremely low.” Rosie shakes her head again. “We’ve been so caught up in trying to save the hotel we’ve forgotten we need to have lives too. Maybe once the snow melts, we should have a night out in Leeds or something.”

“We can’t afford that,” I remind her. “Or have you forgotten that the hotel isn’t making enough right now to pay our wages? Besides, I have a feeling it will be



awhile before the snow thaws out. They're forecasting another heavy snowfall later today."

She shrugs. "We'll figure something out." She turns towards the door and lets out an abrupt shriek, stumbling back and grasping her chest as she breathes heavily, her eyes wide.

Standing in front of us both is a woman who is everything you would expect a ghost to be. Unlike Bertie and Roger, who appear in colour and almost so solid you'd think you could reach out and touch them, this woman is in shades of grey, like an old black-and-white film. Which makes perfect sense seeing as I recognise this particular deceased member of the household. Although I've only seen her once before, I know her name is Leona Falberg-Black and she was a silent film star back in the thirties.

Well, a wannabe film star; she didn't exactly make it very far. Her lover, one of the Ashton-Drakes, almost bankrupted himself setting up a makeshift studio in the ballroom. He intended to launch his very own film studio with Leona as the star despite the fact she couldn't act to save her life (pun intended), according to Bertie. However, that particular Ashton-Drake not only cut costs but also corners, especially with safety, and Leona was crushed to death when a stage light fell on her while filming the first scene of her first film.

"Oh my god, they just keep popping out of the woodwork, don't they?" Rosie says, her eyes wide as she stares at the dead woman. "I don't think I'm ever going to get used to it."

"It's only been a few weeks. Give it some time," I tell her soothingly.

"I can't believe how okay you are with the fact that the hotel is now flooded with spirits."

“Are you kidding?” I grin. “This is epic!”

We turn back to Leona. She’s wearing a short black-fringed dress, and a long string of pearls is looped around her neck. Her dark glossy hair is cut short and sculpted against her skull in perfect waves. In fact, she looks like the human version of Betty Boop.

She makes a dramatic series of gestures as Rosie and I watch her, utterly bemused.

“What’s she doing?” Rosie whispers.

“Uh, I don’t think she talks,” I reply as Leona makes a sweeping gesture with her hand, then mimes writing something, followed by a strange, almost militant march, and finally finishes up with a throwing motion.

“It’s like a really messed-up game of charades,” Rosie mutters. “Did you understand any of that?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re trying to say,” I tell Leona in a loud tone as if she can’t hear me.

She scowls at me and stomps her foot in temper before disappearing as quickly as she arrived.

“I cannot believe how weird our lives are right now.” Rosie sulks. “Ignoring the fact that she’s a ghost, which is just crazy to begin with, why can’t she just talk to us like the rest of them do? I mean, what’s with all the hand-waving and over-the-top facial expressions? And by the way, just how thin are her pencilled-on eyebrows?”

“I think it’s a throwback to when she was alive,” I guess. “The gestures I mean, not the eyebrows. She was a silent movie star. Back then, they didn’t have real scripts

and had to mime everything.”

Rosie closes her eyes and shakes her head slowly.

“Come on.” I take her hand and tug her towards the door. “Let’s go pack away the Christmas decorations, then we’ll see if we can talk Aggie into making us her toffee cookies.”

“Fine.” Rosie pouts. “But they better be a really big cookies.”

I laugh and reach for the door handle but as I open it, we both jolt in shock to find Bertie and Roger on the other side, crouched over as if they’d been listening at the door.

“For fuck’s sake,” Rosie bursts out, and I look over at my bestie. She doesn’t usually swear, but I can see the change in spectral circumstances really seems to be getting to her. “Do we need to put a bloody bell on all of you? How is it we can go for ten long, peaceful years and then all of a sudden the whole place is crawling with ghosts?”

“We do not crawl,” Bertie scoffs as they both straighten up.

“What are you doing?” I ask curiously.

“We were just—oomph.” Roger wheezes and doubles over as Bertie elbows him in the ribs.

“Nothing.” She gives a brusque huff and looks behind her, as if to check someone wasn’t sneaking up on her. “Just out for a morning constitutional and thought we’d stop by to see if you’ve come up with any ideas to save the hotel yet.”

“Since I saw you an hour ago?” I reply, my brows rising. “Even I don’t work that

fast, Bertie. You're going to have to give me a little more grace than that."

"Of course, of course," she says and looks around again in an almost nervous way.

"Are you alright?" I ask. "You seem, I don't know. Distracted?"

"Oh, no. Fine, fine, it's all fine." She looks to Roger.

"Fine." He nods.

"Uh-huh," I reply.

"Yes, well, we should be going. Unless you want to tell us what Morgan's doing back in the old family fold?" Bertie asks.

"You know Morgan?" My stomach jolts a little at the mention of our newest guest's name.

"Of course I do." Bertie frowns. "He is my great-great-nephew, after all. Although I haven't seen the lad since he was a nipper."

"Is that definitely him though?" Rosie pipes up. "I mean, how do you know for sure?"

"He's the image of his father, Elliott. A little older maybe. After all, Elliott was only twenty-nine when he died. Morgan must be..." Bertie shrugs. "I don't know. Forty-ish, maybe? Don't pay much attention to time these days."

"He is a dish though, isn't he?" Roger smirks, staring at me like he's gauging my reaction. I try not to blush, but I can feel my cheeks warming. "That's what I thought," he says smugly. "Can't say I blame you, darling. If I still had a pulse, I'd be

climbing that man quicker than a monkey up a tree.”

“Oh, I...uh.”

“Yes, well, we should be going,” Bertie says hurriedly as she glances over her shoulder. “Things to do and all that.”

The pair of them wink out and Rosie and I are once again left on our own. Frowning, I turn towards her. “Is it just me, or did they look like they’re up to something?”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:30 pm*

5

I stand with my palms pressed against the tiled wall and my head bent forward so the hot water can pound against the back of my sore neck. Rolling my stiff shoulders, I sigh.

I'm exhausted.

I may be only just pushing forty, but the older I get, the more jetlag kicks my ass. Or maybe it was the ninety-hour workweek I pulled before even getting on the damn plane. Most likely, it was that I'd only just got off the red-eye from Chicago before turning around and getting on a plane to Heathrow.

Now that I've finally stopped, all I want to do is crawl into that incredibly ancient-looking but surprisingly comfortable bed. Not yet though. As tempting as it is to take a power nap, I know I won't be sleeping tonight if that happens, and the last thing I want is to be up at some ungodly hour in a creaky old house with only my brain for company.

Not to mention the fact that I need to see my grandfather first. Jesus, I'm not even sure what I'm doing here. It was a knee-jerk reaction. I'd been in Chicago dealing with a problem at one of our hotels when the news had broken.

The article had been less than flattering, but it's not the first time I've been in the spotlight and I guarantee it won't be the last. However, something had touched a nerve, poked at me in a place I didn't even know was vulnerable.

I really don't know how the hell that slimy reporter put my name together with an obscure, eccentric British family I don't even remember. To be honest, I'd rather have ignored all of it and waited for it to blow over, but my brother had insisted I get on a plane and deal with it personally. He seems to think it'll end up coming back to bite us in the ass later on.

Rolling my shoulders again, I wince when something clicks uncomfortably. I sigh and shut the water off, then pause as the water flicks back on. Frowning, I shut it off again and wait for a few seconds. When it remains off, I twist back to the shower door, but as I lift my hand to open it, the water turns on once more.

What the hell?

I shut it off yet again, this time turning the handle extra hard until it's so tight I doubt I'll be able to turn it back on the next time I want a shower. I shrug at the thought; with any luck, I won't be here too long. Hopefully, just long enough to have a very stern conversation with my absentee grandfather, then I'm on the next flight home.

I glance up at the showerhead, watching as a single drip of water escapes, but it otherwise remains off. Satisfied, I reach once again for the glass door to let myself out, but before I can get it open, I'm blasted in the face with a tsunami of frigid water.

I let loose a shocked yelp as I'm pelted with icy shards of water that stab viciously at my face and chest. Grabbing the handle, I yank it as hard as I can back into the off position.

Fuck me, it's cold. My balls have shrivelled up into my body and my dick is trying to follow them. I give one last twist and yell in frustration as the handle comes away in my hand. Clutching onto the useless piece of metal, I reach up and try to angle the showerhead away from me as I can barely feel my face from the numbness.

There's a loud clatter and I look down to see the shampoo and body wash bottles tumble to the floor. Somehow, all the lids have come loose and the slippery liquid gathers into the shower base faster than it can wash down the drain.

Feeling my feet slip underneath me, I try to grab onto something, anything, to keep my balance. With the useless detached shower handle in one hand, I manage to grasp the only other thing in the shower, which happens to be the metal caddy that had held the toiletry bottles. My relief is short-lived, however, when the damn thing, accompanied by the sound of cracking tiles, rips away from the wall and my feet slide out from under me. Sliding across the shower in a skating rink of shampoo and body wash, I fall backwards. The door swings open and slams against the sink as I tumble out. My elbow cracks against the doorframe, causing an intense pain to shoot up my arm, and my breath whooshes from my lungs when I hit the floor.

I lie motionless for several moments, my whole body in pain, and stare up at the ceiling light while I attempt to catch my breath. As I shiver, it occurs to me that I'm still clutching onto the handle and the caddy, and my feet, now covered in soap suds, are still resting in the bottom of the shower enclosure.

Fuck. My. Life.

The handle and caddy clatter to the tiled floor when I release my grip, and I shiver even harder. It's fucking freezing in here and I'm wet and naked, sprawled out on the bathroom floor like I starring in my own personal Hitchcock movie.

My groan echoes in the small room as I drag myself off the floor gingerly, my battered body protesting and making me feel my age.

I stand and glare at the goddamned shower, which has somehow managed to switch itself off. Shaking my head in annoyance, I glance around for the large soft white fluffy towel I brought into the room with me.



The bathroom isn't that large, it's not even a quarter of the size of the guest one in my apartment, yet I can't see the towel anywhere.

What the hell? I could've sworn I brought it in with me and set it on the counter.

Shaking my head again, I head out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. I guess I'm more jet-lagged than I thought. Maybe a thirty-minute nap would be enough to freshen me up, and then I might be able to stay awake until a more reasonable hour. Although I dislike napping immensely, I could set an alarm on my phone and then I...

I stop dead and blink slowly after I step into the bedroom. Turning back to the bathroom, I gaze at it in incomprehension, then take in the bedroom once more. Maybe I will be taking that nap after all because I am almost certain the very heavy, old-fashioned wooden four-poster bed was on the other side of the room when I went into the bathroom. Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure the dresser and the wardrobe have switched places too.

Don't worry if the furniture moves...

The cute little blonde desk clerk's words come back to me and I feel myself scowling. Is this some kind of prank? Do they do this to all the new arrivals? If so, I can understand why they don't have any guests.

Shivering violently again, it occurs to me that I'm standing in my room completely naked and dripping water on the faded old carpet. Determined to give the staff a piece of my mind as soon as I'm dressed, I glance around the room for wherever I left my towel.

I mean, it's one thing to fake a haunting with a few little mechanically moving objects like the coffee mug on the front desk, which I have to admit was clever, but

their marketing strategy is way off. Who in their right mind would pay to stay at a haunted hotel? Especially when everyone knows ghosts aren't real... and where the fuck is my towel?

Stalking through the room angrily, I can't see the damn thing nor any spares anywhere. I stop abruptly and draw in a slow breath through my nose, my eyes closing momentarily as I attempt to wrangle my irritation under control. Furious that someone obviously let themselves into my room to move the furniture, it takes me longer than it should to realise that my luggage is nowhere in sight.

Now I'm completely confused and, to be frank, a little disoriented. Is it a shared bathroom? Have I somehow managed to walk into someone else's room? That certainly would explain the rearranged furniture and the lack of my luggage.

Grabbing a sheet and yanking it off the bed, I wrap it around me just in case I come face-to-face with another guest or staff person—the latter being more likely, I suspect, given the distinct lack of the former.

I march back into the bathroom and stare in confusion. There are no entry points other than the one I'm currently standing in. The shower door is open, the floor is soaked, and laying in a puddle of soapy water are the shower handle and shampoo caddy. It's definitely the same bathroom and since there are no other exits, this must be my room.

Clutching the white sheet to me, I walk back into my room and study it intently. Where is my luggage? And why has the furniture been moved—also, how? I wasn't in the shower that long. Surely I would have heard something? These are heavy pieces, so it would've taken more than one person.

What the hell is going on here?

A sudden ringing startles me and I jolt, almost dropping the damn sheet. I recognise the ring tone though—it's definitely my phone, but where is it? I begin searching, hoping whoever it is doesn't hang up before I find it. Following the sound, I move towards the wardrobe and search all around the huge thing. I come up empty-handed just as the call ends and silence once again fills the air.

A frustrated breath escapes from me, and I growl loudly into the empty room. A few moments later, the ringing starts up again. Sending up a silent prayer of thanks, I cock my head and see if I can pinpoint the origin of the sound. It seems to be coming from higher up. Dragging a chair over, I climb up and find my phone laying in a pile of dust on top of the wardrobe.

There's no way it accidentally ended up there. Someone has definitely been in my room and as soon as I find my suitcase and get some clean clothes on, I'll be giving them a piece of my mind. One that they are not going to like one bit.

Scowling down at my phone, I see my brother's name and swipe the screen, not realising it's a video call.

"Hey, big brother," Warren greets as I climb down from the chair gracelessly, giving him a full view of my makeshift toga as the screen tilts. "Damn, you move fast." He grins. "I didn't expect you to have charmed someone into your bed already. Is that why you took so long to answer the phone? And here I am, thinking you'd be catching up on your sleep and taking it easy after that week in Chicago and the flight to England, not balancing some twink on your balls. Who is he? Is he still there?"

"No one," I growl. "I'm on my own."

"Taking a little solo pleasure time." He winks. "Gotcha. I find it helps ease stress and tension too. Do you want me to call back in ten when you've got some pants on?"

“That would be helpful if I knew where my pants were,” I grumble.

“What?”

“Never mind.” I sigh. “What do you want, Warren?”

“Can’t a guy just check in with his big brother?”

I stare at the screen and he shrugs. “Fine, I was curious. What’s the place like? Is it like Buckingham Palace? Have you met your grandpa yet? What’s he like?”

“It isn’t even remotely like Buckingham Palace or any other palace for that matter,” I reply. “It’s exactly what I expected, a drafty old property in the middle of nowhere that looks like it hasn’t been updated since the Middle Ages. I’m surprised it has running water.”

His brows rise. “Really?”

“No.” I sigh as I slump down on the side of the bed. “Not really. It’s old and run down. It’s easy to see there’s no money here, and it’s badly in need of renovation. There aren’t any guests and I can’t imagine how they’re even keeping the place open at this point. And that’s just from my first impression.”

“What does your grandpa have to say about it?”

“I haven’t met him yet.” I scowl at him. “I still can’t believe I let you talk me into coming here, Ren.”

“Morgs.” He sighs, the amusement disappearing. “I talked you into it because I think you need this.”

“What I need is to not give the press any more reason to print shit about me. You know how often they love to drag up the fact I wasn’t your dad’s biological son. They had a field day when we both inherited equal shares of the business.”

“Come on, how bad can it be really?” Warren cajoles.

“Trust me, if half the shit they printed about this family is true, there aren’t just a few skeletons in the closet, there’s a whole damn graveyard.”

“Technically, they’re your family,” Warren reminds me.

“You’re my family,” I correct him.

“Of course I am.” His voice softens. “I love you, Morgs, you know that. We’re brothers and nothing will ever change that, not the press, not gossip, not family skeletons.”

“I should have just come home to New York,” I say sullenly. “This is a complete waste of time. Eventually, the press will get bored and move on to something else.”

“Yes, they probably will, but a true brother makes you face your problems, not ignore them.”

“No,” I reply, my tone dry. “A true brother would have gone out and slept with a few prostitutes to take the heat off and draw the press’ attention away.”

Warren laughs. “While I’m always happy to take one for the team, you need this.”

“Like a hole in the head.”

“No, for your own peace of mind.”

“My mind was completely peaceful. Coming here is what’s pissed me off.”

“Morgan,” he says, and for once, he’s being serious. “Whether you want to admit it or not, you need to do this. If you’re being honest with yourself, you’ve needed to do it for a long time. I know when Mom brought you back to the states after your dad died, she shut the door on that side of your family. She wouldn’t talk about it, and I don’t know how much she’s even told you about your dad. What I do know is that I watched you, idolised you, and followed you around like your goddamn shadow when we were growing up. You were my amazing big brother, none of this ‘half’ bullshit. It was the same for my dad. He loved you like you were his own. In his eyes, there was no difference between us, but—”

“But?” I prompt.

“I always got the impression that you felt you had to earn your place in our family, no matter what Dad said to you. He accepted you just the way you are, but I don’t think you ever accepted yourself. I think there’s a part of you that needs answers about where you came from... who you came from. This is a chance to discover the roots of your tree and maybe then you can finally be comfortable in your own skin.”

“What? Are you a shrink now?” I grumble.

“I’ll bill you when you get home.” He grins. “Now stop being the grumpy bastard I know and love, and go make nice with the eccentric Brit side of your family. Who knows, you may just learn a thing or two.”

“I sincerely doubt it.” I snort, but before I can say anything else, there’s a loud knocking. “Give me a minute, Warren. Someone’s at the door.”

Pushing myself up from where I’m sitting on the bed, I cross the room, my phone clutched in one hand and the sheet held up to my body by the other. I really hope it’s

whoever took my luggage bringing it back because I'm about to tear them a new one.

Working up a full head of steam as I march across the floor in the most dignified manner I can considering I'm wearing a bedsheet, I grab the door and yank it open. However, I must have caught the sheet on something because the second the door swings open, it's ripped away, leaving me standing butt naked in front of the cute blonde from downstairs.

His huge baby blues widen even more and his mouth falls open when his gaze inadvertently dips to my suddenly very interested cock. Jesus Christ, the damn thing's practically been in a coma for the past several months and now it chooses to start randomly saluting quirky little British desk clerks?

"Fuck," I hiss, breaking the detente and clamping my hand over my dick.

Unfortunately, it just so happens to be the hand holding my phone. The phone that is currently streaming a video call with my brother. The brother who is now without a doubt being subjected to an up close and personal greeting from my fully awake cock.

"My eyes! My eyes!" I hear Warren bemoan through the phone's speaker. "You're paying for my therapy when you get back, you asshole."

He should probably be grateful the view wasn't of my asshole, I think, but instead I switch hands and lift the screen.

"Sorry." I wince. "Knee-jerk reaction."

"That wasn't your knee, bro."

"I know," I sigh. "Consider us now even for your graduation party."

“You said you didn’t see anything,” he protests, his tone shifting to loud and indignant.

“I lied.”

“I’ll call you later once I’ve bleached my brain,” Warren hisses and hangs up.

“Um.” Ellis blushes, his cheeks a bright rosy pink. “Towel?”

It’s only then that I realise he’s holding a stack of freshly folded towels in his arm.

“Yes, please,” I say desperately.

He grabs one from the top of the pile and hands it to me. My phone clatters to the floor as I awkwardly shake out the towel to cover myself, only to discover it’s a face towel and barely big enough to cover a single butt cheek, let alone anything else.

“Oh, sorry,” Ellis apologises and grabs a bigger towel from the bottom of the pile. He hands it to me and politely tries to avoid glancing down as I knot the towel firmly around my waist. “Um, I just wanted to check in and see if everything was to your satisfaction.”

“No.” I scowl at him. “It’s not.”

Ellis stares at me, surprise written all over his face. “I’m so sorry to hear that. What seems to be the problem?”

“The water is freezing and the shower is broken. The shower handle and caddy came clean off the wall, causing me to fall out of the shower. Then I discovered someone has been in my room and moved everything around, hidden my phone, and taken my luggage,” I finish hotly.



“Your phone’s right there.” He points to where it fell on the floor.

“Yes, thank you I can see that.” I glower at him, but he seems unperturbed, as if he’s used to guests getting angry at him. “But all my luggage is still missing, including the clothes I stripped out of before taking a shower.”

“You mean that luggage?” He points over my shoulder and as I follow the direction of his finger, my gaze lands on my suitcase and bags placed neatly in front of the wardrobe. The clothes I stripped off earlier are now laid across the foot of the bed... the bed where I’d been sitting moments before.

“What the?” I mutter.

“May I see the problem with the bathroom?” Ellis says politely, and I can’t fault his professionalism. “I’ll restock your towels and if needs be, I’ll give Ed the Plumber a call.”

“Ed the Plumber?” I repeat slowly, and Ellis nods.

“He’s John the Maid’s second cousin. He deals with all our plumbing emergencies.”

Unable to find the words to respond to that, I step aside and lift my hand in the direction of the bathroom. “Have at it.”

He crosses the room leisurely, and I do not stare at his perfectly rounded ass in those tight pants before he disappears into the bathroom. I close the door and step back into the room. It’s bad enough that I just flashed the blonde bombshell and I’m standing in nothing but a towel. The last thing I need is to inadvertently flash any more members of staff, especially the towering hulk of a maid or the cook with the meat cleaver.

Instead, my gaze trails along the floor, looking for the bedsheet I’d had wrapped

around me. It must have snagged on something to cause my untimely wardrobe malfunction, but strangely enough, not only can I not see what it caught on, I can't find the sheet anywhere either.

There is something very weird about this place.

I glance across as Ellis reappears. "Everything looks okay to me," he says cheerily. "And the water's warm enough now. They're just old pipes, must be a little temperamental. I'll put it on the list of guest feedback."

"What about the broken shower handle?"

"I didn't see anything broken."

I stalk into the bathroom to find the floor bone dry, the handle reattached, and the caddy mounted back on the tiled wall, the toiletries neatly tucked inside it. There's also not a single trace of all the shampoo which had covered the shower floor.

"What?" I mutter in confusion.

"Well, I should let you get dressed," Ellis says with a smile so wide that two little dimples appear in his cheeks. I stare at him, stupidly aware I should say something, but for the life of me, nothing comes to mind. "I actually came to tell you that Mr Ashton-Drake is awake now. I've just taken him up his tea, and he says he'll be really happy to see you if you'd like."

"I..."

My stomach dips and I remind myself firmly that this is why I'm here: to see my grandfather, even if he is a complete stranger to me.

“You don’t have to if you’d rather have a rest first,” Ellis says sweetly, and I feel a little bad that I snapped at him.

“No.” I swallow past the lump of trepidation in my throat.

This isn’t like me at all. I don’t get nervous. I face everything head-on. I straighten my spine and push my shoulders back, selfishly taking a second to enjoy the brief dip of Ellis’ gaze to my naked chest and the way his little pink tongue peeks out to swipe his lower lip before he could censor himself. I may be nearly forty and a little softer around the middle than I used to be, but I’m still in good shape.

I clear my throat and step back in an effort to locate my dignity, which I fear may be back at JFK along with my patience. “No, I’ll see him now. I just need to get dressed first. Perhaps you could tell me where to find him?”

“He’s up on the fifth floor, but it’s a bit twisty-turny along the corridors up there, and I wouldn’t want you to get lost,” he says brightly. “I’ll wait outside while you get ready and then show you up.”

“You don’t have to—”

“It’s no trouble at all.” He practically skips across the room to let himself out, closing the door quietly behind himself.

Taking a moment to breathe, I begin to wonder why I got on the damn plane at all.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:30 pm*

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I slump back against the wall outside Morgan's room and resist the urge to fan my warm face. But before I can mentally replay the incredibly tempting image of a naked Morgan Ashton-Drake, I hear a quiet, childish laugh.

Glancing down the corridor, I see a small boy about ten years old. He has a sweet, mischievous face and a naughty smile, and is dressed in rather old-fashioned clothing: grey knee-length shorts, a white shirt, a pullover, and a jacket.

His name is Arthur. I haven't interacted with him much, but I know for a fact that—like most nine-year-old boys—Arthur, having rattled around the house for the past eight or nine decades, gets bored easily. I have this on good authority from my new friend, Tristan, who was a guest here during the murder mystery and just so happens to be a medium... kind of. Anyway, he told me that Arthur has a habit of moving the furniture around when the guests aren't looking to alleviate said boredom. He's also a nightmare for hiding things.

He died in 1942 from what I've been told by Bertie, who's a fountain of knowledge regarding the house, its history, and, more importantly, its entire list of resident spectres and spirits. Arthur had been evacuated to the house during the war but died of diphtheria before it was safe for him to return to London.

I smile and give him a small wave. He grins in return and disappears straight into one of the walls. It doesn't give me so much as a jolt, and I wonder why that is. Instead, I find it... well, thrilling, but I also get a strange sort of comfort knowing that death isn't the end. That life goes on, just in a different form.

Morgan's door opens and I straighten as he strides out. He's put on a perfectly tailored suit and I can't stop the appreciative slide of my gaze as I take in his long legs, firm-looking thighs, tapered waist, and broad shoulders. As my eyes reach his chiselled jaw and firm lips, I resist the urge to sigh. It's like someone just plucked him straight out of my most private fantasies.

His dark hair is combed neatly, a couple of streaks of silver at his temples. Heat rushes across my skin as I meet his dark eyes, and he quirks one of those thick brows.

Oops .

I'm going to have to get this crush of mine under control. I can't keep eye-fucking him every time I see him looking scrummy and delicious. Which, to be fair, is every time I see him. I want to climb him like a tree, possibly licking every inch of him while I'm at it.

Maybe Rosie's right, maybe I do need to get out. I can't even remember the last time I had sex, but then again, the hotel takes up nearly all of my time and energy. The last guy I even attempted to date got tired of me never being available to pander to his needs twenty-four seven. The one before wasn't much better, and neither was the one before that.

Hmm, maybe I just have really bad taste in men. I always ended up with confident, emotionally unavailable, selfish, bossy types with narcissistic tendencies. They seemed to think that just because I have blonde hair, blue eyes, and leak sunshine from every pore—as one guy put it—that I must be brainless as well. Every one of them expected me to cater to their needs, to change my life to suit their schedules. Hang off their arms, laugh at their jokes, and present my arse whenever the mood struck them .

As a result, I've stuck to hookups only for the past few years, just enough to scratch

an itch, and even that hasn't happened very often. There's just not that much of an active social life in a mostly empty hotel skirting the Yorkshire moors.

I stare at Morgan and feel my heart start to dance a fandango, complete with castanets and everything. He's so bloody tempting. I'd suggest a hookup while he's here but that'd be wrong; he's Mr Ashton-Drake's grandson, after all. It'd be too messy. I love Mr Ashton-Drake like he's my own family, and there's no way I'm going to complicate his relationship with his grandson, especially after years of the older man not seeing him.

"You look very smart." I smile easily at Morgan and take a small, self-preserving step back. If I have to inhale any more of his gorgeous aftershave, I may just bury my face in his neck and sniff him like a horny puppy. In fact, I may not be able to draw the line at humping his leg either.

Shit. I really do need to get out and get laid.

Morgan grunts quietly, his brows drawing down as he smooths the front of his jacket. It's a little formal for meeting family, but then again, I don't really know him. Maybe he's just not a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy.

I tilt my head slightly and consider him. He looks a little nervous. Mum always said I was good at reading people. It comes from being a total people pleaser, often to my own detriment. To almost anyone else, Morgan Ashton-Drake would appear a confident, sexy man. He has a commanding presence that I noticed straightaway, but I imagine he's someone who gets his own way more often than not. He's fascinating to watch, emotions flitting across his face in a fleeting kaleidoscope before settling into a scowl. It looks like he's having some kind of internal argument with himself, but as I examine closer, I realise there's something else going on too—a tiny hint of vulnerability that makes me want to wrap him up in my arms and comfort him.

Judging from the glower he's now sporting, he's probably not a hugger.

Giving him my best customer service smile, I resist the ridiculous urge to reach out and squeeze his hand in support.

"Well," I say cheerily, "let's not keep your grandfather waiting. He's very excited to see you."

Morgan's scowl deepens. "He is?"

I nod emphatically. "So, how are you enjoying England so far?" I ask as we begin walking. "Have you been before?"

"Technically, I was born here," he says gruffly. "But no, I don't visit often. If I do, it's only to deal with one of our hotels in either Edinburgh or London."

"Hotels?" I reply as my stomach jolts in excitement. "You run hotels?"

"My family does," he replies. "My stepfather built an entire brand of luxury hotels, which my brother and I now run."

"Has your stepfather retired?"

Morgan's lips tighten. "He passed away. Last year."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I say, again fighting that urge to squeeze his hand to comfort him.

"Have you worked here long?" He changes the subject abruptly as he eyes the fading wallpaper.

"Yes, I've spent most of my life here," I reply. "My mum used to be a maid here

when I was little. We didn't have anywhere to live, so Mr Ashton-Drake let us stay here up on the fifth floor. I used to lie on the carpets in the hallways playing with my toys or doing my homework. The guests were always really nice. When I turned sixteen, Mum got another job and moved to Leeds. I wanted to stay, so I started working here and I've been here ever since."

"You lived here? What about the rest of your family?"

"It's always just been me and Mum." I shrug. "I never knew my dad. Neither did my mum, really," I chuckle. "I was conceived in a field in the pouring rain at a music festival while Oasis was playing."

He turns to stare at me. "Is that true?"

I nod again. "Yep." I laugh as we begin to climb the stairs to the next floor.

"Where are we going?" Morgan asks. "I'd have thought we'd meet in the restaurant or the bar, maybe the study? Doesn't my grandfather have an office?"

"An office?" I laugh, trying to picture Mr Ashton-Drake in a stuffy office. "No, he'd hate that."

"Then how does he run the hotel efficiently?"

I shrug. "He just tells us what he wants us to do and we do it. To be honest, most of the time he just leaves us to it. He doesn't want to run the hotel day-to-day. After all, that's what a manager is for. The only problem is that we can't seem to keep managers. I think Mr Eldritch was the one who lasted the longest."

"And how long was that?"



“Three months and twenty-two days,” I muse. “Mr Jackson was the shortest—he only lasted thirty-eight.”

“Thirty-eight days?” he says in surprise.

“Minutes.”

He stops dead and stares at me. “Seriously?”

I shrug again. “For some reason, people don’t seem to warm to this place, but honestly, Ashton House is the best place in the whole world.”

“I think your world view may be slightly lacking, because this is most definitely not the best place in the whole world,” Morgan replies, his tone dry.

“You just need to give it time to grow on you.”

“Like a fungus,” he mutters.

“It’s in your blood.”

“I sincerely hope not.” He once again begins climbing the steep stairs. “Where did you say we were going?”

“To the family apartments. They were created when the house was renovated into a hotel back in the early eighties. The family rooms take up nearly an entire wing, but to be honest, Mr Ashton-Drake only uses two of them. The rest we close up to save on the heating bills. Aggie and Dilys have rooms on the ground floor. John the Maid, Rosie, and I have rooms up on the fifth floor in the old servants’ quarters.”

“Five live-in staff members?” He glances sideways at me when we reach the top

floor. “Please tell me you have more staff than that though.”

“Not at the moment, no,” I answer as I lead him down a narrow corridor.

“So, let me get this straight.” His brow wrinkles. “You have no manager, only five people on staff, and no guests.”

“Well, we technically have one guest at the moment. Mr Pennington. He’s a writer.”

“How is this place still open?” he asks in confusion. “Surely it’s not making enough money to pay for the—”

“Here we are,” I announce as we reach Mr Ashton-Drake’s door.

I stare at the unassuming wooden door in front of me. It has no numbers, unlike the doors we passed on the other levels. Instead, there’s only a little brass plaque polished to a high shine and bearing only one word.

Private .

I swallow hard and fist my hands at my side. My collar feels too tight, like my tie is attempting to strangle me. I chose this suit carefully; it’s one of my favourites and has always made me feel confident and in control like my own personal armour.

Warren was right—although I’ll never admit it to him. I did have to earn my place in our family business, even if not in the family. I wasn’t biologically related to Royce Hamilton, a fact the press never let me forget. My every move was scrutinised in a way that Warren never was.

My stepfather came from old money that went right back to the Gold Rush. His marriage to my mother was treated like a Cinderella story by the press: the poor,

young, beautiful, grieving widow falling in love with a third-generation hotel magnate, their perfect son born barely a year after the wedding of the year.

It's true that Royce never treated me any different from Warren. He loved us both and made sure I knew it. When he passed away, he left us equal shares in his hotel empire, but no matter how hard I work, I still don't feel like I've earned it. I've spent my whole life under a microscope, always aware that my behaviour had to be above reproach—no partying at college, no affairs, no scandals. I knew the slightest hint of impropriety would bring the full scrutiny of the press down on me again. Things had only just died down since my stepfather's passing. Once everyone knew about my inheritance, they'd dragged everything back up again—my biological father's death, my mother's marriage to Royce, the fact that I was not his son.

Somehow, it always boiled down to that.

He was a good man, a good father, and he loved my mother, as shallow as she could sometimes be. I even love my brother, even though we're technically only half-siblings. I never resented Warren. I've adored him from the first moment he was placed into my arms, arms that at the time were barely big enough to hold a squirmy red-faced baby.

I never minded that I wasn't Royce's biological son, but somehow, that is always the yardstick by which I'm measured. The press has constantly tried to build up animosity and competition between Warren and me.

Frankly, it's exhausting. I'm sick to death of continuously being judged. I swallow again as I stare at my grandfather's door.

What the fuck am I doing here?

Why did I think it was a good idea to put myself in a position where my only

remaining blood family could once again reject me? After my mother took me to New York, I never heard from him again. Not so much as a birthday card or a single phone call. I don't remember this man at all, and it's clear he doesn't care about me.

I should never have let Warren talk me into this trip. It was a stupid idea, but before I can even consider turning around and heading straight back to my room, Ellis reaches up and knocks on the door.

He waits a few moments, then opens the door and pokes his head around. "Mr Ashton-Drake, it's just us." He opens the door wider and steps inside.

I stand frozen, unsure what to do. We haven't actually been invited in and I'm not sure I feel completely comfortable just—

I don't have time to finish that thought because Ellis grabs my arm and tows me inside. Caught off guard, I stumble into the room and nearly trip over my own feet. I find myself standing in... a sitting room, I suppose you'd call it. There's an upright piano pushed against one wall, the lid covered in framed pictures. The walls are papered in a faded rose print, with more pictures mounted everywhere. Tucked in one corner is a worn armchair with matching footstool and next to it is a side table stacked high with magazines. A low coffee table is close by, and a tea tray on it contains an empty cup, a plate holding a few crumbs, and a teapot.

There are a couple more old sofas covered with crocheted blankets and frayed cushions, and a TV cabinet stands in the corner directly opposite the armchair. It's the type I'd expect to see in a museum—small and boxy and built directly into the cabinet. It even has buttons and dials on it. Like the computer at the front desk, I wonder if it even works at all.

The room is silent except for the sound of our quiet breaths and the monotonous ticking of a small golden carriage clock sitting on the mantle above a fireplace.

I blink as I stare at it. It's a real fireplace, complete with crackling flames and the vague scent of smoke, as opposed to an LED screen with the image of a cheerfully snapping fire.

It also appears that Ellis and I are completely alone. My grandfather is nowhere in sight.

"I thought you said he was expecting me?" My tone is more accusing than I intended.

"He is," Ellis says simply. "Don't worry, he won't have gone far. He doesn't ever leave his rooms."

Before I can begin to unpack that sentence, Ellis calls my grandfather's name loudly, and a door on the far side of the room creaks open. I have just enough time to register a mop of wild white hair before the door slams shut.

"Hey, Mr Ashton-Drake," Ellis calls in that cheery way of his. "I brought you a guest, remember? Your grandson Morgan has come to visit. Isn't that lovely?"

I just about hear a grunt come from the other side of the door. Ellis practically skips across the room whereas I shuffle along in his wake like I'm being led to the gallows.

"I think he's feeling a little shy." Ellis sends me an apologetic smile, then gives a polite little tap at the door. "Mr Ashton-Drake, wouldn't you like to come out and say hello? Morgan has come all the way from America to see you."

"Then he can ruddy well go back there. Bloody Yanks," says the gruff voice on the other side.

"Mr Ashton-Drake." Ellis fists his hands on his hips as he firmly admonishes the closed door. "That's really very rude."

There's another huff from the other side and the door creaks open a fraction, revealing a wrinkly face with dark brown eyes, wiry white eyebrows that match the mop of hair, and a glower I see every time I look in the mirror. He then glances over at Ellis.

"Sorry," he mumbles contritely, and I'm surprised at the dynamic between them.

Given that the formal way Ellis refers to my grandfather as Mr Ashton-Drake, I'd assumed they had a professional but distant employer-employee relationship. But I'm sure I'm not imagining the way his eyes soften with affection when he looks at Ellis.

Affection that disappears the moment his eyes lock on me. His jaw juts out stubbornly and those dark eyes narrow. "You came back, then."

"I—"

Whatever I was going to say trails away as the door opens further and he shuffles out. My gaze drops past the checked shirt and buttoned-up sweater vest he's wearing to his very bare legs. I blink slowly, sure this is an hallucination brought on by stress and jet lag, because he's only wearing a pair of white briefs. Well, I say briefs, but they're huge. His shirt is tucked into the waistband of them, which practically goes all the way up to his armpits, and they fit a bit saggy and have a Y seam in front, although I'm trying really hard not to look at that. His skinny legs are smooth, other than a few tufts of white hair, and he has very knobby knees. On his feet are red tartan slippers and grey socks pulled up to the middle of his calves.

"Where are your pants?" I blurt out in shock.

His scowl deepens. "Right here." He snaps the waistband.

"He means your trousers, Mr Ashton-Drake," Ellis supplies helpfully. "The

Americans call them pants.”

“I know what he means,” my grandfather grumbles and shuffles across the floor towards his piano. “My balls needed some air, damn trousers were too tight.”

My brows rise so high I wouldn’t be surprised to discover they’d disappeared into my hairline.

“I thought you said he’d be happy to see me?” I whisper harshly.

“That is his happy face,” Ellis replies.

“What do you want?” my grandfather says as he settles himself on the piano stool and lifts the lid.

“I... uh.” I take a step closer to him as I try to figure out what I want to say, but my mind is completely blank.

He starts playing a piece I’m not familiar with, which isn’t surprising since I’m not really into classical music. Classic rock, maybe. But despite my lack of knowledge, I’m grudgingly impressed at the level he plays. His gnarled fingers fly over the keys, producing a mournful, melancholy melody.

“Oh dear,” Ellis murmurs and then sighs, seemingly recognising the music. “He’s in one of those moods.”

“If he’s got nothing to say, take him away,” my grandfather orders without so much as glancing in our direction. “I’ve got better things to do with my time than watch him stand there and gawp at me like a fish.”

“Now just wait a minute.” My temper snaps, and I step closer to him. “I’ve travelled

thousands of miles to be here. The least you can do is have a civil conversation with me.”

He abruptly stops playing and slams the lid of the piano closed. The sound ricochets across the room like a gunshot. He turns his head to glare at me.

“No one asked you to,” he snaps back, mirroring my tone. “So why don’t you go back to wherever it is you’ve been for the last thirty-something years?”

“Now, just a minute,” I reply hotly.

“No, I’m tired. Go away,” he says stubbornly and shuffles back across the room, disappearing through the doorway before I can utter another word.

I flinch as the door slams loudly, then grit my teeth. Lifting my hand to pinch the bridge of my nose, I try to wrestle my temper back under control.

“Well, that could’ve gone better.”



## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 1:30 pm*

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“ R ight, is everyone here?”

“Why is it so dark?” Edwina’s prim, disembodied voice cuts through the blackness.

“Mmmmhhsfpt nnnfph,” a muffled voice adds.

“What was that?” Skid growls.

There’s a shuffling sound and then Roger’s seductive purr joins in. “I said you were crushing me. I have no objections if you want to get up close and personal, but your studded sleeves are digging into me, so you’ll have to lose the leather jacket first. Maybe the trousers too.”

“Mr Palmer!” Edwina’s scandalised tone exclaims so loudly my ears pop.

“What?” Roger says innocently.

“Sorry, sweetheart, I don’t do dick,” Skid replies playfully. “But if I did, you’d be top of my list.”

“I actually prefer to be bottom.”

The sound of a teasing slap echoes in the gloom followed by Roger’s giggle, and I don’t really want to imagine who slapped what.

“Can’t say I’ve ever had a todger either, but never say never,” another gruff voice chimes in.

“Ah, Rear Admiral, good of you to join us,” I greet my great-great-uncle as Roger sucks in a loud, sharp breath.

“Admiral Hilary!” Roger says indignantly. “Do you mind!”

“What?” the older man replies.

“Keep your hands to yourself!”

“I just wanted to see if that peach of a rear of yours feels as good as it looks.”

“Of course it does,” Roger gives a haughty sniff. “That doesn’t give you the right to grab a handful.”

“Just thought I’d try something a bit different,” the old lech says diffidently. “You know, for a change. I’m always up for new experiences, that’s why I joined the navy.”

“That’s also how you ended up dying from syphilis,” Roger says dryly. “Keep your hands to yourself.”

“Do you suppose we could hurry this along?” Skid huffs. “It’s a bit claustrophobic in here.”

“Not to mention in incredibly bad taste,” another voice chimes in sourly, and I recognise the dour tones of our newest addition—Professor Prometheus Plume, who met a rather unfortunate end during the recent murder mystery weekend Ellis organised.

“Who’s being chased?” a querulous voice replies, and I suppress a groan.

“Urgh, Violet,” I huff to no one in particular. “Who woke her up?”

Violet was the mother-in-law of one of my ancestors. She arrived at Ashton House from Manchester back in 1799 to visit with her daughter. Already in ill health, she came for the country air. Little good it did her as she was dead a month later—helped along, rumour has it, by a rather hefty dose of arsenic, courtesy of my great-great-great-grandfather. Violet generally inhabits the guest room on the fourth floor, which is where she died. It’s not often she bothers to get out of bed.

“Bad taste ,” Prometheus repeats loud enough to make me wince. “I said bad taste, you daft old bat.”

“There’s no need to shout,” Violet replies sharply. “I’m not deaf.”

She absolutely is, which is why she always has an old-fashioned ear trumpet grasped in one hand.

“What’s in bad taste?” Edwina asks softly, her posh Edwardian tone mildly curious.

“Well, this is the cupboard my dead body was stuffed in,” Prometheus grumbles saltily.

“Alright, that’s enough,” I interrupt. “Is everyone here? Where’s Leona?”

We all fall silent but no answer comes, which isn’t surprising considering the woman doesn’t speak.

“Maybe someone should switch the light on?” Skid offers helpfully.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” I huff, and the bare light bulb above us winks on.

We’re all crammed into a tiny cupboard hidden behind a false bookcase in the library—where, yes, Prometheus’ body unfortunately had been stuffed by one of the other murder mystery actors.

I take a quick head count. Prometheus is standing pressed up against my side, his face bearing what has become a perpetual sullen glower. He still has the large carving knife protruding through his neck and bloodstains on his clothes. Poor chap. He’s still a newbie, barely been dead a few weeks. Come to think of it, I’m not sure they’ve even had his funeral. He’s not yet learned how to change his appearance. I’ll have to try to remember to take some time to explain a few things about the afterlife to him but not right now. Plenty more pressing matters are afoot.

Edwina is crushed up against the wall, her rather large, feathered hat knocked askew and her Votes for Women sash rumbled. Pressed up against her, and no doubt the reason for her bright pink cheeks, is Skid. Clad in a studded leather jacket, a loose and ripped vest with the anarchy symbol sprayed on the front, red plaid skinny trousers adorned with silver chains, and heavy black boots, he looks amused more than anything. His enormous mohawk is sprayed lime green and almost reaches the low ceiling of the cupboard.

Just behind him, I see the magnificent golden plumage of the admiral’s bicorne, and when I tilt my head, I can see his wrinkled face. Admiral Hilary’s mouth is almost obscured by his thick white curved moustache, and he has a monocle hooked under one bushy white brow. He’s gazing down with a contemplative expression at Roger, who is crushed against Skid on the other side of Edwina.

Beside them is Violet in her customary white high-necked, long-sleeved nightgown. A matching sleep cap is secured under her bony chin and covers the top of her grey hair, which falls over one skinny shoulder in a thick braid. In one of her hands is her

ever-present ear trumpet and in the other, her walking cane.

Finally, my eyes fall on Leona. The tiny waif of a woman has all but disappeared in the crush, and her face is smooshed up against my front. She looks up at me in annoyance, managing to just about raise her hands in the tightly confined space and make a couple of small gestures.

“What?” I frown down at her. “Blast it all, woman, why don’t you just speak like everyone else? I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“She asked you to breathe in. She said she’s practically being suffocated by your... uh... sweater,” Edwina explains with an embarrassed flush, trying not to look at my ample chest.

“Sorry about that”—I try to back up but merely succeed in stepping on Prometheus’ foot—“I do rather take after my mother,” I continue, ignoring the overly dramatic yowl of pain coming from just behind me. “She nearly smothered my father to death several times. It was his own fault, really. Apparently, he liked to nap with his face in her bosom. It’s a wonder the poor woman got anything done with him permanently attached to her.”

Roger draws my attention back. “I think we’re getting a little off track, Bertie.”

“Yeah.” Skid nods in agreement. “Why don’t you tell us why we’re all crammed into a tiny little cupboard?”

“Because we’re avoiding Stanley Flibblebottom Longfellow,” I reply in a hushed whisper in case he hears us.

“Stanley Fitzgerald Longbottom,” Roger corrects.

“Whatever.” I wave my hand and accidentally slap Prometheus in the side of the head. “Whoops. Sorry, old chap,” I apologise absently, ignoring his glare. “Anyway, the point is, after our marginally overenthusiastic contributions to the murder mystery weekend, it seems we’ve landed ourselves in a bit of hot water. The Bureau of Domestic Hauntings has?—”

“The bureau of what?” Skid’s pierced eyebrow rises.

“Domestic hauntings,” Roger chimes in. “I know, darling, I was as surprised as you. Then again, should we have really been? With the British love of paperwork, why wouldn’t they attempt to bureaucratised the afterlife too?”

“What does he want?” Edwina asks, trying to set her hat straight and huffing in annoyance when it keeps sliding forward into her eyes. “He visited me in the orchard and asked some highly impertinent questions regarding my conduct during the murder mystery weekend. I had to remind him that I am a lady of impeccable breeding and good poise. My conduct is above reproach.”

Skid snorts. “Yeah, well, your conduct was throwing vases and vandalising the silverware during the murder mystery riot.”

“It was not a riot,” she says primly. “It was an... incident.”

He grins. “Uh-huh.”

“Yes, well.” I wave my hand again and Prometheus ducks. “Putting all that aside, the long and the short of it is that we’re now in a bit of a pickle. I don’t think they’re particularly fussed about the criminal damage, but they really didn’t like that we showed ourselves to the fleshies. They’ve got their knickers in a twist, and now they’re threatening to deport us all to the afterlife and designate the house and grounds a no-haunting zone.”

Everyone starts talking loudly, shouting over each other in a frenzy of indignation.

“Ssush,” I hiss. “He’ll hear us. We’ve got to be very careful now with him sulking around the place, looking for more reasons to report us to the stiffs.”

“What are we going to do, Bertie?” Edwina asks, her eyes large and teary and her bottom lip trembling. “I don’t want to leave. This is my home.”

“It’s home for all of us,” I point out. “Which means we need to work together for our plan to succeed.”

“Oh, capital!” Rear Admiral Hilary pipes up. “Always good to have a plan. What is it?”

“The plan is twofold. Isn’t that right, Bertie?” Roger interjects.

“That’s right.” I nod. “We’re going to divide and conquer. Our two main objectives are, one, stop Stanley Finklefellow Longbutton?—”

“Fitzgerald Longbottom,” Roger corrects again.

“That’s what I said,” I mutter. “Anyway, objective one is to make sure Stanley doesn’t report anything unfavourable back to his superiors. We need to make sure we pass that inspection with flying colours and get him out of the house as quickly as possible.”

Leona makes a series of gestures and I automatically look to Edwina, who seems to be the only one who understands her.

“She said, ‘What’s the second part?’”

Leona hikes a thumb towards Edwina as if to say, What she said .

“The second part is to stop the hotel from closing,” I carry on. “It’s no great secret the hotel has been in decline for some time, but it is now in imminent danger of closing for good.”

The noise once again rises as they all begin to chatter loudly.

“It’s okay. Bertie and I have a plan, and it’s genius ,” Roger speaks over them.

“What is it?” Edwina asks suspiciously. “Because if I recall, it was your idea for us to show ourselves to the fleshies and make this into the most talked-about haunted hotel in the north of England, which is what landed us in trouble with this Stanley fellow and the Bureau in the first place.”

“Yes, well,” I bluster. “In my defence, I didn’t know about the Bureau or their apparent rules.”

“No point in casting blame now, Eddy,” Skid tells her. “Fuck the Bureau and fuck the establishment.”

“Quite,” I nod. “Now, the plan. Some of you may have noticed one of our own has returned to the family fold.”

“Morgan?” Edwina replies, her cheeks pinking prettily. “He is very handsome, just like his father.”

“Good genes,” I agree. “Anyway, it occurs to me that we can kill several birds with one stone. One, we can help Cedric resolve his issues before his time comes so he’s not trapped here with unfinished business. After all, he’s not getting any younger. Two, I overheard Morgan talking to his half-brother. It seems the two of them run



some kind of hotel empire over in the States. Which means Morgan clearly has a good working knowledge of how to run a successful hotel, and we could certainly use someone with that level of expertise. Three, Roger is convinced the lad has a bob or two?—”

Roger preens. “Oh, trust me, honey. I am never wrong. Morgan positively reeks of money.”

“Yes, well, if you say so.” I shrug. “And if Roger is right about the boy’s finances, he might be persuaded to invest in this place and give it long enough to get back up and running like it did in its heyday.”

“Bertie, it’s never had a heyday,” Admiral Hilary huffs.

“Well then, it’s overdue.” I shake my head. “And finally, if Morgan decides to stay on, we’ll have someone in place that will inherit when Cedric’s time comes.”

“This is all very well, but how are we supposed to achieve all of that if we aren’t allowed to reveal ourselves to him?” Edwina points out.

Roger and I share a glance.

“We’re going to make him fall in love with Ellis!” Roger blurts out excitedly.

Insert sound of crickets.

“I’m sorry, you’re gonna what?” Skid finally says, his tone incredulous.

“Make him fall in love with Ellis!” Roger vibrates with glee.

“That’s what I thought you said.” Skid frowns.

“It’s perfect when you think about it really,” I reply. “Ellis is the epitome of walking on sunshine. He spreads happiness and glitter wherever he goes without even trying. If anyone can unlock my great-nephew’s heart?—”

“And his bank account,” Roger mutters under his breath.

“—it’s Ellis,” I continue, ignoring Roger’s input. “He’ll fall in love with Ellis and, by extension, the hotel, and he’ll help us to save it! It’s a plan with no drawbacks.”

“It’s a plan with many drawbacks,” Skid replies. “Many, many drawbacks. In fact, so many that I’m not even sure where to start.”

“Sourpuss.” Roger pouts prettily.

“I’m just pointing out what I hope should be obvious to you both, despite your scheming, and that is that Ellis has his own autonomy. He may not even be interested in Morgan. You can’t manipulate him into a relationship with someone because it suits your purposes.”

“Well, if it’s for the greater good,” Prometheus pipes up.

“You have already demonstrated your capacity for deceit during the murder mystery weekend.” Skid glares at him and he slumps back into the corner closing his mouth. “I care about Ellis. He’s a good kid and I’m not going to stand by and let him be sacrificed on the matrimonial altar just to save a pile of bricks and mortar.”

“No one said anything about marriage,” Roger mutters. “Good god, this isn’t the dark ages.”

“This may be our home,” Skid continues, “and I don’t want to leave either. I’ve spent the last fifty years here and I’ve kinda got used to it, but I’m not staying at the

expense of Ellis.”

“I’m afraid I have to agree with Mr Skid. As pleasing as he is to look upon, how can we be certain of Morgan’s good character? He is an Ashton-Drake, after all,” Edwina asks. “They are for the most part a host of self-absorbed, philandering, gambling, alcoholic, amateur poisoning, grouchy old windbags.”

“I say, that’s jolly unfair,” the Admiral protests.

“Gambled away your inheritance, ran away to join the navy, died of syphilis.” Roger stares at Admiral Hilary.

“Fair point,” he says in a conciliatory tone.

“Calm down, you lot.” I shake my head. “All of us care about the boy. We’ve watched Ellis grow up within these walls. He’s family, and we protect our own. We’d never make him do anything he didn’t want to, but you didn’t see the way he and Morgan looked at each other. There’s something there, I’m certain of it. Would it really be so bad if we just... you know... gave a little nudge?”

Skid grunts, not entirely convinced, but he raises no further objections.

“Right. So we need all of you to keep Stanley Fitzfinkle Longbarrow?—”

“Fitzgerald Longbottom.”

“Still don’t care. We need all of you to keep this Stanley chap distracted so he doesn’t catch wind of what we’re doing. Make sure we pass that inspection and get him out of here as quick as you can. Leona, you won’t be much use as he won’t be able to understand you anyway, so you’re with me and Roger.”

“And what exactly will you be doing?” Prometheus pipes back up.

Roger grins wickedly. “Bertie and I will concentrate on Butch and the Sundance twink.”

“Roger, Leona, and I will be providing opportunities for Morgan and Ellis to get to know each other,” I clarify.

“You’re going to be matchmaking,” Skid says dryly.

“It’s a dirty job,” Roger answers piously, “but someone’s got to do it.”

I knock on Morgan's door and wait patiently. He'd stalked back to his room a few hours ago, after being summarily dismissed by his grandfather, which I imagine was probably a bit hurtful. Unfortunately, when Mr Ashton-Drake gets in these moods of his, there's nothing we can do but wait for him to come out of it.

Although I know Mr Ashton-Drake's son—Morgan's father—passed away unexpectedly when he was only in his twenties, I don't know the full story of how Morgan came to grow up in the US. I'm also very curious as to why he doesn't seem to have had any contact with his grandfather during that time, but I don't want to pry.

I shift restlessly and raise my hand to knock again. I'd decided to give Morgan some space after the disastrous visit with his grandfather, but I haven't been able to settle. Usually, I wouldn't be so forthright with a guest, but Morgan isn't a guest exactly, he's Mr Ashton-Drake's family, and the thought of him being unhappy makes something hot and unpleasant squirm in my belly. I don't like it when people are upset, and I can't help but want to cheer them up.

No matter how many times I told myself to just let him be, I ended up wandering upstairs to room 419 and pacing the corridor, arguing with myself all the way. In the end, my need to make sure he was okay won out, and here I am, standing outside his door like a very smiley stalker.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

My hand drops, but before I can turn away and head back down the corridor, the door

is yanked open, and Morgan stares down at me angrily. I can't help it—my dick gives an interested little twitch. God, he's hot when he scowls like that. Makes me want to let him do bad things to me, but it's not very professional of me.

I sigh. Such a shame he's off-limits.

“Good afternoon.” I give him a smile. “I wondered if you were hungry? You missed lunch and Aggie is about to start serving an early dinner. I know I've said it before, but you really don't want to miss her stew and dumplings.”

“I'm not having dinner,” he says sharply. “I'm leaving. Call me a cab, please.”

He turns and strides back into the room while still talking to me, so I have no choice but to reach out to stop the door from slamming in my face and then follow him inside.

“I'm afraid I can't call you a taxi,” I tell him apologetically.

“Why the hell not?” he snaps as he approaches the bed where his open suitcase lays half-packed.

“Well, it's just that?—”

“It's no wonder this place is empty if you can't even offer to call a cab for the guests who want to leave.”

“It's not that. Of course I would call one under normal circumstances, but it's just that?—”

“I should never have come here in the first place,” he mutters to himself as he turns towards the dresser and opens a drawer, pulling out the clothes he obviously

unpacked earlier. “I knew it was a bad idea, I should have listened to my gut. But no, I listened to my idiot brother instead.”

“Um, if I could just?—”

He shoves the clothes into the case and as he does, I see Leona appear beside him. He, of course, can’t see her. She peers at the haphazard pile and shakes her head, rolling her eyes.

He turns back to the drawer to get the rest of his clothes, and I watch open-mouthed as Leona calmly plucks the pile out of the suitcase behind his back. He drops a fresh pile into the suitcase as she turns and places the first pile back in the drawer.

“Uh.” I raise a hand. What on earth is Leona doing?

“I should have just stayed in New York. The press would’ve gotten bored and moved on sooner or later,” he continues muttering. By now, I’m not sure he even remembers I’m in the room, let alone expects my participation in this very one-sided conversation.

He stares down at the contents of the case in confusion. Turning to look over his shoulder, he frowns when he sees that some of his clothes are back in the drawer.

“And another thing,” he says. He turns to retrieve them, but as soon as his back is turned, Leona once again plucks the pile from the case and returns them to the drawer. “Where does my grandfather get off, saying he’ll see me and then kicking me out of his room before I can so much as open my mouth and utter a single word? Do you think I wanted to be here?”

“I think?—”

He looks across the room to me, and his dark eyes make butterflies erupt in my stomach.

“All these years and not so much as a phone call,” he hisses under his breath. “I don’t even know what I’m doing here,” he growls. “And where the hell are my clothes?” He stares down at the now empty suitcase.

“Mr Ashton-Drake,” I say, drawing his attention. “I’m sorry, but you can’t leave.”

“Why?” He glares at me. “I don’t want to be here and my grandfather has made it pretty obvious he doesn’t want me here either. So why the hell should I stay?”

I point to the window where we can both see a heavy flurry of fat snowflakes fall.

“What?” He shrugs. “It’s just a few flakes. That’d be considered a light dusting in New York.”

“Yes, well, this is England,” I reply. “A few flakes of snow and everything grinds to a halt, but snow on this level? There’s no chance of getting out. All the roads into the hotel are impassable, Rosie says the local plough has broken down, and the local council have already run out of road salt.”

“Well, they need to call someone to get some more, then.”

“We’re one of the more rural areas so we’re not a priority, especially as we have plenty of food and fuel. We just have to wait it out, I’m afraid. But the good news is they can probably dig us out by February.”

“February? Are you serious?”

I nod. “Look on the bright side. February is only just over a week away, and they may



be able to get the roads cleared earlier. Or not. Our weather is a bit unpredictable, what with climate change and everything.”

“There’s no way out?”

“We’re having unseasonably heavy snow at the moment,” I explain. “It hadn’t fully melted from the last heavy fall a couple of weeks ago, and now with this blizzard heading in unexpectedly, it’s made things much worse. They’ve sent out weather warnings and a lot of flights have been grounded too.”

I watch as he sinks onto the bed in defeat and rubs his hands over his face tiredly. Leona is now nowhere to be seen, so I step a little closer.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly. “About your grandfather and about the snow.”

“Neither of which are your fault.” He looks over to me once more. “Do you always apologise for things you have no control over?”

“Often.” I chuckle. “Do you always try to control everything around you?”

“Often.” His mouth twitches and my fingers itch to trace the beautiful curve of those soft-looking lips, so I jam my hands in my pockets to stop myself from reaching for him.

“But you’re wrong anyway.” I inch closer, feeling a little guilty about the current situation with Mr Ashton-Drake. “About your grandfather, that is. I should have read his mood better. I know how he gets when he’s stressed. He doesn’t do well with change or surprises. You showing up has unsettled him, I think. I should have given him more time to get used to the idea before I put you both in the same room. I was just so excited that he had family come to visit him. He never has any visitors. The only people he ever sees are me and Rosie, Aggie, and John the Maid. Dilys checks

in on him sometimes, but she struggles with the stairs.”

He frowns. “Who’s Dilys?”

“The bartender.”

He shakes his head. “Doesn’t matter anyway. I didn’t exactly come here for a social visit.”

“You didn’t?” I reply in confusion. “Why did you come here, then?”

He stares at me, the furrow between his brows deepening and the grip of his hands tightening on his knees.

“Sorry.” I grimace. “That was rude. It’s not my business. Forgive me for asking.” I turn to leave, realising he probably wants some space and privacy, but pause when I hear his voice.

“Honestly, I don’t know what the hell I’m doing here.” He admits slowly. I turn back to face him, he glances up from his perch on the edge of the bed, looking so miserably frustrated that I’m again hit with the urge to soothe away that frown and make him smile. “Stupid, huh?”

“I don’t think so.” I incline my head toward the edge of the bed beside him. He nods, so I take a tentative seat beside him, careful not to crowd his space.

“I was in Chicago dealing with a problem at one of our larger hotels and the next thing I knew, my name was plastered all over the papers. Some asshole reporter had put my name together with this place, just after that guy was killed here. They love dragging my name through the dirt whenever they can. A few papers ran with it and then it got blasted all over social media. They dug up what happened to my dad—my

biological dad—then they started dragging up all the previous deaths linked to this place.”

“Oh,” I murmur. I’m not sure what to say, but I feel bad that he’s been drawn into the mess we inadvertently caused.

“Yeah.” He sighs. “I shouldn’t have reacted. I know better. It would have all blown over in a matter of days, but I guess it was the proverbial straw. I was pissed and so sick of having it all thrown in my face. I was halfway across the Atlantic before I calmed down enough to realise this probably wasn’t a good idea.”

I wince. “Sorry. This is kind of my fault, then. The murder mystery weekend was my idea.”

“Oh, really? Did you murder the guy?”

“No. Turns out no one did. He fell on his own sword, so to speak.”

“Then it wasn’t your fault.” He sighs again, and he sounds so... weary. “It’s all just one big clusterfuck.”

“Mr Ashton-Drake,” I begin, but he cuts me off.

“Morgan,” he corrects. “You may as well call me Morgan. You say Mr Ashton-Drake and I think you mean the crazy old guy with no pants that’s supposed to be my grandfather.”

“Morgan,” I say gently. “I don’t think coming here was a mistake, whatever the reason you got on that plane. Your grandfather does want to see you. Believe me. Otherwise he’d have refused flat out in the first place. He’s just prickly and, like I said, he doesn’t react well to change. Just give him time. You’re going to be here for

a few days or at least until the snow clears enough for travel. Why don't you try to get to know him? I know he seems... eccentric. And, well, I guess he is, but underneath it all, he's a very sweet and kind man. He just tends to be a bit grumpy."

Something that seems to run in the family, I think in amusement as I watch Morgan.

He huffs. "You sound like you know him well."

I shrug. "I practically grew up here. It's all I know. Mr Ashton-Drake was always really nice to me, and I guess I kind of thought of him as my de facto grandparent since I don't have any of my own."

"You don't?" He studies me, his dark eyes narrowing curiously. "No family at all, other than your mom?"

"I do have family." I smile. "They're all here at the hotel."

"What? The staff?"

"Yes, the staff. They're a quirky bunch, but fun and loyal." He seems surprised by this, but I nod. "Why don't you come and have something to eat?" I offer. I want to get him out of this room where, judging by his current mood, I'm sure he'd quite happily sit and brood all evening.

"I'm not hungry," he rumbles like a sullen teenager.

"Okay." It is, after all, his choice. I rise to my feet and head towards the door. "If you change your mind, just head down to the dining room."

He doesn't say another word but watches contemplatively as I leave the room.

Clicking the door closed behind me, I head down the corridor.

I wish I knew why he hadn't come to see his grandfather before now, but I can't ask. It would be too rude and intrusive. I'm also not about to go snooping for information. If what Morgan said was true, an internet search would probably bring up half of what I want to know about him, but how much would actually be true? It also seems like a horrendous invasion of his privacy.

The thing is, I wasn't lying when I said earlier that Mr Ashton-Drake had wanted to see him. He did, but the moment he was actually confronted with Morgan, his anxiety had got the better of him, which is why he was so rude and grumpy. It's a self-defence mechanism and also the reason why I still call him Mr Ashton-Drake instead of Cedric, even after all these years and how well I know him. It makes him more comfortable to have that slight degree of separation, a protective layer.

I don't know the exact circumstances that triggered Mr Ashton-Drake's anxieties, but I'm pretty sure it had something to do with Morgan's father's death. It was before my time, way before I was born even, but Aggie and Dilys worked here back then. They know some of it, if not all—after all, you can't usually hide much from the staff in a place like this. But I've never asked and they've never told. I've always thought some things are best left buried.

Now, I'm not so sure.

I think both Morgan and Mr Ashton-Drake need to have a conversation. I won't push them though. I'm not one for interfering, not like Rosie, bless her, who can't help meddling in people's private affairs. With all the best intentions, of course.

Knowing Mr Ashton-Drake the way I do, I know he needs to warm up to Morgan in his own time. The funny thing is, Morgan's expressions and adorable grumpiness are almost an exact mirror of his grandfather.

The apple really didn't fall very far from the tree. I chuckle out loud, then sigh. I get the feeling Morgan has a lot more going on under that frown than most people realise, but if he turns out to be as stubborn as Mr Ashton-Drake, nothing will get resolved.

I mean, the man's gorgeous and, as much as I'd love to slip into his bed with him and offer him a more personalised service, I also wonder if maybe he could use a friend.

Shaking the thoughts of Mr Ashton-Drake's sexy grandson from my mind, I shove my overeager libido back into the cupboard it's been hiding in for the past several months and head towards the kitchen to see if Aggie needs any help.

I really have no intention of going down to the dining room and eating stew and dumplings with a bunch of strangers. Not that there'll be many strangers; this place is almost empty except for the one guest and a few members of staff.

My stomach tries to have some input, growling loudly at the thought of a meal, but I'm not in the mood. I'm still pissed I'm even here in the first place, unhappy with the way my grandfather acted like I was dragged in on the bottom of Ellis' shoe, frustrated at the snow and lack of anything remotely resembling a contingency plan for adverse weather conditions, and annoyed that I'm going to be stuck here in this old British relic which is falling apart at the seams and is probably in imminent danger of closure.

There's only been one tiny spark of brightness, and that would be the cute blonde with an ass I'd like to feast on for days. Too bad he's off-limits. I get the feeling he'd be an immensely satisfying way to pass the time while snowed in. But given his sweet disposition and his obvious friendship with my grandfather, it would be a bad, bad idea to hook up with him. I'm not even going to think about how much younger than me he is.

No, I'm going to sit in this room until the snow melts enough for me to get on the next flight out of this miserable country. No snow ploughs. Seriously? What country doesn't account for snow in the winter, particularly in the northern parts? I mean, do they not have forecasts? It's not difficult to plan accordingly.

My stomach growls loudly once more.

I am not going downstairs. I do not want to see Ellis again and have him smile at me. I keep telling myself that even as I leave my room, pocketing the old-fashioned room key.

I've always been a bit of a moody bastard, or at least that's what Warren takes great delight in telling me. My brother is charming and boyishly good-looking, and has most people eating out of the palm of his hand within twenty minutes of meeting him. I've always found it much harder. It's not that I have a chip on my shoulder per se, but I was always uncomfortably aware of trying to find where I fit in. Making friends doesn't come easily for me.

It doesn't help that I'm a bit of a perfectionist, especially when it comes to my professional life. I don't like to form attachments and have never really had the urge for a committed relationship. I'm too busy, too set in my ways. When I have an itch that needs scratching, I hit up Grindr, not that I can do that here, and I'm not going to lie, an orgasm or two would go a long way towards easing the tension currently making my shoulders ache in its iron-like grip. However, the distinct lack of options means a little self-relief is probably in my cards somewhere.

My thoughts drift back to Ellis again, and I immediately shut them down. No . I am not going to start down that slippery path. Off-limits, I tell myself firmly. Even if he is prettier than anyone I've ever seen, with those big blue eyes, cherubic blonde curls, and soft, pillowy lips.

I'm only fixating on him because of the limited options. Probably. Maybe. Okay, it's because he's the only person who's piqued my interest in god knows how long. Doesn't mean it's a good idea, and he's most likely not going to be interested in someone as prickly and hard to please as me anyway.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself. Shaking my head, I follow the staircase down past the various empty floors, but just as I reach the short flight of stairs that



leads to the foyer, I stop and jolt in shock. There's a body sprawled out at an unnatural angle on the floor at the foot of the steps.

What the fuck? Is this place murder central? And is it so common now that they just leave dead bodies lying about the place for guests to trip over? I hurry down the steps and kneel beside the man. He doesn't have any obvious injuries, so mostly likely internal. I reach out to press my fingers to his neck in order to search for a pulse, but as my fingertips skim his skin, his eyes open and he gives a loud cry of surprise, jerking up into a sitting position.

I topple back and fall on my ass, my eyes wide and my heart pounding, having not expected an animated corpse.

What the hell is it with this place?

"Oh, so sorry," the man says, his tone polite. "You startled me."

"I startled you?" I snap. "What on earth were you doing? Taking a nap at the foot of the stairs?"

"What?" He looks confused for a moment. "Oh, no." He scrambles to his feet and reaches out a hand to help me up. "I wasn't taking a nap."

I ignore his hand and push myself up, scowling at him. "What the hell were you doing, then?"

"Pretending I was dead." He says this like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"I can see that," I say dryly. "Why?"

"Oh, I do beg your pardon." He gives a small, self-deprecating laugh. "I'm Alfred

Pennington.” He stares at me expectantly, as if the introduction alone should explain why he was lying at the foot of the main staircase in the foyer, imitating a corpse.

Seriously, what is it with this place?

“Morgan,” I reply out of politeness as I give his offered hand a brief shake. I omit my surname, not really wanting random and possibly crazy strangers to know about my connection to this place.

We stare at each other in silence for several uncomfortable moments, then the smile slowly falls from his face, to be replaced with a confused frown.

“I’m a horror writer. Well, more of a hybrid writer. My novels are kind of cosy mystery meets horror.” I continue to stare him. “Killer Plague Country Village?” he says as if I should know what he’s talking about. “The Knitting Club Murders? High Tea at the Homicide Café?... The Deadly Vicar?” He trails off. “No?”

“These are... books?” I guess.

“Yes!” His smile widens once more. “I do have a somewhat modest following,” he says coyly.

“And you were lying on the floor because...” I trail off, waiting for him to fill in the blank.

“Oh! Yes, I’m working on my new novel. It’s going to be completely different from anything I’ve written before as I’m venturing rather daringly into the paranormal with a haunting ,” he announces gleefully. “I’ve been giving a lot of thought to adapting my pen name. Make it look a bit bolder on the cover and maybe give a little degree of separation from my older novels. Let the readers know they’re getting something new and exciting. I was thinking about using my initials. Alfred Stanford Sebastian

Pennington. A.S.S Pennington.”

“Ass Pennington?” I stare at him. “You’re going to print Ass Pennington on your exciting new novel? Well, your readers will certainly be expecting something different.”

“Argh, yes, I see what you mean.” He gives a loud and slightly awkward chuckle. “Maybe not. Perhaps I’ll just drop Sebastian, never liked it much anyway. A.S Pennington.” He muses. “Anyway, in one of the chapters, a character is thrown down the stairs, and as they lay dying, they look up into the eyes of the killer, who happens to be the deceased former owner of the hotel...” He looks thoughtful.

“You don’t say,” I murmur.

“Possibly. It’s still a bit of a work in progress. Anyway, I wanted to really get into the mindset of the character, so I thought, you know?—”

“That you’d pretend to be dead?”

He nods enthusiastically.

“And did it help?” I ask, although I’m not really sure why I’m encouraging the continuation of this ridiculous conversation.

“Oh, yes, very much so.” He beams at me.

“So you’re a guest here?” I ask. Again, I’m not really sure why. I stare at the strange guy with the garishly patterned pants in bright orange paired with a blue argyle knit sweater-vest over a pink checked shirt. Apart from the fact that the clashing colours and patterns are starting to hurt my eyes, there’s a strange kind of surrealism to this whole encounter, and I’m beginning to wonder if it’s not me who’s prostrate at the

foot of the stairs with a head injury, hallucinating this whole conversation.

“Yes, I’m a guest. I came for the murder mystery weekend, hoped it would fuel the old creative tanks.”

“And did it?”

“It most certainly did,” he exclaims with very obvious delight. “Not just the whole dead body slash was it a murder or was it not a murder, oh my gosh who’s hidden the body debacle. No, I mean, that was obviously a huge shock, but then all the ghosts of the house appearing was just so thrilling. Terrifying, obviously.” He waves a hand wildly. “But thrilling. I mean, how often is one invited to look beyond the veil of life and death? I knew then... Well, once I’d come around from passing out due to the shock, I knew that I needed to stay here, that I was destined to write the greatest works of my whole life within these walls,” he says reverently. “This new novel will rival the likes of Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol .” He stops and looks as if he’s thinking hard. “Or maybe Beetlejuice . I haven’t quite figured it out yet.”

“Uh-huh.” I narrow my eyes as I watch him, wondering if he’s on some kind of medication or has a drinking problem. After all, ghosts aren’t real. “Okaay,” I say slowly. “Well, don’t let me keep you.”

“You’re absolutely right, of course,” he guffaws. “Must get back to the old grind. This masterpiece is not going to write itself.”

“It certainly isn’t,” I mutter under my breath as he scurries back across the foyer and through an open doorway into another room, closing the door firmly behind him.

I shake my head and turn away from the staircase, wondering which direction the dining room is in when my elbow catches the suit of armour and the whole thing crashes to the ground.

The sound of all that metal hitting the flagstone and then skidding off in all directions is deafening. I wince and tense up as the helmet spins on the stone floor before finally slowing. I glance up, certain that everyone in the hotel must have heard the commotion and would come running, but there's nothing. Not one single person to witness my embarrassment.

After several long seconds, I breathe a sigh of relief. At least no one was around to witness my abject humiliation; after all, if there's one thing I hate, it's being the centre of attention. Reaching down to pick up the helmet, I pause, my hand outstretched, as the helmet begins to vibrate, dancing on the spot.

A scraping sound pulls my attention and as I turn to look, the chunks of polished metal that are spread far and wide across the lobby floor also begin to vibrate. I pull my hand back, standing up sharply as one piece of the armour slides across the stone, followed by another, then another. Stumbling back a step, my eyes widen as the pieces of metal lift off the floor and shoot across the room as if attracted by a giant invisible magnet. I watch in disbelief as the parts reassemble themselves, and I find myself once again staring at a pristine, complete suit of armour standing on its plinth.

"What the hell?" I mutter aloud. "How did they do that?"

They really must be taking this haunted hotel theme seriously. I have to admit, it's very impressive. The parts must be on wires or something. I step closer to the armour and study it closely, but for the life of me, I can't see how they pulled off such a convincing trick. Maybe it's some kind of magnets?

I kneel down on the floor to examine the base of the plinth. There must be something, some explanation. I lean in further and stick my head around the back of the armour, conveniently ignoring the fact that I probably look ridiculous on my knees in a thousand-dollar suit with my ass in the air, looking for some sort of concealed ropes or a pulley system.

“Morgan?”

I close my eyes as I recognise the voice behind me. So much for no one witnessing my embarrassing moment. Pulling back, I stand as gracefully as I can and dust the knees of my pants.

“Did you lose something?” Ellis asks.

“My good sense, apparently,” I mutter. “My dignity seems to be MIA too.”

Then he hits me with that goddamn smile of his, and I can’t do anything but blink back at him. It’s like staring at the sun for too long and makes me feel a little dizzy. What is it about him that sets the butterflies loose in my belly? Or maybe it’s just that I’m hungry.

Right on cue, my stomach gives a very loud, very unattractive gurgle, and I close my eyes in mortification.

“Did you come down for dinner?” Ellis asks sweetly.

“I was looking for the dining room, but as I was coming downstairs, there was...” I glance back at the foot of the stairs and frown, deciding I don’t really want to revisit the weird conversation I had with the Ass Pennington guy. Instead, I turn back to Ellis, who is watching me curiously. “You know what? Never mind. Yes, as you can probably tell, no matter how much I was intent on brooding in the privacy of my room, my stomach had other plans. Besides, I can’t miss Maggie’s stew and dumplings, right? I heard they were the best in England.”

Ellis’ smile widens even further if that’s possible, and damn if it doesn’t give me a weird warm feeling in my gut that I was the one that put it there.

“Aggie,” he corrects me gently, “will be so pleased, and you won’t regret it. She also makes a sticky toffee pudding to die for.”

“God, I hope not. I would have thought you’d had enough of dead bodies around here.”

Ellis lets out the sweetest laugh. “Careful, Morgan, or people might start to think you have a sense of humour buried underneath that scowl.”

“I’ll have you know I’ve worked very hard on the scowl. I practice in the mirror and everything.” I’m not sure what I’m doing. I sure as hell have no business flirting with the pretty staff member, but when I’m rewarded with another soft laugh, I can’t lie to myself. It fills me with... something. Something not unpleasant.

“Come on.” Ellis nods towards the door behind him. “I’ll show you to the dining room. I just have to pick something up from the bar first.”

I follow along in his wake obediently like a baby duckling before I even realise what I’m doing. He just has this way about him, all warm and genuine, and it draws me in like a gravitational pull.

I shake my head. I’m sure it’s just an undiscovered side effect of jet lag or something. I have no doubt I’ll be back to my grouchy, cutting self tomorrow, but right now, I’m content to let him lead me along like a pied piper with a gorgeous smile and a sexy ass.

The doorway leads into a small bar area, and it’s like I’ve stepped into a different time period. Out in the lobby, the hotel has an almost medieval feel to it, with flagstone floors, high ceilings with exposed beams, and fake candles mounted on heavy wagon wheel-shaped metal chandeliers. But in the bar, I find myself surrounded by geometric patterns with gilded edges, low, polished dark wood tables,

and velvet-covered bucket chairs. It all has a very art deco feel to it, and something about that appeals to me, reminding me of all the architecture back home in New York.

All the furniture and fixtures are decorated in a theme of black, cream, gold, and teal, and I'm struck with the realisation that although everything is old and worn, it's scrupulously clean and well maintained. I'm coming to understand that despite this place's reputation for unfortunate incidents and accidental deaths, the building itself is well loved and cared for.

I pause and watch as Ellis ducks behind the bar. There's a clinking of glass and then he reemerges with several bottles of wine, both red and white, in his arms.

"Should I be worried you have a drinking problem?"

He chuckles. "No. A couple are to serve with dinner and the rest are for Aggie for cooking. She ran out earlier."

"Here, let me help you." I reach out and carefully take some from him, and once again try to ignore the warmth spreading in my chest when he smiles at me gratefully.

We head out of the bar the same way we came in, stepping back out into the foyer and crossing the large space to a door on the opposite side. He leads me into a fairly large dining room, and despite the size of it, it still manages to feel cosy and intimate. It's filled with round tables covered with pristine white linens and gleaming silverware. Small deco lamps light each table, casting a soft glow throughout the room, and Ella Fitzgerald's dulcet tones croon softly in the background.

Ellis leads me to a table by a large window. "This is the best table in the room." He nods towards the window, and although it's dark outside, I can see the fluffy white snowflakes falling, giving the room an even cosier feel. "During the day, it has the



best view of the grounds, but there's just something so soothing about sitting quietly and watching the snow fall."

"Yeah," I mutter, standing there like an idiot, holding several bottles of wine and completely mesmerised by this beautiful man.

"Why don't you take a seat?" He takes the wine from me and I do as he suggests, sliding into the comfortably cushioned chair.

"I'll just drop these in the kitchen and be back shortly with the menu."

"There's no need." I shake my head. "I'll have the stew. After all, it comes so highly recommended."

Ellis gives me a shy smile and his cheeks go deliciously pink, making me wonder what other parts of his pale skin I could make flush that pretty colour.

"I'll be right back," he says again, and I watch as he turns and makes his way across the dining room to a set of double doors on the far side. I assume it leads to the kitchen and to Aggie, the cleaver-wielding small Scottish woman who apparently uses a lot of wine in her cooking.

I lean back in my comfortable chair and gaze out of the window, watching the fat flakes drift down languidly, and for the first time in months, I begin to relax.

Peeking around the door into the dining room, I hum in satisfaction as I watch Ellis lead my great-great-nephew to a table. “Good, they’re both in the dining room. This is the perfect opportunity for their first date.”

“Bertie.” Roger looks up from where he’s crouched below me so he can also spy around the door. “Don’t you think they should be aware it’s a date for it to actually count as a date?”

“What does it matter as long as they’re both in the same place getting to know each other? There’s music and candles and dinner. What more do they want?”

“I think it’s going to take a bit more than Frank Sinatra and stew and dumplings to make them fall in love,” Roger replies. “I still think my idea was better.”

I roll my eyes and sigh. “We are not locking them in a room and stealing their clothes.”

“Spoilsport.” Roger sulks.

“This requires romance. I know it’s not something you’re familiar with.”

“I’ll have you know I can be very romantic.” Roger sniffs primly. “Why, when I was still alive, there wasn’t a single man immune to my charms.”

“I’m sure,” I huff. “But we’re not pimping the lad out. This isn’t a bordello for

heaven's sake. We need Morgan to form a bond with Ellis so he'll want to stay here and help us save the hotel. We're not just trying to get them into bed together."

I feel a tap on my shoulder and I look across to see Leona staring at me. She makes a complicated series of gestures with her hands and then points to Morgan and Ellis, who are now talking by one of the tables.

My gaze locks on Roger, but he simply shrugs, as bewildered as I am. We both turn back to Leona, who makes a throwing gesture followed by a reeling-something-back-in action and points once again to Morgan and Ellis.

"You want them to go... fishing?" Roger says slowly as he squints in her direction. "That's not very romantic, not to mention cold. We wouldn't want anything important freezing off."

"I have to say, Leona, Roger's right. The weather is a tad inclement."

Leona shakes her head and stamps her foot crossly before making a rather rude gesture.

"I say, that's not very ladylike," I gasp, and Roger cackles in delight. Turning my attention back to the dining room, I frown when I see Morgan seated alone at one of the tables and Ellis making his way towards the kitchen with several bottles of wine in his arms.

"Do you think he's developed a bit of a drinking problem?" Roger muses.

"Dash it all," I grumble. "Where's he off to? How can we get them to fall in love if they're not even in the same room?"

"Get whom to fall in love?" A posh but stern voice says from behind us.

We jolt and spin around. “Mr Fitzherald Longpossum,” I greet him innocently. “What a lovely evening. How are you? Enjoying the house and grounds?”

He raises an eyebrow and leans past us to glance into the almost deserted dining room. His gaze lands on Morgan, who is staring out the window watching the snow drift down, and then across to Ellis, who has re-entered the dining room and is making his way towards Morgan with a laden tray.

“We weren’t doing anything,” I say hurriedly.

Roger, on the other hand, sashays over to the man and looks him up and down with a naughty smile. “You know, Stanley—may I call you Stanley?” he asks, but he doesn’t pause for a response. “You’re really quite sexy, in a buttoned-up penal kind of way.”

Stanley stares at him for a long moment, still clutching his beloved clipboard to his chest. “Rule number seven thousand, eight hundred and forty-two, paragraph six B, subsection nineteen A, sub-subsection eighty-two F. Whilst under active investigation, all spirits must maintain a distance of twelve feet, nine point two five inches from the living at all times.”

“That’s oddly specific,” I murmur to Leona, who has inched closer to me.

Stanley lifts the hand not clutching the clipboard and clenched in it is some kind of complicated mechanical contraption. He presses the button on its handle while still maintaining eye contact with Roger. A quiet whirring sound fills the air and a long measuring tape begins to unwind itself. Extending through the open door, it crosses the dining room floor. We all stand there for several long minutes, watching as it approaches the table where Morgan and Ellis are once again in conversation. Finally, it comes to a halt beside Morgan’s foot.

Stanley glances down at the tape measure and his lips tighten. Resting his clipboard on the forearm of the hand holding the tape measure, he retrieves the pen attached to the top, clicks it open, and writes something on the page.

He looks at us and shakes his head slowly in admonishment before clicking the pen closed and reattaching it to the clipboard. We observe in painful silence as the whirring starts again and the tape measure is gradually retracted. I'm really not sure why we all stand in mute stupefaction as it slides across the floor, rolling itself back inside the contraption in Stanley's hand.

"My," Roger purrs as he runs a fingertip over Stanley's tape measure. "That's a very long apparatus you have."

"Mr Fitzgerald Longbottom!" a loud voice shouts. We turn to see Edwina and Rear Admiral Hilary rush towards us, looking a little harassed and out of breath. Skid comes sauntering up behind them, his hands tucked in his pockets as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

"Yes?" Stanley says. "How may I help you?" He looks down and checks his clipboard. "Rear Admiral Ashton-Drake."

"W..." He looks over Stanley's shoulder towards me, then his eyes flick to the doorway to the dining room. "Well." He clears his throat and smooths down his uniform. "I, uh... you must come quickly," he says. His gaze deviates towards Edwina as if he's looking for some kind of excuse to draw Stanley's attention away from us. "I uh... someone has broken rule three thousand three hundred and ...er nineteen, paragraph fouuur..."

"A," Edwina mouths at him.

"Subsection Q twenty-one?" he finishes hesitantly.

Stanley draws in a sharp breath, his eyes widening. “Leaving ectoplasmic deposits in a public area?”

“Uh, y—” He looks once again to Edwina, who’s nodding. “Yes, that’s right,” the admiral says with a bit more conviction. “Some complete cad has left an epto-clasmic deposit in the back gallery.”

Skid snorts loudly.

“Good lord, this place is a zoo,” Stanley mutters and dematerialises along with the others.

I let out a deep breath in relief. “Thank god, that should keep him busy for a bit. Leona, keep an eye out in case he comes back.”

“Why, what are we doing?” Roger asks gleefully.

“What do you think?” I reply. “We’re going to make sure Morgan and Ellis have their first date.”

I try not to trip as I cross the dining room, weaving around empty tables and chairs while I carry the tray with Morgan's meal balanced on it.

He's so handsome, bathed in soft lamplight as he sits quietly looking out of the window, watching the snowfall.

He must be exhausted after travelling— not just the travelling, I think to myself. He has shadows under his gorgeous dark eyes and there's a constant tension in his shoulders. This is a man who doesn't slow down and rest, I'm certain of it. Maybe being snowed in here will do him some good, and I don't mean because of the opportunity to get to know his grandfather. Just the chance to stop and breathe. He looks like he needs it.

"Here we go." I set the silver tray on the table and lift the deep dish filled with fragrant stew topped with fluffy golden dumplings, then place it down in front of him.

He breathes in deeply and his stomach lets loose another loud growl.

"I guess I should really stop missing meals," he says self-deprecatingly, and I smile.

"Dilys will bring you over a bottle of wine and a glass," I tell him as I fill his water glass and pick up the empty tray. "I'd have brought it myself, but Dilys doesn't like other people doing her job for her. She's been here a long time and she's very set in her ways."

“She’s the bartender, right?” he replies, and I nod. “So let me get this straight.” He cocks his head a fraction as he studies me. “Dilys is the bartender, Aggie is the cook, John?—”

“The Maid,” I add, and a small smile tugs at his mouth.

“John the Maid is the... maid. Rosie is office staff and you...” His lips purse thoughtfully as he continues to watch me. “You are the receptionist, you carry luggage, and you’re the waiter too?”

“I also organise events, mow the lawns, and look cute in a French maid’s outfit.” I give a laugh of amusement.

His eyes flare with interest and I mentally admonish myself for flirting. I need to be professional for goodness’ sake. “I’m sure you do,” he murmurs.

“I don’t even remember what my official job title is.” I shrug. “I just do whatever I’m needed to. It was different when we had more staff, but then again, we had more guests too. Now it’s quiet more often than not. During these periods, I help John the Maid with the cleaning.”

“I see.” His eyes slide over me slowly, and I fight the urge to squirm under that intense gaze. It’s making me restless in the most inconvenient way, which means I should probably leave him to his meal before I do something thoroughly unprofessional like climb into his lap and rub myself all over him. Those dark eyes and that sexy accent... All I want to do is have him whisper dirty, dirty things into my ear while his soft-looking lips skim over my skin. My very naked skin.

“Sorry?” I blink, realising he’s speaking to me once again. Definitely need to do something about this dry spell soon.



“I said have you eaten yet?”

I shake my head. “No. I’ll just grab something in the kitchen.”

“Why don’t you join me?” he offers.

“Oh.” My stomach jolts in surprise and warmth spreads through my chest and colours my cheeks. “No, I couldn’t. I should be working.”

He glances around the deserted dining room and then back to me, raising one brow pointedly. “Doing what, exactly?”

“Um.” My mouth twitches and I shrug.

“Please,” he says softly. “Maybe you can tell me more about the hotel. I spent the first few years of my life here, but I don’t have any memory of it, and my mother... well, she didn’t like to talk about her time here.”

I suddenly feel myself shoved forward into the chair opposite Morgan and my seat scooted in by an unseen force, tucking me against the table like I’m a small child. Looking around suspiciously, my gaze lands on Bertie and Roger—or rather, their heads. They’re about two rows over and ducked down behind one of the tables. All I can see are their grinning faces and hair.

I frown, wondering why they’re bothering to hide. After all, I already know about the house ghosts, and I’m pretty sure Morgan can’t see them if they choose not to show themselves to him.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Morgan smiles and it’s a real smile, even if it’s a small one. I’m so enamoured of that smile I almost miss him pushing his untouched plate in front of me. “You have this. I’ll go to the kitchen and ask for another one.”

“Oh no,” I say in horror. “You don’t have to do that. That’s my job.”

“Not tonight, it’s not,” Morgan says decisively and stands. “I’m guessing the kitchen is through those doors?”

“No need,” a familiar voice rings out before I can respond, and when I turn, I see Rosie making her way to the table with a second serving. “Here we go.”

“How did...” I trail off as Morgan takes his seat once more and Rosie sets another dish of stew on the table.

“Bertie said...” she trails off and shoots Morgan a look. “You know what, never mind.”

“Who’s Bertie?” Morgan asks as he picks up his fork. “Is he a member of staff? Another guest?”

“She , uh, well, you know, she’s just part of the hotel, been around forever,” Rosie hedges. “Anyway, I need to get back to the kitchen to help Aggie. Enjoy your meals. Dilys is just bringing the wine.”

She heads back to the kitchen before either of us can say anything.

“Is she always like that?”

“Not always.” I sigh. “It’s been a strange few weeks. Everyone’s adjusting.”

“After that guy’s death?” Morgan scoops up his mouthful of stew and groans obscenely, making my dick take notice.

“I, uh.” It takes my brain an alarmingly long time to focus on the question he asked

because I'm too busy staring at those beautiful lips of his and wondering what he tastes like. "Oh, you mean Professor Plume. Well actually, that wasn't his name. He was an actor. His name was actually Bartholomew Briggs. I think he was from Croydon." I shake my head and pick up my own spoon, humming in happiness as I taste Aggie's stew. "He said he was a method actor and insisted on remaining in character the whole time he was here, so I suppose we just got used to calling him Professor Plume."

Morgan takes another mouthful and hums in pleasure, looking around the dining room thoughtfully as he swallows. "I have to admit, I don't really know what to think about this place. The papers have certainly dragged it through the mud lately. I thought the parts that reached me in the States were bad enough, but I've been online and I've seen what the British press have been saying. It wasn't exactly complimentary."

I sigh. "They have been a bit overzealous, especially since the murder mystery weekend, but I can't control what they print, so I choose to ignore it and concentrate on what's really important."

"That's disgustingly well-adjusted of you." His eyes glitter with amusement, which makes me grin at him.

"The hotel has always been kind of infamous, even before it was a hotel. There have been countless deaths and accidents here over the centuries." I continue eating, smiling as Morgan pours me a glass of water.

"Anyone would think the place is cursed or something."

"Definitely or something," I mutter. "It's just unlucky."

"I guess that's one word for it."

“Tell me about your life in New York,” I say eagerly. “I’ve never left the UK. New York has always seemed so exciting. I was obsessed with that old TV show, Fame , when I was a kid.”

“Old?” He gives an indignant reply, and I chuckle.

“I used to cartwheel down the corridors here wearing sweatbands, a leotard, and leg warmers. Although I was asked to confine my enthusiasm to the ballroom when I accidentally took out a hundred-year-old Royal Doulton Shepherdess figurine with my very impressive high kick.”

Morgan snorts as he raises the spoon to his mouth and quickly picks up his napkin to wipe his mouth.

“After that, I holed up in the ballroom and practised the audition scene from Flashdance ,” I grin. “Never did quite get the hang of the breakdancing part. I almost ended up with a concussion.”

“How old were you?” Morgan’s mouth twitches.

“Fifteen.” He shakes his head and chuckles. “What were you doing at fifteen?”

“Well, I wasn’t doing high kicks in the hallways or pirouettes in the ballroom, but I was working in my stepfather’s hotels,” he says. “Although we had a house in the Hamptons, most of the time we lived in the penthouse suite in his flagship hotel in Manhattan. Both Warren and I had to work our way from the ground up. That meant bussing tables in the hotel restaurants, cleaning bathrooms, and changing bed linen.”

“Warren?”

“My brother.” He frowns. “Half-brother, technically, but I’ve never thought of him

that way. He's just... my brother, as annoying as he is sometimes."

"I wish I'd had a sibling," I muse and pick up my water to take a sip. "But back then, the hotel was a lot busier, so there was always someone to talk to or other kids to play with."

"My stepdad, Royce, always intended for Warren and me to take over the hotel chain so he could enjoy his retirement."

"Is that what he's doing now?"

"He..." Morgan hesitates for a moment. "He passed away. Last year."

"I'm sorry," I sympathise. "Were you close?"

"We were, actually," Morgan admits. "He was a good man. He never treated me any different from how he treated Warren, his biological child. He was warm and affectionate, but he instilled a solid work ethic in the pair of us. There was no free ride. If we wanted to take over from him, then we had to earn it."

"Cleaning toilets and clearing tables." I smile softly.

"Yeah." He huffs a small laugh. "Neither Warren nor I were very happy about it at the time, but he was right. As teenagers, we started off with those kinds of jobs, but by the time I left high school and then college, there wasn't a single role I hadn't tried my hand at, from front desk to concierge to night manager. It gave me a fuller understanding of what it takes to run a successful hotel, and I understand better than most owners that every staff member counts."

Warmth spreads throughout my chest as I listen to him speak so passionately about the hotels he grew up in.

“I guess that...” He trails off as he looks over and sees Dilys approach the table at a snail’s pace.

Dilys is a tiny little thing, with delicate bird-like bones and no meat on her at all. She walks with a stoop and looks as if she’s a hundred at least. Her porcelain skin is pale and her short, curled hair is so white it’s almost colourless. Her customary floral dress is neatly pressed and covered with a pale pink cardigan. Shuffling towards us in her carpet slippers makes the tray in her gnarled hands rattle and shake, the two wineglasses atop it quietly chinking as they knock together.

Morgan stands abruptly as if to help her, but she looks up and glares, which has him pausing.

“She’s fine,” I tell him. “I told you, Dilys is very territorial about her job. She doesn’t like people trying to take over even if they mean to be helpful.”

He sits back down, not looking convinced, and it’s kind of sweet, his manners. It shows he’s been raised well, but Dilys is very stubborn.

It’s almost painful to watch her super slow approach, the wine bottle teetering precariously as her bony hands tremble, but I’m used to it. I know Morgan is itching to rise and take the tray from her, but heeding my words, he waits patiently.

Finally, she lifts the trembling tray and slots it onto the table, then pushes it towards us. She’s so small her fluffy white hair barely rises above the table’s edge. I remove the bottle and two glasses, and she takes the tray back.

Morgan watches in fascination as she reaches into the pocket of her cardigan and retrieves a card, which she then slides onto the table. It’s a small white business card with the Ashton-Drake Manor House Hotel and logo printed on one side. On the other in gold lettering are the words:

Thank you for your custom. Please have a nice day.

“Thank you,” Morgan says awkwardly to Dilys, who is staring at him.

She nods her head in acknowledgement and then turns and shuffles back across the room, her slippers making a muted rasping sound against the floor.

“Does she talk?” he asks incredulously.

“Hmm.” I think hard. “You know, I’m not sure. I’ve never heard her speak, and I’ve been here years.”

“How old is she?” He frowns. “Surely she should have retired by now?”

“I don’t know how old she is, and it’s not polite to ask.”

“Not polite?” He shakes his head. “Isn’t her age listed in her employment records?”

I shrug. “I’m not sure if she has employment records. She’s just always been here. Come to think of it, I don’t think any of us have actual employment contracts. I know I don’t.”

“You don’t have—” He breaks off and shakes his head. “This place is crazy.” He lifts the wine and opens it, making a small, inquisitive gesture with the bottle. I nod and he picks up my glass, filling it.

I take the glass from him and hum in pleasure. I don’t usually drink other than the odd glass while I’m soaking in one of the guest room bathtubs or when I’m out at the Blue Banana in Leeds and it’s two-for-one on cocktails.

“This place may seem a little odd, and I’ll admit it’s got its quirks, but I love it.” I

sigh. “We all do. I just hope we can figure out a way to save it.”

“Save it?” He picks up his own glass and sips, his brows drawing down. “I can see how empty this place is. Just how bad is it?”

I shrug and offer him a smile that I don’t quite feel. “We’ll make it work.”

“Ellis,” he says, and I suppress a shiver at the sound of my name in that low, gravelly tone. “Sometimes hotels just come to the end of their lifespan, and there’s no bringing them back. Without some serious investment in this place, I’m not sure it can be saved. Not when you have no guests, no staff, and the place needs thoroughly modernising.”

“We’ll make it work,” I say with more conviction. “We have to.”

“Do you? There’s no shame in just moving on. With your years of experience here, I doubt you’d have trouble finding a position somewhere else. Any of you... except maybe Dilys, who really should be retiring.”

“You don’t understand. This is more than just a hotel. For those of us still here, it’s our home, and Mr Ashton-Drake needs us.”

He’s quiet for several long moments as he toys with the stem of his wineglass. “Speaking of my grandfather, will he be coming down to dinner?”

“No,” I say softly. “He never leaves his rooms.”

“What... ever?” His frown deepens, and I shake my head. “He’s agoraphobic?”

I ponder this for a minute. “I’m not sure if he just doesn’t want to leave his rooms or whether he can’t leave. All I know is he’s never so much as stepped foot outside the



doorway in all the years I've been here. From what I understand from Aggie, he hasn't left them since 1990."

"1990?" His eyes widen.

I nod, watching him curiously. "Why? Does that mean something to you?"

"No, I—" He stares down at his glass. "That was the year my mother took me to New York to live permanently."

"That's a strange coincidence."

"Hmm." He picks up his glass and takes a slow sip.

"So you lived here for the first few years of your life?" I ask, the curiosity burning inside me. I want to know everything about this complicated man.

"Like I said before, I don't really remember it."

"How old were you when you moved to the States?"

"Six."

"Six?" I blink in surprise. I have memories of my own that go back to when I was at least two or three years old. "You really don't remember anything about your time here?"

He shakes his head and goes quiet again and I let the subject drop. After all, if he left for New York soon after his biological father's death, maybe the trauma of that would have blocked his memories. He suddenly looks exhausted and not just physically. It's like he carries this huge invisible weight around with him, and I find

myself wishing I could help him somehow.

“Tell me what you love about this place, Ellis,” he says as he drinks his wine.

“So many things,” I say happily, feeling my chest glow with love for my home. “There’s something so wonderfully eclectic about this place. Every time you turn a corner, you find another little piece of history waiting. So many lives lived here, so many stories.”

“I suppose.”

“Why don’t you let me show you?” I offer.

“Excuse me?”

“Tomorrow. We’re most likely going to be trapped in the house for the next several days. Why don’t you let me show you around the house and tell you all of its secrets?” I’m excited at the thought as it gathers momentum in my brain. “After all, most of it is your family history, and you said yourself you don’t really remember when you lived here. Maybe this time you can go home with good memories.”

He studies me thoughtfully for several long moments.

“Actually, I think I’d like that,” he says finally. He looks down at his watch and sighs. “But first, I think the jet lag’s catching up with me, so I better call it a night.” I rise when he does. “Thank you for your company this evening, and please give my compliments to the chef.”

“You liked the stew, then?”

“That, and after seeing Aggie strolling leisurely through the lobby brandishing a meat

cleaver and a cloth sack containing I don't know what, I'm a little afraid to get on her bad side in case I've inadvertently walked into the hotel version of Sweeney Todd."

I let out a warm, amused laugh. "I can assure you, that's not the reason we don't have any guests, but thank you for inviting me to join you for dinner. It's been a long time since I've enjoyed a meal and conversation with someone who wasn't a permanent fixture in this hotel."

"I'll see you in the morning, then, for the tour," Morgan says.

"In the morning," I repeat softly. "After breakfast. It's served between eight and ten a.m."

"I'll meet you down here, then." He continues to watch me. "Goodnight, Ellis."

"Goodnight, Morgan," I reply, but my voice is breathier than I intended.

We stare a moment longer and then he heads out of the dining room. I resist the urge to sigh like a lovesick teenager.

Off-limits, I remind myself as I start stacking up the empty dishes to haul them back to the kitchen. My arms finally full of dirty plates, I turn around and pause when I see Bertie and Roger on the other side of the dining room. They both give me identical grins and four very enthusiastic thumbs up before disappearing.

I shake my head. I have no idea what's got into those two lately, but knowing them, I have no doubt they'll let me know sooner or later. I push that thought to the back of my mind and if my brain happens to linger instead on the gorgeous grumpy American... well, that's no one's business but mine.

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I step into the foyer, my cheeks warm with happiness. It could have been the wine, but I think it's more likely due to the company.

Morgan Ashton-Drake fascinates me in a way no one else ever has. It's not just that he's gorgeous because, oh my god, I want to lick that man like a six-foot lollipop of sticky-sweet yumminess.

No, it's... well, actually, I can't explain it. A tug of awareness deep in my gut tells me this man is somehow important. Not just to me, but maybe to his grandfather too, or maybe it's just me being overly optimistic as usual. This is all probably going to end in spectacular disaster, which is what usually happens when I try to do something good.

"Ellis, there you are," Rosie says as she closes the office door and locks it for the night. "I thought you might be with our American guest. Checking his bedding is up to scratch." She grins.

"Don't be ridiculous." I set the heavy tray I'm carrying on the reception desk. It's laden with a huge, steaming mug of Aggie's incredible hot chocolate and warm, freshly baked cookies. "I'm not just going to jump into bed with Morgan. He's off-limits."

"Why?"

"Uh, maybe because I don't even know if he's into guys." I begin to tick the reasons

off on my fingers. “And then there’s the fact that he’s Mr Ashton-Drake’s grandson, and also that he’s a sort of guest and it wouldn’t be very professional of me to show up at his room with a bottle of chocolate sauce and ask if he minds if I lick it off his naked torso.”

“So you have thought about it.”

“Of course I have,” I reply, unabashed. “Thought it over in great detail, but that’s where he’s staying. Firmly in the spank bank labelled things I probably shouldn’t think about during self-gratification but I won’t admit to, so it doesn’t count .”

She snorts loudly and changes the subject. “You on your way up to see Mr Ashton-Drake?”

I nod. “I get the feeling seeing Morgan churned up some feelings, so I’m just going to check in on him before bed.”

“Do you want me to?” She wraps her chunky knit cardigan around herself tightly to ward off the night chill. “I’m on my way up to my room anyway. I can stop in.”

“Thanks, but it’s fine. I’ll do it.”

“Okay, then. Well, I’ve locked up down here and checked the forecast for tomorrow. Even heavier snows heading in.”

“We better double-check the heating and see if anyone wants extra blankets for their rooms, then.”

“I’ll do that first thing after breakfast.” Rosie yawns. “Night, Ellis.”

“Night, Rosie.” I watch as she climbs the stairs and disappears.

Looking around the dimmed lobby, I smile happily to myself. I really do love this place with my whole heart and can't imagine having to live anywhere else. Shaking my head, I remind myself not to dwell on negative thoughts. We're going to find a way to save this place, I just know we will.

Picking up the tray I turn towards the stairs. I've barely set one foot on the bottom step when Bertie and Roger appear next to me, startling me so much I jostle the tray and only just manage to right myself and prevent hot chocolate from sloshing over the side of Mr Ashton-Drake's favourite mug.

"Oh, my goodness," I gasp with a small laugh. "Don't you two sleep?"

Roger grins. "Oh, honey, we don't need to."

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" I begin to climb the stair flanked by my two oddball ghosts. "If this is about saving the hotel, I still haven't come up with a plan yet. You'll have to be a bit more patient."

"No, lad," Bertie booms heartily, the sound shocking in the stillness of the sleepy hotel. "We just thought we'd check in on our favourite fleshie."

"As nice as it is to be anyone's favourite anything, would you mind terribly not referring to me as a fleshie? It makes me sound like a sex toy."

"Well, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?" Roger winks cheekily, and I blush all the way to the root of my hair.

"Have you been snooping around in my room?"

"Not exactly." He raises one brow and I burn even redder if that's possible.

“Oh my god, you weren’t watching me, were you?” I gasp in utter mortification.

“Relax, sweet boy.” Roger lights a cigarette and waves his hand airily as he blows out a thin trail of ghostly smoke. “I’m very respectful of your privacy. I was just floating around when I happened to see you perusing your... collection.”

“Oh my god,” I mutter, knowing I could probably toast marshmallows on my cheeks right now. “I don’t get out much.”

“Oh, hush now, darling,” Roger purrs. “There’s nothing wrong with that. I’m a little jealous, to be honest. They barely had anything to choose from when I was alive. Honestly, you’d have never got me out of my room if I’d had a variety like that.”

“Yes, well, as enlightening as this discussion is,” Bertie cuts in, “you do know you’ve got the real thing on the fourth floor.”

“What?”

“My great-great-nephew.” Bertie wiggles her brows. “I have it on good authority he’s into chaps.” On the last word, she gives a final wiggle of her brows for emphasis.

“Have you been listening in on people’s private conversations again?” I sigh. “That’s really quite rude.”

“Tosh,” she sniffs. “Couldn’t help it if the lad talks loudly.”

“If he’s in the privacy of his room, you most certainly can help it,” I admonish her gently. “Please stay out of the guests’ rooms.”

Bertie huffs. “Still, your dinner date seemed to go well.”

“It wasn’t a date.” I can’t help the smile tugging at my lips at the thought of him though.

“Sure, it wasn’t.” Roger snorts. “I could practically see you making heart eyes at each other.”

“That is absolutely not true,” I protest. “He was just being kind, and it’s not like he had many other options for company. Mr Pennington has barricaded himself in the study to write his next novel. Rosie was in the office watching, ironically, re-runs of The Office , and Aggie never leaves the kitchen. Plus, I don’t think she’d be good company for Morgan unless he wanted an in-depth discussion on how she sharpens her knives.”

“You two looked like you were enjoying yourselves though?” Bertie nudges. “Eh?”

I frown slightly, not really sure what she’s getting at. “Yes, I did enjoy his company. It’s nice to have someone new to talk to. After all, I haven’t left the hotel in weeks, and even then, it was just to pop down to the village for Mrs Braithwaite’s homemade preserves for Aggie.”

“Oh, I do remember those.” Bertie beams. “She uses the same recipe as her mother, Vera, did. I used to have Vera’s preserves on my toast every morning when I was alive. Vera was a fine-looking woman, used to pop in for tea and scones every now and then.” She winks salaciously at me. “If you get my drift.”

I pause abruptly and turn to look at Bertie. “You and Mrs Braithwaite’s mother?”

“What?” Bertie says innocently. “Her husband couldn’t have found his way around a woman’s lower portions with a map and a compass.” She grins at me. “And I have always excelled at orienteering.”



“Is that what you call it?” I laugh and begin climbing again.

“We’re getting a bit off topic.” Roger rolls his eyes. “We were on the subject of you and Morgan.”

“There is no me and Morgan.” I sigh. Not that I wouldn’t have been tempted. “He’s not staying and he’s Mr Ashton-Drake’s grandson. It’s too messy even if he were interested.”

I’m totally lying. If he showed even the slightest bit of interest, I’d be climbing that man like a jungle gym. What can I say? It’s been a really... really long dry spell. “Why do you both care anyway? Don’t you have more important otherworldly stuff to concentrate on?”

“Why, what have you heard?” Bertie says, shooting a look at Roger, who gives her a shrug and a what? Don’t look at me, I haven’t said anything look.

“Okay, what’s going on?” I ask as I finally reach the top staircase and make my way down the corridor.

“Nothing?” Bertie replies, avoiding my gaze. “Absolutely nothing at all. Everything’s tip-top and nothing out of the ordinary is going on at all.”

I glance over at Roger.

“Nothing,” he adds, echoing Bertie.

“Okay.” I shrug and stop in front of Mr Ashton-Drake’s door. “Now shoo, you two. Mr Ashton-Drake has had a trying day, and I don’t want him any more stressed than he is. Given your penchant for eavesdropping, I’m assuming you know that the doctor said it’s not good for his heart.”

Bertie's eyes soften as she looks at me almost affectionately. "You're a good lad, Ellis. I couldn't have asked for someone better to look after Cedric."

Before I can open my mouth to say anything, both of them flicker out, and I'm once again alone in the silence of the corridor.

I'm not sure I'll ever understand those two.

I carefully balance the tray on one hand and raise my other fist to knock.

"Come," a gravelly voice calls from the other side.

Opening the door, I step inside and close it behind me with a quiet click. Looking up, I see Mr Ashton-Drake in his striped blue-and-white pyjamas and tartan dressing gown, brown leather carpet slippers on his feet.

"I've brought you a hot chocolate and a couple of Aggie's cookies. She baked them fresh this evening just for you."

He settles down into his armchair beside the crackling fireplace and harrumphs. "I suppose you'll be mashing it all up and feeding it to me with a straw soon."

"Only if you ask nicely." I grin and set the tray on the table beside him, then reach up to grab his favourite blanket that I crocheted for him and tuck it over his legs. "There's a chill in the air tonight." I hand him the mug. "They're forecasting heavy snow again."

He huffs. "That's nothing. When I was a kid, the snow got so deep around here it used to fall over the tops of my wellies. Clifford and I would drag out sleds up to the big hill by the old oak."

“I know it.” I smile when he takes a sip and glances up at me.

“We’d spend hours playing out there in the woods ...” He trails off, lost in memory.

“Do you miss him? Your brother? He’s been gone a long time, hasn’t he?”

“I miss them all. I’m the last one,” he says quietly.

“You’re not the last one. You still have Morgan.”

He stiffens, and I remind myself to tread carefully. “Sit down, Ellis,” he snaps. “You’re making my neck ache.”

I slip onto the armchair opposite him on the other side of the fireplace.

“You didn’t bring a cup for yourself?” he says after a moment, wrapping his bony fingers around his mug and most likely enjoying the relief the warm brings his arthritic hands.

“I had a late dinner,” I reply. “I’m still full.”

“The stew was good.” He takes another sip before picking up a cookie. “I sent my plates down in the dumbwaiter.” He nods towards the small square wooden shutter set into the wall.

On the other side is a small lift on a bell and pulley system which is just large enough to place trays and plate in. It’s over a hundred years old, but it still works, and although I always make sure I bring his meals up in person, it does help having him send his empties down. I’m used to the profusion of staircases in this place, but there are times when I wish we had a lift to all the floors. I sigh quietly; this place really could use some modernising.

“What you huffing for over there, lad?” Mr Ashton-Drake slurps his chocolate loudly and proceeds to dunk a cookie, which then disintegrates into a soggy lump and drops back into the mug with a plop.

“Nothing.” I give him a pleasant smile. It’s not like he isn’t aware of the financial state of the hotel—it is his property, after all—but I don’t like to heap more worry on him if I can help it.

“Doesn’t sound like nothing.” He continues to stare into his mug with a small frown, as if trying to figure out if he’s better off using his fingers to retrieve the cookie or letting it dissolve completely and just drinking it. “You sound like an asthmatic chipmunk.”

I chuckle lightly. “There are worse things, I suppose.”

“What’s on your mind, boy? You may as well spit it out. Some of us aren’t getting any younger, you know.”

“You’ll live to be a hundred. I’m certain of it.”

“Which is not as far off as you might think.” He gives up on trying to look for the remains of his cookie and takes a gulp of the now lukewarm drink. “Stop stalling. Either tell me what’s on your mind or go to bed. It’s getting late.”

“I just want to say sorry.”

“What for?” Mr Ashton-Drake looks over at me, confused.

“Earlier, with Morgan. I feel like I just sprung his visit on you and then steamrolled right over you without considering how you might feel.”

“If it makes you feel any better, you’re a very sweet-natured steamroller.” He sets his mug down on the table, now empty but for a sugary sludge in the bottom.

“Still, I’m sorry,” I murmur. “I was so excited you had family coming to visit you. I didn’t really stop to think you might not be happy about seeing him. After all, you haven’t seen him since he was a child.”

This time he sighs loudly. “It’s complicated.”

“I would never presume to invade your privacy and ask for details, but whatever happened between you and him?—”

“He didn’t do anything,” Mr Ashton-Drake mutters quietly. “Go in that drawer.” He points to an old 1950s sideboard.

I do as he says, rising from my chair and opening the large curved middle drawer. Inside are several old photo albums.

“Bring me the red one.”

Again, I do as instructed and pick up a small album with a dark red leather cover. Handing it to him, I take a seat on the footstool beside him. He leafs through several pages until he finds what he wants and then hands it back to me.

Glancing down at the open page, I see Mr Ashton-Drake sitting on a blanket on the grass by the largest oak tree on the grounds. He’s wearing a tweed suit and his hair is darker, shot through with grey. He also has fewer wrinkles, but what’s really startling is that his head is tilted back and he’s laughing. Really laughing. It’s like the joy is seeped into the page.

Next to him is a man whose appearance gives me a jolt. He could be Morgan’s

double, albeit a few years younger and slightly less serious than Morgan appears to be. The man in the photo is looking at Mr Ashton-Drake and smiling, and on his lap is an adorable dark-haired boy clutching a toy train.

“Is this?—”

“Morgan? Yes.” He nods. “He was three, I think, when that was taken. Right here on the grounds, not far from the pond where we taught him to swim.”

“We?”

Mr Ashton-Drake reaches out with his own twisted, trembling finger and taps the man in the picture.

“My son, Elliott,” he whispers, and the pain in his voice hits me somewhere deep inside, making me hurt for him. “My wife, Edith, took that picture. She adored our grandson from the moment he was born, loved him as fiercely as she loved our son. I’m not sure where Elliott’s wife, Lillian, was when that was taken, lying down most probably. She seemed to suffer from an inordinate amount of headaches, but the truth is, I don’t think she ever quite warmed up to life here at the estate, or even to England in general. She was American.”

He taps the book again and I turn the page to reveal a close-up of a stunning blonde woman.

“That’s Morgan’s mother.”

“She’s very beautiful,” I mutter, studying the picture.

I can see hints of Morgan in her striking features. A little around the eyes, the shape of her nose—but other than that whisper of shared genetics, Morgan is a carbon copy

of his father. It must have been so painful for Mr Ashton-Drake to see Morgan looking the way he does.

“For a moment, I thought he was Elliott,” he confesses so quietly I almost miss it, confirming my suspicions. “Morgan was only six the last time I saw him... when Lillian took him to...” He breaks off and clears his throat. “I suppose somehow he’s always remained a child in my mind. Of course he’s not. He’s already lived ten years beyond the time Elliott had.”

“What happened to Morgan’s dad?” I ask softly.

“Aneurysm,” he replies as he traces his fingers over the blanket. “A ticking time bomb in his head none of us knew about. He stood up from a chair and the next thing we knew, he was falling. He was dead before he hit the ground. There was nothing that could have saved him, they told me, and that he wouldn’t have felt it. He was only twenty-nine years old. I was still grieving my Edie, I’d only lost her the winter before, and then I was burying my child.”

“I’m so sorry.” I reach out and lay my hand over his, feeling the dry, papery skin stretched thin over his fragile bones.

I’m surprised when he lifts his other hand and lays it over the top of our joined hands, patting my skin, but he doesn’t let go.

“I didn’t cope well, shut myself in my room,” he admits. “Lillian said she was taking Morgan to see her parents, and she never brought him back. By the time I’d pulled myself together enough to call and ask to see him, it had been over a year and Lillian had already met that American fella. She said Morgan didn’t remember a lot of what happened. She’d had him in therapy and apparently the doctor or whoever they were said that he’d suppressed a lot of his memories from the grief. Lillian thought it might be better for him to have a clean break and start afresh.”

“But that’s terrible.” I frown. “He was still your family.”

He shrugs. “Like I said, Lillian never really adapted to life here. I think she did love my son, and lord knows he was dazzled by her, but I don’t know if their marriage would have survived long term. She allowed Morgan to keep my son’s name even when she married her second husband. I guess I just didn’t have it in me to fight her. I started thinking maybe he would be better off somewhere new and exciting. Somewhere filled with adventure and opportunities instead of being surrounded by sadness like I was. In the end, I retreated further and further into my rooms because there wasn’t anything out there for me anymore.”

“That’s not true,” I tell him softly. “We’re here. We can’t ever replace your wife or your son, but we’re your family and we love you. That’s why we’re all still here.”

He reaches up and pats my cheek. “You’re such a good lad. I hope life is kinder to you than it has been to me.”

“Mr Ashton-Drake.” I draw in a breath. “You still have Morgan.”

“It’s too late. We’re strangers.”

“It’s never too late. He’s here, isn’t he?” I reply. “No matter the reasons that brought him here, he’s here now. Why don’t you spend some time getting to know him, get to know the man he is now?”

He shakes his head. “What’s the point? Like his mother, he won’t stay.”

“But—”

“Nope, no point, might as well leave things the way they are.” He releases my hands and pulls the blanket from his knees, then takes the photo album from me and tucks it



reverently back into the drawer. “I’m tired now, I think I’ll go to bed.”

There isn’t anything I could say to him right now that would help, but I at least feel like I understand him a little better. I rise from the footstool and cross the room to the door, with him shuffling along behind me to see me out.

I open the door and step out into the hallway. “Goodnight, Mr Ashton-Drake.”

“You may as well call me Cedric,” he says gruffly.

“Really?” I turn and beam at him.

“Might as well.” He shrugs, and I hear him mutter sourly as he closes the door, “I’ll probably be dead soon anyway.”

The sudden and very loud ringing of my phone startles me out of a dream, which must have been a good one considering how hard my dick is. This is not my regular morning wood at all; my painfully throbbing cock practically has its own heartbeat.

I look towards the nightstand where I left my phone, fully intending to decline the call and ignore whoever is calling me at... well, whatever hour this is. I have no clue. Thanks to the winter months and the heavy drapes, the room is still in almost complete darkness except for a slim shaft of pale light peeking through the tiny gap between the curtains. Fumbling at the nightstand, I frown when a, the insistent ringing won't quit, and b, my hand keeps coming up empty.

I roll over onto my stomach in order to reach further but end up groaning loudly when my aching cock is crushed underneath me. Caught somewhere between pain and the need to hump the bed like a horny teenager, I lift my head and squint through the darkness, trying to locate the lit screen of my phone.

The goddamn thing won't stop ringing and it's making my head hurt. I shuffle a little closer and peer over the side on the bed to see if it's fallen down but I can't make anything out in the gloominess of the room.

My head spins, and after a second, I realise I'm not suddenly developing vertigo. The sheets beneath me are moving and taking me with them. It feels like someone has grasped the sheet and is trying to yank it out from under me, but instead I slide across the bed. The next thing I know I hit the hard floor, knocking my elbow, which sends pain radiating up my arm. I flail as I'm buried under an avalanche of sheets, blankets,

and a rather heavy quilt.

“Oww,” I groan into the now silent room. The phone, wherever it is, has now rung off. I rest my head against the floor and try to ignore the pounding in my temples. I’m not sure if it’s a combination of stress and jet lag, or if I’m unlucky enough to be coming down with something, but my head hurts.

I probably should haul myself to my feet and remake the bed, but honestly, I’m still a little disoriented. How the hell did I end up down here? I wasn’t leaning that far over the bed, certainly not enough to take every stitch of bedding with me on my swan dive to the freezing floor.

I close my eyes and am just dozing off when that loud and insistent ringing starts up once more, this time accompanied by a buzzing. Tilting my head in the direction of the sound, I see my phone under the bed, the screen lit up as it vibrates across the floor.

Frowning, I wonder how the hell it ended up deep under the heavy old four-poster bed.

Sighing in resignation, I realise that whoever is calling will not give up, and I roll over onto my stomach. My erection has completely deflated as I huff in annoyance and belly crawl commando-style underneath the bed. I have to give it to John the Maid, there is not a single speck of dust or a single spiderweb in sight under here.

Reaching my phone, I grasp it and look at the screen, squinting as I try to focus. An even louder sigh escapes me when I register who’s calling. Knowing he’s not going to quit, I hit connect.

“What do you want?” I grumble.

“Good morning to you too, brother,” Warren’s dulcet and slightly alcohol-laced tone greets happily.

“Is it morning?” I pull back and glance at the screen again, wishing I had my glasses. “Warren, it’s eight a.m here, so it must be three in the morning in New York. Why are you calling?”

“Can’t I just check in on my big brother?”

“At three in the morning?”

“Well, I knew it would be later where you are.” I can hear the grin in his voice. Great, he’s in one of those moods. “Besides, I just got in.”

“What do you mean you just got in?” I lift my head and wince as I loudly crack my skull on the bottom of the bed, which does nothing at all to alleviate my headache.

“Hookup.” He hums and the sound manages to sound extremely smug. “Damn, he was an animal. I can barely sit down. You should have seen the size of his thighs and all that hair. Mmm,” he hums again. “It was like a pelt.”

“As much as I enjoy you telling me every single minute detail of you getting your hole drilled by whatever bear has caught your attention this week, please note the tone of sarcasm in my voice. Because I do. Not. In fact. Enjoy the salacious and often kinky details of your extensive sex life. My question stands, Warren. Why are you calling me? Why aren’t you crawling into bed with an icepack on your ass?”

“The icepack was only one time, and I really regret telling you about it.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Jonas was a one-off, a unicorn in the wild. I’ve never again encountered a dick as magical as his. This guy was fairly average, maybe just slightly below average,” he says thoughtfully. “Although what he lacked in size and girth, he did make up for in skill and enthusiasm. He did this thing where he?—”

I tune him out, well used to his recounting of his most current sexual escapades. I’m a much more private person but the little shit delights on sharing everything... often in excruciating detail.

As much as we love each other, and we really do, my brother and I have always been polar opposites, especially when it comes to men. He’s a needy bottom who can’t resist being manhandled by a bear, the bigger and hairier the better, whereas my tastes run more to topping slim, svelte, pretty boys with the curly blonde hair of a cherub, the bluest eyes I have ever seen, and a smile that is like pure sunlight on a rainy day.

Fuck .

I’m pretty sure I remember what I was dreaming about now—or rather, who. I let my head drop forward. My brain rattles and I wince once more when my forehead clunks against the floor, making my head throb even worse.

“Morgs? Are you still there?”

“It depends,” I mumble into the floor, making no attempt to move. “Are you still describing the size of your hookup’s dick? Because I’m hanging up if so.”

“No,” he snorts. “I called to check on you.”

“Urgh, wait a minute.”

Tangled up in my bedding, I do what can only be described as a backwards caterpillar crawl as I attempt to edge back out from under the bed. Once free, I push myself to my feet, grabbing a blanket to wrap around myself against the chill of the room before sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You sound out of breath,” Warren says in amusement. “Have I disturbed something? Do you actually have company in your bed for a change?”

“No.”

“Why not? When was the last time you had a cute guy balanced on your balls?” Warren asks with absolutely no shame.

“Hanging up now.”

“No, wait!” Warren huffs. “Christ, you’re a grumpy asshole. I wanted to know if you had a chance to speak to your grandfather.”

“I met him.”

“And?” He waits for several long seconds. “Morgan, for fuck’s sake. It’s like pulling teeth. I was looking for something more than single-syllable answers.”

I scrub my hand over my face tiredly and reach for light by the bed, flicking it on and blinking against the sudden brightness.

“It didn’t go...” I pause, resisting the urge to rub the sudden ache in my chest. “He didn’t want to talk to me.”

“What? Why the fuck not?”

I shrug even though he can't see me. "I don't know. He's an old man, in his late eighties, and I'm not even sure how mentally competent he is. I mean, he didn't even have pants on. He was just wandering around in his socks and slippers, a shirt and sweater, and tighty-whities that were practically pulled up to his armpits."

"Seriously?"

"Is it weird?"

"What? Walking around in your underwear in front of your long-lost grandson? Yes, it is."

"No, I mean, is it weird I don't recognise this place? After all, I lived here for the first six years of my life, but I don't remember anything at all, not even him."

"Give yourself a break, Morgs." His voice is low. "You were just a kid, and you lost your dad, moved to another country, and had to start over. It's not surprising you've got repressed memories."

"Ellis is taking me on a tour of the house today," I say without thinking.

"Ellis?" Warren repeats sharply.

"Don't," I warn.

"What?" His voice drips with innocence, but I know him too well. I can hear the smirk in his voice. "Ellis is the cute little twinkly blonde, isn't he?"

"How do you know?" I ask suspiciously.

"Do you really think I didn't go straight online and look up the website for your

ancestral abode? I'll give them their due, it was a very professional-looking site, although it doesn't look like they've updated their staff page recently. There were only five people listed."

"No, that's correct. There are only five at the moment." I nod even though he won't see it.

"For a hotel that size?" he says in stunned disbelief. "How do they even keep that place running?"

"Barely, I imagine. Then again, I haven't exactly looked too closely. It's nothing to do with me."

"Aren't you your grandfather's only living relative?"

I shrug. "As far as I know."

"Doesn't that mean you'll inherit that place one day?"

"I doubt it," I scoff, thinking about my grandfather's scowl. He hadn't been exactly happy to see me. "Besides, what the hell would I do with this place other than sell it?"

"You'd really sell it? Hasn't it been in your family for generations or some shit like that?"

"How the fuck should I know? I practically know nothing about that side of the family and whatever Mom knows, she hasn't exactly been forthcoming with the information."

"I know, but still. Wouldn't you want to keep it? Start your own little hotel chain of



quirky British manor houses?” The amusement in his voice is clear even across an ocean.

“Trying to get rid of me already?”

Warren sighs. “You know that’s not true. If anything, it’s the exact opposite. I’ve been far too reliant on you over the years. You were always the practical, responsible one, and I think sometimes I took advantage of that,” he says soberly.

“That’s a little deep for you at three in the morning. What’s brought this on?”

“I guess I’ve just been thinking about things a lot since Dad died last year.”

“Warren, are you okay?” I ask in concern.

“I’m fine,” he replies, brushing off my question. “Anyway, back to your hotel.”

“It’s not mine.”

“You know what I mean.”

“It’s really quiet here. They only have one guest.”

“You’re kidding.”

I shake my head. “I honestly don’t know how they’re keeping this place running. It’s empty, so it’s clearly not making any money. There’s almost no staff, the building itself is in desperate need of updating, but...”

“But what?”

“There’s something almost charming about the hotel. It’s spotless and well cared for despite needing an update. The food so far has been outstanding, and it may only have a handful of staff, but those who are here love this place. You can tell how committed they are to it.”

“What will happen to your grandfather if it closes down?” Warren asks, echoing the same thought that had occurred to me yesterday. “Will it just revert to being a family residence instead of a hotel?”

“Couldn’t say.” I frown, recalling how Ellis had casually mentioned figuring out how to save the hotel. “It doesn’t look as if there’s enough money to keep it running. I need a better understanding of what’s going on. My grandfather may not particularly want me here, but the fact remains that, as far as I’m aware, I am his only living relative. And as inconvenient as it is, I kinda feel like?—”

“Like he’s your responsibility?”

I go silent for several long moments after his interruption, trying to get my aching head around my random thoughts.

“You forget I know you, Morgan, and as prickly as you are ninety percent of the time, there is no one I know who takes on more responsibility than you. You’re a good man.”

“Urgh, it’s too early for this shit.” I rub my face again.

Warren chuckles deeply. “So, are you staying for a while?”

“I don’t really have a choice. I’m snowed in,” I lament. “I couldn’t leave right now even if I wanted to.”

“Snowed in with the hot twink blonde?” The smirky tone of his voice is back. “Some might call that serendipity.”

“And some might call it bad weather and poor planning,” I return dryly, feeling my head pulse again. “I can’t believe I even got on the damn plane in the first place.”

“Then why did you?”

“Because you told me to,” I grumble under my breath.

“Since when have you ever done anything I’ve told you?” he points out. “I’m the younger sibling, as you’re so fond of reminding me. You got on that plane because you know deep down this is something you need to resolve. You need this closure.”

He’s right, but I’m not about to admit it because he’ll be insufferable until the end of days. “You should get some sleep,” I reply, hearing the slight slur of his words and the tiredness in his voice. “You’re going to have your hands full with work until I can get back.”

“I’ll manage just fine.” He yawns loudly. “Because, unlike you, Mr Control Freak, I know how to delegate instead of trying to micromanage everyone and everything.”

“Fuck you,” I mumble, but there’s no heat behind my words because, again, he has a point. I do like to control my environment, it makes me feel secure.

“Now go and offer that gorgeous receptionist a blow job. It will make you feel better,” he declares with a little too much glee. “You’re too uptight.”

“Goodnight, Warren.” I sigh and hang up the phone before he can put any more ideas in my head about Ellis. I have absolutely no doubt that I would thoroughly enjoy giving him a blow job, but that doesn’t mean it’s a good idea.

I stare down at my dick, which is enthusiastically tenting the front of my pyjama pants.

“That’s enough out of you,” I mutter quietly. “You don’t get to have an opinion.”

Looking at the mess of blankets and sheets on the floor and then at the bare mattress on the bed, I frown. I don’t understand how everything ended up on the floor, me included. I shake my head and, ignoring the dull thud, scoop up the bedding and dump it back on the bed. There’s a good chance I’m not going to get any more sleep; what I need most right now is a shower and then some really strong coffee.

Carefully placing my phone back on the nightstand, I head into the bathroom and switch the light on. My cock aches and no matter how much I try to wrangle my wayward thoughts back into order, fragments of my dream flicker back through my mind: my hands gliding over smooth skin, soft lips pressed against mine, the hot tangle of tongues, a slim body beneath me.

I set the water to a slightly lower temperature and hope for a more successful shower than yesterday when I almost ended up with hypothermia. Gingerly, I step inside and sigh in relief. It’s just the right side of too cool, enough to wake me up and hopefully blast away the last of this headache without turning me into an ice cube.

However, the temperature seems to have no effect on my dick, which stubbornly refuses to go back into hibernation. Trying to ignore it, I reach for my body wash and lather up, but as I close my eyes and run my fingers over my body, the images are back with a vengeance. This time it’s not the dream but an image of heavy-lidded, lust-filled blue eyes staring down at me as I take his cock into my mouth.

Unable to help myself, my palm glides over my stomach and lazily fists my cock, the slick glide of my soapy hand smoothing my foreskin back as I circle the sensitive head with my thumb. I’m not circumcised like my younger brother, another parting

gift from being born and raised in England for the first six years of my life.

I moan and let my head fall back as I enjoy the slide and increase the pressure of my grip slightly. My mind returns to Ellis, and I wonder if he's uncut; as a Brit, the likelihood is that he is, and the thought gives me a little jolt of pleasure. There's nothing I love more than playing with a partner's foreskin. Slipping my tongue underneath the little folds of flesh and tasting the musky flavour and hint of precum. Slowly gliding the skin back and chasing it with my mouth as I glide over the thick mushroom head, my tongue flat against the underside.

I wonder what sort of sounds Ellis would make as I teased him before taking him deep, right to the back of my throat. Would he be loud? Vocal? Would he cry out or grip my hair and talk dirty to me? The thought of that sweet, angelic smile as he tells me to swallow his cum has me spilling over my fist. My orgasm rips through me so suddenly I lean forward to brace my palm against the cool tiles. Gasping heavily, I watch the milky whiteness of my release spiral lazily in the water and slip down the drain.

What the fuck am I doing? Has it really been so long that I'm forced to tug one out to the image of the pretty receptionist slash waiter slash a million other jobs I'm sure he's not contracted for but does anyway?

Out of love , I think to myself. He does it out of love—for this place, for my grandfather.

If I hadn't just had the most intense orgasm in recent memory, that thought would have been enough to deflate my dick in double time. After washing my hands, I splash the cool water on my face, searching for some kind of clarity, but I don't find any. No, it's not because I'm hard up for a bed partner. The last several months of self-imposed celibacy were by choice. Nothing about random hookups has been doing it for me anymore, which is why I haven't even looked at Grindr, not even for a

little quick relief during overnights to various cities when visiting our hotels.

But I want Ellis.

There, I've admitted it. But one thing I've learned the hard way over the years? Just because I want something doesn't mean I can have it.

I 'm still feeling residual guilt over what I did in the shower even after I'm dressed and heading downstairs.

When I'd wandered out of the bathroom and back into my room in nothing but a towel, I'd discovered that the bed, which I'd left as an untidy heap of bed linen piled on the bare mattress, was now completely remade and pristine.

I have to admit John the Maid is scarily efficient, and as much as I do appreciate a productive member of staff, I don't appreciate the fact that he was obviously in my room while I was in the shower.

The first thing I'm going to do when I get downstairs is grab a Do Not Disturb sign and then make it absolutely clear that no one is to enter my room if I'm in there. Mortification rushes over me, warming my skin. What if the slightly scary-looking man heard me in the throes of my orgasm? I try to remember if I accidentally groaned out Ellis' name as I came.

Christ, I hope not.

My body flushes again and I hurry down the steps, trying not to think about it too much. I'd just reached the bottom of the last staircase, the front desk and office in sight, when a figure leaps out from behind the curve of the bannister with a loud shriek and brandishing a large knife.

I shout out in shock and fall back against the steps, my heart pounding. My ass cheek

throbs in pain—that’s probably going to bruise.

I glare at the writing guy, Ass Pennington, who’s now smiling like he didn’t just leap out as if we’re starring in one of the *Scream* movies.

“What the hell are you doing?” I exclaim angrily.

“Oh, this?” He places his finger on the tip of the blade and presses. The blade retracts into the handle, and he presses it up and down a few more times as if to demonstrate.

“It’s a gag knife. Plastic, of course. After all, safety first, especially considering what happened to that murder mystery actor—What was his name? Plume. Professor Plume.”

“That doesn’t explain what you were doing jumping at me like that. Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Oh, nothing of the sort.” He laughs heartily and I’m about two seconds from wringing his scrawny neck. “How are you feeling? Rapid pulse? Sweating? What was the first thought that went through your mind when you saw the knife? Was it instantaneous panic, or did you pause for a moment in confusion?”

“What?” I glower at him.

“I’m doing research”—he raises the knife and wiggles it, as if I missed the damn thing the first time—“for my book. So, tell me how you’re feeling right now.” He retrieves what appears to be a tiny notepad and the stub of a pencil from his pants pocket.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Incredulity! Marvellous! Yes, I suppose there would be an element of disbelief. A



split second where the victim couldn't quite believe what was occurring. Amazing input! Thank you so much for being such a good sport. I should have done this years ago."

"What? Leap out and scare unsuspecting and innocent bystanders?" I grumble as I haul myself off the step and rub my ass cheek.

"No." He gives a merry laugh. "Stay somewhere for the ambience." His smile widens and he almost looks manic. "Really gets the old creative juices flowing." He punctuates that sentence with a small thrust of his fist.

"Uh-huh." My eyes narrow as I eye him suspiciously.

"Ellis was telling me about his idea to host a macabre writers' retreat. Fantastic idea! I will, of course, spread the word in my literary community. Anything to help, after all."

My belly does this weird little jump at the mention of Ellis's name. I shake my head and tune out his rambling. Glancing over his shoulder, I see that the front desk is still empty.

"Hey, Pennington?" I interrupt. "I don't suppose you've seen that John guy around?"

"John the Maid?" he asks, and I nod.

"He was in my room earlier changing the bedding while I was showering, and I don't appreciate the intrusion."

"Oh." His brows draw down as if he's trying to figure something out. "What time was this?"

“About eight thirty.”

“I don’t think it was John the Maid then. He’s been outside shovelling out the snow from the main entrance since seven. Although I really don’t know why he’s bothering. It’s forecast for heavy snow again later today and into late this evening.”

“Are you sure?” I reply, and he nods.

“The Met office seemed very certain.”

“I meant about John.”

“The Maid,” he supplies helpfully. “And yes, one hundred percent. I’m an early riser myself, so I saw him on his way out. I’m surprised they changed your bedding though. Especially as you only arrived yesterday. Did you request it?”

“No.”

“I’ve been here a few weeks now, and they usually only change the sheets once a week unless you request an extra set.” he shrugs. “Oh well, I’m sure there’s an explanation. You can always use one of the Do Not Disturb signs.”

“Thanks,” I mutter. “Have you seen Ellis?”

I don’t want to tell him that Ellis is supposed to take me on a tour of the house. It may sound crazy, but I don’t want anyone else tagging along. Mostly because I don’t want to have to make the effort of small talk, not because I want his attention all for myself.

At least, that’s what I’m telling myself.

“Ellis is in the dining room with Rosie. I’ve just come from there.”

Giving a brief nod of thanks, I head out in search of the quirky little blonde. I’ve just stepped through the door into the dining room when I’m hit with the mouthwatering scent of bacon. My stomach gives a loud growl that surprises me, especially after the hearty serving of dinner I had late last night. I’m not usually one for breakfast. Usually it’s a large black coffee on my way to whatever meeting I have first.

My feet are moving before I’m even consciously aware of it. Drawn to the heavenly scent. I enter the room and head towards a long rectangular table covered with a pristine white cloth. As I approach, I see an array of warming dishes filled with fluffy scrambled eggs, perfectly crispy bacon slices, thick sausages, grilled tomatoes, hash browns, mushrooms, and... what the hell is that? Looks like beans in some kind of grim-looking, orange-coloured juice.

I grab a warm plate from the stack at the end of the buffet and start piling it high with a little of everything—with the exception of the suspect beans. Settling at a nearby table, I pour myself a glass of orange juice from the pitcher in the middle of it and unwrap the sparkling silverware from an immaculate cloth napkin.

I cut into the sausage and raise a piece to my mouth, humming in pleasure as the flavours of the meat and herbs burst over my tongue. I glance around the empty dining room as I devour the contents of my plate. It’s delicious, cooked to perfection and exactly the right temperature for a buffet-style breakfast, which sometimes have a tendency to get cold quickly.

It’s a shame they can’t seem to attract guests. The place may be a little shabby and short-staffed, but I can’t fault them for their cleanliness or hospitality. It’s a great location, private, whimsical, perfect for couples. Even Ellis’ idea of hosting a writers’ retreat is great. I can’t help but wonder why this place is failing. It’s certainly not due to neglect.

There must be a reason.

“Good morning, Morgan.”

My stomach gives another one of those stupid little jolts, and I choose to blame it on the fact that I’ve overindulged and my belly’s too full rather than that I may be developing a ridiculous fixation on the younger man.

Jesus, is this the beginning of a midlife crisis?

“Good morning, Ellis.” I pick up my napkin and wipe my mouth.

“Did you enjoy your breakfast?” He smiles at me and I blink, my heart picking up a quick, hot step.

“It was g-great. Did you enjoy it? I mean your breakfast, not mine. If you’ve had breakfast, that is. I mean, you’re working, of course, but you should make sure you eat.” I almost sigh out loud. And now I’m stumbling over my words and acting like a complete moron.

What is it about this man that makes my palms sweat like I’m a sixteen-year-old with his first crush? I’m always smooth and confident with men, but ten minutes in Ellis’ company and apparently I forget my command of the English language.

Oh, who am I kidding? Two minutes.

Fine, one and a half.

Fuck. I’m so glad my brother is not here to witness this. But Ellis simply smiles wider and there goes my pulse again. Perhaps I should get my blood pressure checked too.

“I did have breakfast, thank you. I had toast and jam in the kitchen. Rosie’s just taken a plate up to your grandfather. He does love his sausages and bacon, although we do try to keep an eye on his cholesterol levels. He’s actually in surprisingly robust health considering he’s nearly ninety.”

I stare at him for several long seconds before responding. “How is he this morning?”

“I haven’t seen him yet,” Ellis replies. “But I took him a hot chocolate last night before he went to bed...” He trails off and studies me. Pulling his plump bottom lip between his teeth, he nibbles thoughtfully. “We had a talk, and he explained that seeing you took him a bit by surprise. In his head, he still thought of you as the little boy he remembered, even though he knows you’re grown now. But when you walked in and he saw you, for a moment he thought you were your dad, and... it hurt him.”

I sit in silence, absorbing his words. Not sure how I feel about them, but a small part of me gets it and it takes some of the sting from his reaction to me.

“Thank you,” I mutter finally.

“Maybe if you just give him a day or two to adjust, you can try again,” Ellis says gently. “I don’t mean to overstep, but I think it will do both of you some good if you could just have a conversation.”

“Hmm,” I answer, then change the subject. “So, are we still having this tour?”

Ellis brightens and nods enthusiastically. “Yes, although we have had to close off the west wing of the house and a couple of the floors.”

“Why?” I frown. “Is there something wrong?”

“Oh, no,” he answers easily, shaking his head. “It just saves money on the heating

bills if we only heat the parts of the hotel we're using. I could take you to the other floors and the west wing because there's some really cool stuff over there, but it will be really cold."

"I see," I mutter as I continue to watch him.

"Let me just drop your plate in the kitchen." He reaches over and clears away my plate and glass before I can offer to do it myself, then hurries back to the kitchen.

I stand and smooth down my suit. In fact, I don't know why I'm still wearing one instead of something warmer and more casual. Well, no, that's a lie. I do know—it's my armour, just like it always has been. Being here in this place, meeting my grandfather, and having to possibly face unresolved feelings about my birth father has left me more unsettled than I care to admit. But before my brain can descend into an anxiety-induced tangent, Ellis reappears next to me.

"Sorry to keep you. Are you ready?" he asks, and I nod. "I thought we could start on the ground floor." He starts walking towards the exit, and I follow obediently.

We've just stepped through the doorway when Ellis lets loose an ear-splitting scream and stumbles back. I catch a glimpse of a figure brandishing what looks to be an axe and without thinking, I grab Ellis and thrust him behind me.

It takes me an adrenaline-filled second and Ellis's breathless laugh to realise it's that idiot Pennington again.

"What the hell are you doing?" I growl.

"Oh, Mr Pennington." Ellis peeks around me, still laughing, and pats his chest like his heart is racing. "You got me that time." He shakes a finger at the possibly unhinged cosy mystery slash horror writer in mock admonishment.

“Are you trying to give everyone here blood pressure issues?” I demand.

“Oh no, still researching.” He waves the axe at me nonchalantly.

“You startled me so much I actually felt a bit dizzy this time,” Ellis supplies. “Well done.”

I twist to look more fully at Ellis and note his pretty flushed cheeks. “Why are you encouraging this lunatic?”

“Just doing my bit to help.” He shrugs, and I turn my attention back to Pennington, who has the rather brutal-looking axe tucked neatly under one arm as he scribbles furiously in his little reporter’s notebook.

“Feels dizzy,” he mutters to himself. I fight the urge to roll my eyes and sigh instead. Mr Pennington looks up at me once he’s finished writing. “It was jolly heroic of you though.”

“What was?”

“The way you reacted, it was instantaneous. You didn’t even think about it, just grabbed Ellis here and thrust him behind you, out of the way of imminent danger. Bravo.”

“He’s right, you saved me.” Ellis grins up at me playfully.

“Yeah, sure, I saved you.” I snort, and this time I do roll my eyes at the absolute ridiculousness of the situation. “From the crazy English writer in pink-checked pants clutching a fake axe. It’s not like I gave you a kidney or pulled you out of a burning building.”

“Still,” he says softly, his eyes bright. “Thank you.”

My heart starts to pound out an irregular staccato and I swallow, feeling awkward. “Oh, uh, well, like I said, you were in no real danger. I mean, it is fake.” I spin back towards Mr Pennington and eye the axe, which looks like something a Viking would use to pick his teeth and then pillage a small village. “It is fake, isn’t it?”

“What, this?” He lifts the axe up. “Of course it is.” To prove his point, he gives it a swing, only to freeze in horror as the lethal-looking steel head flies off, followed a second later by the sound of something smashing.

Mr Pennington jolts at the sound and winces, then turns back towards us with his face fixed in a whoops grimace. “I will pay for that.” He points at what looks to be a broken vase.

“Oh dear,” Ellis sighs. “I believe that was a gift from King Ferdinand of Spain in 1504.” Mr Pennington’s eyes widen and his face drains of colour. “Either that, or it’s the one that Rosie won in the village raffle last summer. They do look remarkably similar.”

Mr Pennington closes his eyes and raises both hands with his fingers crossed. “Please let it be the raffle prize.”

I glance over at Ellis, who winks at me with a devilish smile. My cock twitches at that naughty look on his face, and I’m pretty certain Ellis, who is completely devoted to this place, knows damn well it’s not a sixteenth-century vase.

“Pennington, relax, Ellis is just messing with you.”

Mr Pennington opens his eyes and looks over at Ellis hopefully. “Really?”



“Got you!” Ellis points at him and Mr Pennington gasps and gives a roaring laugh.

“My goodness, Ellis, you certainly did! The entire contents of my bank account flashed before my eyes just now.”

“Relax.” Ellis chuckles. “I’m pretty sure the person who donated it to the raffle got it from the local charity shop.”

“Pennington, where did you get the axe?” I ask.

“Oh, from the storage cupboard just off the ballroom. I was out stretching my legs—got to make sure I keep the circulation going, you know. Anyway, I was exploring the ballroom, which is, of course, where poor dear Leona Falberg-Black met her untimely demise from a shoddy stage light falling on her. There was a whole load of props left over from that time period just shoved in a storage room, so I borrowed it.”

“Uh, Mr Pennington,” Ellis interjects, “the props left over from the film sets are in a concealed part of the old ballroom. That storage cupboard is filled with items from the history of the house.”

“The axe is real?” He blinks.

“I believe it was used at the Battle of Bosworth.”

Mr Pennington stares at us for several long seconds and then gives a delighted laugh, pointing at Ellis. “Ah, you almost had me there, but fool me once...” He waggles his finger before turning around and heading down the corridor towards the lobby.

“So it was a fake? As in a replica? A movie prop.”

“No,” Ellis says brightly as he picks up the axe head carefully and follows Mr Pennington. I hurry to keep pace with him. “It really was used at the Battle of Bosworth. It used to be mounted on the wall in the upstairs gallery, but it kept falling off because the head was loose. We took it down and put it in the storage room until we can afford to have it restored properly.”

“You’re all crazy,” I mutter as we step into the lobby and see Mr Pennington waiting for us, still clutching the handle of the axe.

“Ellis, did you say there was a concealed part of the ballroom?” Ellis nods. “Oh,” he gasps. “I’d love to see it. Would you mind?”

Ellis shrugs. “Okay,” he says simply. “I was going to give Morgan a tour of the house, but we can start there.”

He leads us across the lobby and into the bar where I notice a barely visible mop of white hair moving around behind the counter, and I shake my head in bewilderment. An octogenarian bartender that doesn’t speak. I guess I’ve seen it all now; then again, I get the feeling I’ve barely scraped the surface with this place. I’m almost afraid to see whatever’s coming next.

We cut through the bar and head into a lounge set with low tables and couches. It has the same art deco feel as the bar and although it’s worn with age, it’s actually remarkably well-preserved.

“Just behind that panel over there”—Ellis looks over his shoulder at me and then nods at a wall behind a low sofa—“there’s a secret passageway that runs from this room all the way diagonally under the house to the conservatory at the back of the house in the west wing.”

“Seriously?” My brows rise, and he nods again.

“We discovered it recently during the murder mystery weekend... or, well, Tristan and Danny did. They got engaged while they were staying here. It was so romantic. I mean, okay, there was a dead body there at the time and the police burst in, but Danny made the sweetest proposal. They are absolutely relationship goals in big blinky, shiny neon letters— GOALS .” He mouths the word goals for emphasis. “I’ve been messaging with Tris ever since they left.”

“Why are you messaging an engaged man?” I demand a little too forcefully, not at all enjoying the strange, unfamiliar churning in my stomach. Maybe I had too much bacon.

“Because he’s my friend.” Ellis’s forehead wrinkles like he doesn’t get the question. “Poor thing’s going through some really tough personal problems right now.”

He stops by a door and when he opens it, I realise it’s the storage room he was talking about. It looks as if it’s packed to the ceiling with junk. The entire hotel is a secret hoarder’s delight.

I watch as he carefully sets the axe head down, then retrieves the handle from Mr Pennington and adds it to the pile. Closing the door again, he reaches into the pocket of his pants and pulls out a small bunch of old-fashioned keys and locks the door firmly.

“There.” He points the key in Mr Pennington’s direction. “No more snooping about,” he says in a firm but kind tone, the way a parent might reprimand a child. “If you want a proper tour of the hotel, then ask. No more helping yourself because there really is a vase that was gifted to the family in 1504 by King Ferdinand. Some of the things here may look old and shabby, but they really are irreplaceable.”

“You have my word,” Pennington agrees quickly, his cheeks colouring.

Thoroughly put in his place by the gentlest dressing-down I've ever seen, Pennington follows Ellis into a large ballroom while I bring up the rear.

Once Ellis switches on the lights, I take my time looking around. Much like the lounge and the bar, the room has been left with its 1930s original fixtures and feel. It's pretty amazing.

I glance over to Ellis as he crosses the space to the panelled wall on the far side, watching in surprise as he flicks open several cleverly concealed catches. It's not actually a wall I realise when it splits open in the middle and Ellis slides the two halves open on well-oiled runners. It's a divider. The ballroom is actually massive, over double the size I originally thought.

I cross the space towards him, absolutely fascinated, my lips parted in shock as I take in the sight.

I'm pretty sure this is how the Goonies felt when they discovered One-Eyed Willy's ship, The Inferno.

On the other side is a room frozen in time. It's exactly how you'd expect a film studio from the silent era to look. The sets and backdrops are still in place, a little faded but in beautiful condition. Huge old-fashioned studio lights are suspended from the ceiling.

"You'll be happy to know it is safe, despite what happened to Leona. After the accident, the lighting rigs were all reinforced, but the fledgling studio couldn't get insured and none of the backers would fund any more movies, so that was that," Ellis says from just behind me.

It's incredible. The movie cameras are all still here and intact, just a little dusty. Stacks of film reels are in piles amidst racks of costumes and true vintage gowns,

shoes and accessories. There are also props everywhere.

“After the studio closed, war broke out,” Ellis continues like a seasoned documentary presenter. “The house was requisitioned by the army and designated a temporary hospital. So they basically shoved the whole film studio into one half of the ballroom and sealed it off. The other half was a makeshift ward, in addition to other rooms in the house. After the war, the medical equipment was cleared out—well, most of it anyway. Some of it was moved up to the attics. The ballroom was left alone from the fifties until the late nineties. When the house was opened as a hotel, they had a nicer partition wall built to match the decor of the rest of the room. There were a few weddings and events hosted here, but even that sort of thing fizzled out eventually, and so it is as you see it now.” Ellis shrugs. “Such a shame. We could throw some amazing parties and masked balls in here.”

“Ellis.” I turn to him slowly. “Do you have any idea how much all of this stuff is worth?”

He shrugs and shakes his head. “Not really. There’s more though.”

“More?” I blink.

“The whole house is filled with stuff like this.” He cocks his head curiously as he looks up at me and smiles widely. “I told you there’s history around every corner.”

“E lliis, do you realise what this could mean?” Morgan says as we walk back into the lobby. We’re headed in the direction of the library, which is my next destination in this whistle-stop tour of Morgan’s childhood home.

He may not have any memories of it, but that doesn’t mean he can’t appreciate how cool it is as an adult. He’s so lucky to have that tie to this place. It’s seriously awesome here, and I can’t wait to share it all with him.

“What what means?” I reply absently, waving to Mr Pennington as he ducks back into the study to work. His intent and slightly distracted expression is one I’ve come to learn means I’ve just had a crazy good idea and must write it down before I forget . I accidentally disturbed his muse once before and let’s just say I wouldn’t want to do it again.

“Everything in this house. You said yourself that some of the items go back centuries. It must be worth a small fortune.”

I shrug. “I imagine it is.”

“Don’t you see where I’m going with this?” he says, a bit exasperated.

I pause at the door of the library with my hand on the doorknob as I look up at him. “With what?”

“You keep saying you need to save this place. Now, I don’t know what kind of state

the books are in, but even I can see the hotel is badly in need of renovation, the kind that is sympathetic to historical buildings, which this would definitely come under.”

“Oh, it does.” I nod. “We’re a Grade Two listed building.”

“Really?” He pauses. I nod again and he shakes his head. “Anyway, my point is that even I can tell a hotel that’s a listed building in need of modernisation and repairs plus no guests equals financial difficulty. Given the value of these antiques and historical items stashed in cupboards and corners, my grandfather could probably afford to revamp the building, get a modest marketing budget in place, and start bringing in paying guests. It might be enough to keep this place from going under.”

“Really?” I reply brightly.

“All you have to do is sell some of it.”

“Oh no, we can’t do that,” I answer with a smile.

“What?”

“We can’t sell any of it,” I reiterate.

“Why the hell not? If it’s the difference between keeping this place open or losing it?”

“It’d be like selling organs on the black market.” He stares at me for several long moments and I wonder if he’s fallen asleep with his eyes open. “Morgan?”

“Sorry. I’m trying to figure out what you mean.”

“Well, a person who needed money to survive could keep selling their organs, but

sooner or later they'd die. If we sell all the treasures inside the house, eventually it will just be a husk. There'd be nothing left to save."

He hesitates. "That shouldn't make any sense, but I kinda see where you're going with this."

"Morgan," I say softly, my fingers itching to reach up and smooth the wrinkle between his brows and ease the serious look on his handsome face. "This house isn't just bricks and mortar. It isn't the age or the architecture that makes it special. It's the memories it holds, the stories of the people who have passed through its doors and the little pieces of themselves they left behind. It's the massive chip in the edge of the stone steps that lead down from the back turret. That's from when a friar fell down the entire staircase drunk and carrying a casket of wine. Instead of even trying to put his hands out, he chose to save the wine and smashed his skull open."

"What a charming and heartwarming tale," he says dryly.

"Or the ballroom where Leona died in the makeshift studio at the birth of the film industry. How do you think she'd feel if we sold all her dresses and costumes?"

"She's dead," he replies in bewilderment. "I don't think she'd notice."

"You're wrong about that." A small smile tugs at the corner of my mouth when I recall seeing Leona hiding behind one of the movie cameras and watching us when we'd been in the ballroom. "My point is, the vase that was a gift from King Ferdinand, the goblet that Queen Elizabeth drank from, the bed that Oscar Wilde shared with a young lover?—"

"Oscar Wilde? Really?" His mouth falls open.

"Apparently," I reply. "But all of these things are part of what makes this place what



it is. If we start breaking it up and selling off chunks of it, it loses its magic.”

“I can understand that, genuinely I can,” Morgan says. “But if my grandfather is going to ultimately end up losing the house, it’s a moot point. I mean, how bad is it? Really?”

I hesitate for a second. Even though Morgan is Mr Asht— Cedric , I correct myself, still feeling the warmth of him allowing me to use his first name. Even though Morgan is his family, he’s still a stranger, and I don’t want to reveal sensitive information that Cedric might not want him to know.

“It’s... it’s not good,” I finally say. “We’re running out of time, but I have to believe we’ll find a way. One that doesn’t involve cannibalising everything that makes this house special.”

He shrugs. “I guess it’s not really any of my business anyway.”

“Thank you for caring anyway.”

“I don’t though.” He pauses. “I’m not saying that to be an asshole. It’s just that, whether this place stays open or not, it isn’t my business. I don’t have any ties to it. What my grandfather chooses to do is up to him, but it...” He hesitates. “It bothers you.” He shrugs again and looks away, not meeting my eyes.

“Like I said.” I reach out and tug the sleeve of his jacket so he’ll turn that smouldering dark gaze back in my direction. “Thank you.”

I reach out and twist the doorknob. We both step into the room, only to be brought up short when a brightly coloured explosion of confetti hits us straight in the face. Pink and red tissue paper hearts float down around us. I try to blink away the hearts that have caught on my eyelashes, and twisting to look at Morgan, I catch him with his

mouth open. He's trying to spit out several hearts, which appear to be stuck to his tongue.

"What the hell?" he growls, and the sound sends a shiver down my spine. Not from fear, but one of the sexy variety.

Tearing my gaze away from the tempting grumpy man beside me, I look across the room in time to see Bertie and Roger giggling like children as they disappear into one of the bookcases. I drop my gaze to the circle of hearts around us and sigh. I had been saving those confetti cannons for Valentine's Day, hoping that we'd have more guests by then. I had a very tentative idea in my head for a mini Valentine's party in the ballroom or something.

"Sorry about the cannon malfunction." I turn back to Morgan and reach up to dust a few paper hearts from his shoulders and chest and try not to grope him during the process—which, to be honest, is what I'd really like to do. "So, this is the library. There're actually quite a few first editions in here and a lot of interesting reading, your great-great-grandfather had quite eclectic reading tastes, but one of the things that's really cool is this."

I cross the room and search for the right book, then give it a tug. It releases a concealed mechanism and a door opens, revealing a hidden cupboard.

"This is where poor Professor Plume's body was stashed during the murder mystery weekend."

"Christ, this whole place is like a massive whodunnit. Are you sure Agatha Christie didn't stay here?" Morgan plucks a stray heart from his ear.

"Actually, she did. I believe she wrote one of her books here, but I'm not sure which. I must remember to ask," I muse, sure that Bertie or one of the other ghosts would

probably know the answer.

“Seriously? The Agatha Christie?” he replies and I nod. He leans further into the cupboard, an odd expression on his face that I can’t quite put a name to. “I wonder what the purpose of this cupboard is. Other than to hide bodies in, that is.”

Suddenly, I feel a hand at my back shove me forward, and unable to keep my balance, I crash into Morgan. We both fall into the cupboard as the door slams shut, plunging us into darkness.

“Ouch, sorry.” I wince as Morgan accidentally elbows me in the ribs and I manage to tread all over his toes.

“No, it’s okay... just let me... ow .”

We stumble again, tangled up in each other, and hit the side wall of the cupboard.

“Maybe if I just—” I feel the breath knocked from me as I’m pinned.

“Sorry, sorry, I’m just going to—” I hear a loud thump, and Morgan groans. “Ouch, that’s gonna leave a mark.”

“Okay, stop moving,” I pant, and he stills.

For several long seconds we freeze, our heavy breathing the only sound in the blackness of the small, confined space. My heartbeat picks up and my dick stiffens as I feel the heat of his body and smell the wonderful scent of him. Something slightly spicy mixed with a citrus, orange maybe. I’ve never been particularly good at identifying individual scents, but there’s something almost Christmassy about his. It’s like all my favourite things, and I want to press up against him, burying my face in his neck and dragging my lips against his throat as I breathe him in.

Okay. Not helping the dick situation.

“What happened?”

“We’re stuck in the cupboard,” I reply, trying not to sound as aroused as I feel, but my voice is still a breathy gasp, and I swear he presses into me a little closer.

“I guessed that.” His voice is a delicious growl in my ear, his breath tickling my skin.

I’m so tempted to turn my head a fraction closer to that voice so I can find his lips with mine, but instead I swallow hard, trying to focus.

“Please tell me this cupboard opens from the inside,” Morgan says.

“Yes, um.” I clear my throat and reach out, patting across the surface beside me in my search for the door handle. After waiting for a few moments while I don’t find it, Morgan shifts.

“Here, try this.” He fumbles around in the dark.

I have a brief, wonderful fantasy of him reaching for my trousers and unzipping them so he can slip his hand inside, then realise he’s actually reached into his own pocket. A moment later, the dim glow of his phone’s flashlight shines in the cramped space.

The light skims over the walls and when it falls on the door handle, I reach for it. Nothing happens. I frown and jiggle the handle again. Morgan shifts away and I put my shoulder against the door to give it a shove.

Still nothing... except for an amused giggle on the other side. An amused giggle I recognise.

“Roger!” I yell through the door. “I know it’s you, which means you’ve most likely got Bertie with you. Open the door this instant and let us out!”

The giggle comes again, accompanied by Bertie’s hissed, “Sssh, they’ll hear us.”

“I can already hear you,” I shout. “Open the door! This isn’t funny. The confetti cannons were bad enough. I was saving those for Valentine’s Day, and you know they’re totally going to clog up the Hoover. John the Maid will not be happy.”

Silence on the other side.

“BERTIE! ROGER!”

“Who’re Bertie and Roger?” Morgan scowls. “And why did they lock us in a closet?”

I sigh and look over my shoulder at him. “They’re ghosts.”

He stares at me long and hard, as if trying to gauge whether I’m serious or have some kind of head injury.

“Ghosts?” he repeats slowly.

“Yes.”

“Uh, Ellis, I get the whole leaning into the haunted hotel angle to try and get guests in, but you do know ghosts aren’t real.”

“Actually, they are,” I say conversationally as I bang my shoulder against the door again and twist the handle. “There are”—bang —“quite a lot”—bang —“of them here”—bang —“actually.” Bang bang bang . My shoulder is now throbbing and my palm is starting to get a friction burn from twisting a handle that refuses to budge.

When I get my hands on Bertie and Roger, I'm going to have a few choice words for them. This is not what I agreed to when I said I'd be their liaison to the living.

"Here, hold this." Morgan hands me his phone. "It's not ghosts. It's just an old door, with rusted hinges and a temperamental lock."

I fumble with the phone, my hand still smarting from gripping the handle so tightly, and end up dropping it to the floor with a clang. I grimace apologetically, even though he probably can't see me properly in the low light, especially as the flashlight on the phone now seems to be highlighting our shoes.

"Hang on, I'll get it." I try to lower myself to the floor of the tiny space and at the same time valiantly try to ignore the fact that his groin is centimetres from my face.

Frankly, I think I deserve a medal for my self-control. Picking up the phone shifts the beam of light, and something low on the wall catches my eye. Curious, I kneel even further down and hunch over.

"Oh," I gasp out in surprise. "Morgan, you should see this."

I try to sink to my knees, but it's a tight fit. Ellis shuffles to the side, still staring at whatever it is he's found. I hunker down beside him and his body ends up flush with mine. The heat of his skin warms my side, distracting me. I lean in next to him, which is even worse because we're almost cheek to cheek. A fraction closer and I could taste those pouty lips of his.

"Look," he whispers excitedly, and I drag my gaze away from his mouth and down to the patch of wall he's pointing the flashlight at.

My eyes narrow when I see two words carved into the wooden panelling of the closet wall. No, not just words, I realise. Names. The first one hacked into the wood in a

childish scrawl is the name Artie, and just beneath it...

I suck in a breath.

Morgan.

Promise me, Morgan, promise we'll always be friends...

I close my eyes as the fragment of a memory teases at the edge of my mind, but when I try to reach for it, it disappears. I know this closet. I used to play in here when I was a kid. I carved those two names into the wall with the little penknife my granddad gave me. The penknife had my initials engraved into its red handle. M.A.D. I remember laughing at the word my initials made and my granddad whispering in my ear.

We're all mad here, Morgan, just like Wonderland.

I trace my fingertips over the grooves in the wood.

Promise we'll always be friends...

"I did this," I whisper, although I don't know if it's to myself or Ellis. "I carved this."

"Who's Artie?" Ellis asks.

"I don't know," I reply, not able to shake loose any more memories. "But..." I murmur slowly as I trace my fingers along the edge of the wooden panel, feeling for a familiar groove, a slight change in texture.

When I find it, my stomach tightens with a mixture of shock and excitement. I push it in, and we hear a click. The whole back panel of the closet opens, swinging outward

on slightly groaning hinges and revealing a secret passageway.

There's a blast of cold, frigid air that makes our breath turn to mist.

"Oh!" Ellis says excitedly. "Another passageway. Where does it lead?"

"Come on." I awkwardly push myself to my feet and hold out my hand for him. "I'll show you."

His small, warm hand slips into mine, and I feel a jolt of static electricity ripple up my arm, but I don't let go. For a second, we stand there staring at each other in the dim light. Then he shivers as another gust of cold air whistles down the secret passage. He's only wearing his white uniform shirt and black button-up vest, his name badge and a tiny rainbow pin attached just above his heart.

Slipping off my suit jacket, I wrap it around his shoulders and take the phone from him so he can slip his arms into the sleeves. I watch as he presses his face into the lapel and inhales, a small, sweet smile playing on his lips.

"Thank you." He looks up at me and even in the low light, his blue eyes still enchant me. There's something about his gaze that I can't look away from. "We should go, or we're both going to catch cold," he teases.

I reach down without thinking and take his hand again. His eyes widen in surprise and then a shy blush steals over his pretty cheeks. I feel his fingers entwine with mine and, lifting my phone with my other hand to light the way, I lead him into the passageway.

There's a slight slope downwards, then rough stone walls cocooning us in and a thick, rough-hewn wooden floor beneath our feet. It's freezing, but I know we won't be down here long. Hurrying along the narrow corridor, we reach a set of steps at the



other end and climb them. At the top of them is a wall with an old metal catch above a matching metal handle, the kind you might find on a garden gate. I flick it up confidently and press the handle down. The wall splits and a doorway appears, suddenly flooding the passage with bright light.

We both blink until our eyes adjust, then step through into the room beyond and find Aggie in front of us with her arms folding across her chest.

“So this is how you always managed to sneak into the kitchen to steal cookies,” Aggie says loudly as she stares at me. “I always wondered about that.”

“Oh, it opens out into the kitchen!” Ellis exclaims in delight, turning to look as the concealed doorway closes behind us. It’s covered by the same tiles as the rest of the kitchen wall and once it closes, it’s almost completely undetectable... unless you know where to look.

The small Scottish cook stares at me a moment longer, and just when I begin to wonder if she’s planning on chopping me into tiny pieces with the meat cleaver she’s so fond of, she reaches up and grabs an old-fashioned tin from the shelf. She lifts the lid and holds the container out to me so I can see the contents.

“Go on,” she says. “You’ve gone to all this trouble, might as well claim your reward.”

I reach into the tin, wondering if this is a trap of some sort. Instead, I retrieve a large golden brown perfectly baked cookie with what looks like toffee or fudge chunks in it. I can smell the delicious scent before I’ve even raised it to my lips.

Taking a generous bite, I begin to chew as it melts over my tongue. Sugar and sweet, gooey goodness, and with every taste comes a flood of memories. I look down at the cookie in my hand and swallow.

“I remember these,” I whisper, my gaze sweeping back up to Aggie’s face. “I remember you.”

Her stern mouth tilts up at the corner. “Welcome home, Morgan,” she mutters in her rhotic accent. “Now, get out of my kitchen before I chase the pair of you out with my broom,” she snaps.

Ellis laughs delightedly, snatches a cookie from the tin, and grabs my hand like we’re Bonnie and Clyde. The next thing I know, we’re running towards the door. We crash into the dining room, weaving our way through the empty, pristinely set tables, and don’t stop until we’re through the doorway and landing in the small vestibule on the other side.

He turns to face me, his merry blue eyes bright and his cheeks flushed pink. There’s a spider web in his hair and a smear of dirt on his cheek. My jacket, which is two sizes too big, practically swamps him as he clutches his stolen cookie in one hand.

He studies my face intently, and it’s only then that I realise I’m laughing, my mouth stretched in an unfamiliar but wide smile.

“You look so much lighter when you smile,” he says, and I’m so enchanted by him.

He drops my hand and I mourn the loss of his palm against mine, but he reaches up and runs his fingers through my hair.

“Cobwebs,” he whispers as I step closer.

Still holding onto my half-eaten cookie with one hand, I reach for him with my other and entwine my fingers with his again. He looks shyly pleased and my heart beats faster. I’m beginning to think he’s right.

There is something about this hotel that's magical.

"I want to see it all," I say impulsively. "Show me everything."

I peer around the corner so I can watch Ellis wander down the corridor, a slight skip in his step. He's wearing a bathrobe and a pair of pink flip-flops and carries a towel and a loofah. I know exactly where he's heading. It's what he always does on a Friday night to relax.

After spending all day with my great-great-nephew, Ellis joined him for dinner again, but just when I thought we were making progress, they then parted ways at the dining-room door with an awkward goodbye.

For heaven's sake, honestly . If we leave the courting up to them, they'll still be circling each other when they're fifty. We need to up our game.

He heads into room 416, which is never locked, probably because Ellis uses it so often. Well, that and the fact there are never really any guests here anymore and certainly not on this floor. I watch as he heads inside and closes the door behind him.

"He's coming!" Roger rushes around the corner. "Hurry up!"

Cracking my knuckles, I summon all my psychic energy and push it into my fingertips. They tingle as I reach up towards the number 6 and slowly, painstakingly twist it upside down so it now reads 9. Rubbing my hands together gleefully, I turn to Roger, who peeks around the corner of the corridor towards the staircase one more time, then gives me a thumbs-up and hurries towards me.

"He's coming, he's coming!" Roger chants, giggling wickedly, and we duck down

behind a large potted palm. Not that it really conceals the pair of us, but it adds a little more excitement. After all, being dead for decades can get a little dull.

We continue to watch as Morgan wanders down the corridor. Not paying attention, he types something out on one of those blasted phone thingies.

“He’s going to miss it,” I hiss to Roger.

“Don’t worry, darling, I’ve got this.” Roger winks.

Just as Morgan reaches the door, Roger points towards the carpet at Morgan’s feet. The man stumbles, like he’s tripped over something, and crashes against the door.

Roger smugly blows the tip of his finger like it’s a gun and grins. “Bullseye.”

“I say, jolly good show,” I commend him.

We watch as Morgan straightens up and checks the floor in front of him, presumably to see what it was he tripped on. When he doesn’t find anything, he glances up and does a double take at the room number. Looking up and down the corridor like he’s lost his bearings, he finally gives up with a little shrug and opens the door, once again giving his attention to the phone in his hand.

Blasted things.

Roger and I hurry forward. I reach up and turn the 9 back to a 6, then we both slip through the wall into the room. Morgan is about to start typing something again when he notices the bathroom door ajar, a wispy curl of steam escaping through the crack. The sounds of splashing and happy humming come from the bathroom and Morgan, once again scowling, strides towards the doorway.

I remain in the bedroom since Ellis is most likely naked. Roger, on the other hand, has no such compunction. He skips merrily across the room and disappears into the bathroom right after Morgan. It's pointless to try and stop him; Roger can't help it. He loves drama and if meddling were a competitive sport... well, what can I say? He'd be on a podium with a wreath of flowers around his neck, clutching a giant trophy like he'd just won Silverstone.

There's a loud exclamation, followed by an alarming crashing sound, followed by splashing water, followed by... well, a lot of splashing water, and a few minutes later, Morgan comes striding back out, red-faced and limping. His suit is soaked and covered in bubbles, streaks of shampoo, and soap. He crosses the room and yanks the suite door open, then stares up at the room number in horror.

"Oh dear," I mutter as he storms out into the hallway. Well, that didn't quite go as I intended.

My attention is diverted as Ellis exits the bathroom a moment later in nothing but a towel with unicorns printed all over it wrapped around his hips. He rushes past me, his skin wet and soapy with clumps of bubbles up his back and neck, all the way into the back of his hair, as if he'd been lying back in the bath relaxing.

I almost feel bad.

Almost .

Then I remember why we're doing this. As Ellis scampers out into the hallway after Morgan, barefoot and wet, Roger comes out of the bathroom, cackling loudly.

"Oh, I wish I had that on film so I could watch it over and over again." He holds his flat belly and laughs so hard that tears spring to his eyes. "That couldn't have gone more perfectly if I'd scripted it."

“What couldn’t have gone more perfectly?” We both jump and spin around to face the stern voice.

Stanley Fitzblossom Longtentacle is sitting on the edge of the bed, his beloved clipboard in one hand and his pen in the other. He raises one brow as he waits for our response.

“I’ve got this, Bertie,” Roger whispers out of the side of his mouth. “I’ll distract him.” I watch in mute admiration as Roger flings himself brazenly over Stanley’s lap. “Oh no!” he wails, his eyes large and his expression innocent. “I fell over, whatever shall I do!” He wiggles his pert little bottom in his tiny white shorts, which looks ripe for a spanking.

Stanley stares down at that wiggling posterior, and I have to admit, although I don’t go for chaps myself, Roger’s derriere is a peach. It’s like two Fabergé eggs wrapped in a silken handkerchief.

Roger gazes over his shoulder coyly at Stanley and wiggles his bum again, looking hopeful. “Oops.” He bats his eyelashes. “I don’t seem able to get up. I do hope I haven’t sprained anything.”

Stanley continues to stare at him, his expression dry. Finally, he lifts his clipboard.

“Aaa-tempt-ed frat-er-nis-ation,” he says slowly as his pen scribbles across the page.

He stands up and Roger rolls off his lap, hitting the floor with a small oof . Stanley looks down at Roger, who, unperturbed at being dumped unceremoniously onto the antique Persian rug, has simply rolled onto his side, one leg coiled underneath the other, his head propped up on his hand. From that position, he runs an enticing palm over his hip and licks his lips slowly.

I have to hand it to him, no one can brazen it out with such effortless style as Roger. He winks at Stanley and puckers his lips, blowing the straitlaced bureaucrat a kiss.

Stanley turns to me and, with a reproving shake of his head, scribbles something else on his clipboard, then dematerialises in a swirl of mist.

“Oh, bugger,” I mutter under my breath.



“Morgan!” I call out as I hurry down the corridor in nothing but my hastily grabbed towel. “Morgan, wait!”

My nipples pebble and tiny bumps rise on my skin as the cool air hits my wet body. Morgan is just up ahead of me, squelching across the carpet in his soaked shoes and drenched clothes. He’s deliberately ignoring my shouting, and I can’t blame him. I’m pretty certain he’s beyond embarrassed right now, but he doesn’t need to be. None of what just happened was his doing, I’m certain of it.

In fact, I’m a thousand percent certain the blame lies with a certain ghostly duo that were doing a very poor job of hiding in the room I’ve just exited.

I really am going to have to have words with them. I know they want to practise their haunting skills, but enough is enough. They’re really stressing Morgan out and he doesn’t even believe in ghosts.

Morgan stalks past John the Maid, who is standing with his hand on the handle of the vacuum cleaner, glaring at the trail of bubbles and wet, soapy footprints left in Morgan’s wake. But before John the Maid can open his mouth to say anything, Morgan lets himself into his room and slams the door.

I hurry down the corridor, clutching my towel so I don’t inadvertently flash John the Maid. “I’m so sorry,” I tell him as I reach Morgan’s door. “It was an accident.”

John the Maid glowers at me, then the carpet, then Morgan’s door, then growls loudly

and stomps off in the direction of his supply cupboard on this floor.

“Morgan!” I knock on his door loudly but, unsurprisingly, there’s no response.  
“Morgan!”

I keep knocking, even as my body shudders and my teeth start to chatter. Bloody hell, it’s cold. “Morgan, please! I’m freezing out here.”

The door suddenly swings open and Morgan is standing there in all his livid, soggy glory. He takes one look at my shivering body and reaches out, pulling me into his room and shutting the door behind me. It only takes me a moment to feel warmer. I’m definitely going to have to check to make sure the heating is working in the communal hallways on this floor.

Having stripped off his soaked jacket and trousers and kicked off his ruined shoes in the short time he’s been in his room, Morgan’s now in nothing but a pair of very sexy, tight black boxer briefs and a very wet shirt, which is plastered to his body, giving me a delicious view of his well-defined pecs and the dark hair covering them.

I’m so caught up in my attempt not to drool that I’ve almost forgotten I’m in nothing but a towel when Morgan yanks a blanket off his bed and wraps it around me to keep me warm. “What are you doing?” he snaps. “Are you trying to catch pneumonia?”

“No, I?—”

“Oh my god, what the hell am I doing here? It’s a never-ending cycle of abject humiliation and feeling like a complete and total idiot. I don’t do this. I don’t make a fool of myself,” he rants as he paces the floor, running his fingers through his hair. His expression contorts at the slimy handful of peach-smelling body wash that he pulls away from his scalp. “I can’t believe I walked into the wrong room. What the hell is wrong with me? I checked the number. I could’ve sworn I checked the

number.”

“Well, I—” I try to interrupt, to let him know it wasn’t his fault. Not that he’d believe me if I told him the dead twinkie tennis instructor in white hotpants had intentionally emptied all the shampoo and body wash bottles over the tiled bathroom floor, turning it into a skating rink. Roger’s lucky Morgan didn’t knock himself out cold on the sink; instead, he’d ended up in the tub with me. Well, in the tub on top of me, and I was very naked... and very slippery.

“I swear, I’m not some sort of sexual predator.” He grimaces. “I just couldn’t get a good grip.” His eyes widen in horror. “I don’t mean on you. I mean on the bath... to climb out...oh my god.” He covers his eyes with one soapy hand and immediately hisses in pain, no doubt from the soap making his eyes sting.

“Morgan.” I still his hands with mine, my mouth curving as he blinks at me rapidly, his eyes streaming. Reaching up with one of my hands, I wipe gently at his face with the edge of the blanket he wrapped me in. “Trust me, I don’t think you’re a sex predator at all.” I chuckle. “It wasn’t your fault. Even though I have a room up on the fifth floor, I use that suite when it’s not in use because I like the bathtub. I only have a tiny little bathroom, which I happen to share with Rosie, who has the room adjacent to mine.”

“I’m sorry,” he says miserably, and I want to lean in and kiss his bottom lip which is sticking out.

“It’s fine,” I murmur, then realise that my hand has dropped the blanket and is now cupping his cheek, my thumb stroking the stubble along his jaw.

His dark eyes flare as his gaze drops to my mouth. I watch as those sexy eyes, the colour of bittersweet chocolate, travel over my throat and down my bare chest. The blanket, now loosely draped around my shoulders like a cape, does nothing to hide

the spectacular tenting of my unicorn towel.

I'm not even ashamed. Morgan is the sexiest man I've ever seen. Fuck, I want him so bad. My hard cock is aching, my heart is pounding, and my breathing is just a series of shallow little pants. I'm so desperately turned on by him. I want that gorgeous body pressing me into the bed, all hot, hard flesh and delicious friction.

I know it's been a long time for me, but I've never wanted a man like I want him. And his breathing is as erratic as mine—this isn't one-sided.

Is it a bad idea? Probably.

Am I going for it anyway? You bet I am.

I don't know which one of us moves first, but the next thing I know, our mouths meet in a desperate clash of lips and tongues. My hands tangle in his slick hair and his palms slide around my naked waist, pulling me flush against his body.

One of us groans and I'm not sure who. It had a kind of choral quality to it, so maybe it was both of us in glorious harmony. I grind up against him and he returns the motion. Oh yeah, we are both definitely on board the same train.

"Morgan," I breathe heavily. "Morgan." His name is on repeat in my head because I don't currently have the mental capacity for anything more eloquent than get your dick out and fuck me hard .

Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.

The blanket slips from my shoulders and we stumble as he powers me backwards until I'm pressed up against the wall.

Maybe not.

“We probably shouldn’t be doing this,” he pants between kisses. I reach up and unknot his tie, sliding it out from his damp collar.

“Uh-huh.” I kiss him again, dropping the tie and reaching for his buttons. “Terrible idea.”

“Really terrible idea,” he groans, reaching down and whipping my towel off, then sending the unicorns flying across the room.

“The worst, ughhhhhmmh.” The next word out of my mouth is a garbled mess when he wraps his warm palm around my dick and strokes firmly.

“Fuck,” he moans and I shove his boxers down his thick, hairy thighs.

Taking his cock in my hand, I start up my own rhythm, making sure to run my thumb across the sensitive head and gather up the drops of precum to make the glide more intense.

He takes my mouth again, his tongue plunging between my lips to taste me. We hump frantically at each other. Fuck me, he’s addictive. There’s no civility, so finesse, just a desperate need.

I let go of his dick and push his shirt off his shoulders, dragging the material down his arms only to have it tangle at his wrists. I fumble with the buttons, but the fabric is damp and twisted, and I don’t have the patience. Neither, it seems, does Morgan. He grabs the sleeves, first one, then the other, and rips the whole thing off, flinging it to the floor.

My dick twitches at the fierce desire in those dark eyes. He slides his hands down and

cups my arse, grinding his hard cock against mine, then lifts me. I wrap my legs around him, trying awkwardly to shove his boxers further down his thighs with my feet.

Suddenly, he pushes away from the wall and turns us around. Clinging to him, I continue to devour his mouth, which is my new favourite thing in the world, while he does a kind of shuffling waddle towards the bed with me in his arms. Looking down, I see his boxers tangled around his ankles, and I snort out a laugh as we tumble to the mattress in a mess of mouths, groping hands, and grinding pelvises.

God, this man. It feels like I'm on fire.

"Morgan." I'm back to panting his name like the desperate little hussy I am, begging against his lips. "Morgan, please."

He groans long and loud and ruts against me, our dicks sliding together with all kinds of delicious pressure and friction. I practically see stars when he wraps his fist around both of us and begins to stroke, but as damp as we are with our collective precum, it would be better with lube.

Something unexpectedly smacks Morgan in the side of the head, causing him to release my mouth and glance up. "Ow, what was that?"

We look down to see a small bottle of lube lying on the sheet next to us.

"Where did that come from?" Morgan frowns in confusion.

"Just go with it," I breathe heavily, taking his mouth again. I pat the sheet blindly to pick up the bottle.

After flicking it open, I pour some into my hand, then reach down between us. He

moves his hand and I take over. Both of us moan loudly, and I begin a slick but firm stroking motion, my thumb gliding over the heads of both our dicks. Morgan undulates against me, humping into my hand and grinding against my dick.

I cry out into his mouth as I spill over my fist and soak his cock with my cum. That seems to push him over the edge, and he lets out his own strangled cry while a pulse of hot liquid coats my fingers.

He collapses against me, his face buried in my neck, his hot, panting breaths against my skin.

I like it.

I like the weight of him, the feel of his heart thundering against mine and the dampness of our mingled orgasms slick between us. After a few moments, he rolls onto his back beside me. He takes another couple of slow breaths and lifts his head weakly.

“I’m still wearing my socks.”

I follow his gaze and chuckle when I see his boxers dangling from one ankle. Rolling onto my side to face him, I wipe my hand on the covers and tuck it under my cheek.

“I better remember to wash the bedding myself tomorrow. I don’t think John the Maid will be happy at the state of the sheets.”

Morgan snorts. It’s loud and unattractive and absolutely perfect. The kind you can’t keep in when you’re happy and something is funny.

“Oh my god, can you imagine his face when he sees the lube and cum stains?” Morgan is still laughing as he turns his head to look at me. His eyes dance with mirth

and his smile is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"You're so gorgeous when you smile," I mutter, lifting my other hand to trace his lips and the curve of his cheek with my fingertips.

"I don't know about that," he says. "I guess I don't smile much."

"Why?"

He shrugs. "I don't know. I did, I think, when Warren and I were younger. Less responsibilities."

I bend my elbow and prop my head on my hand so I can gaze down at him as I run my fingers through the thick chest hair scattered across his firm pecs.

"I know you take your responsibilities very seriously, but don't you ever... I don't know, just have fun?"

"Ah, yes. Fun. That's what people do when they don't have a multimillion-dollar hotel empire to run, right?"

"You know what I think you should do?" I roll over on top of him, then fold my hands on his chest and rest my chin on them.

"What?" He reaches up absently and toys with an errant curl at my temple.

"You should find a reason to smile every day," I decide.

"Every day?" He chuckles and I enjoy the feel of his chest rumbling beneath me.

"Every. Single. Day." I nod. "Life's too short, Morgan. I know you have a big,



important job that comes with stress and decisions, but there's always time for a smile..." My voice trails off, and he stares at me for a long time.

"What are we doing, Ellis?" His tone is low and intimate as he traces the line of my cheekbone with his finger.

"We're enjoying the time we have together."

"Is that enough?" he replies, his brow furrowing. "I'm going back to New York."

"I know." Even though my heart gives a sad, little forlorn thud at the thought of him leaving. "It's enough," I whisper, leaning in and pressing my lips to his. The kiss has none of the heat and desperation of earlier but instead is filled with sweetness.

When I pull back, he looks slightly dazed, and I chuckle. "Did I scramble your brain?"

"I think you might have." He skims his palms down my back and rests them in the curve at the base of my spine. "I've never met anyone like you," he mutters, and I'm not sure whether he meant to say that out loud or not, but I answer anyway.

"I've never met anyone like you either," I murmur, teasing my lips against his again.

"This has the potential to go so wrong."

I reach up and graze the pad of my thumb between his brows to smooth away the almost-permanent crease.

"I'm not asking for anything you don't want to give. I like you, Morgan, just the way you are. There's not a thing about you I'd change. Why not let yourself have this? I get the feeling you don't allow yourself the things you want very often. Enjoy the

time we have together and when it's time for you to go home, take the memory with you." I trace the arch of his dark brow softly. "And maybe when you think back to our time together, it'll make you smile."

"You know, I'm beginning to think you're right about this place."

I grin. "About what?"

"That it's magic," he says as he watches me. "I feel like I'm caught in a web you're weaving around me."

"Maybe I am," I tease.

This time, it's him who lifts his head to lay a soft, sweet kiss on my lips, and my heart gives a hard knock and rolls over lazily. In that one moment, I know without a doubt that I will lose something important when he leaves.

He'll be taking a little piece of my heart that I didn't mean to give but did anyway.

I press my ear to the door a little harder, straining to hear. My cheeks are still flaming from all the moans and groans and yelling. Roger, on the other hand, has a glass pressed to the door and is grinning gleefully.

I can vaguely make out the words, but the intent is unmistakeable. Smiling in satisfaction, I raise my hand, and Roger high-fives my palm.

“Smashing effort!” I step back and congratulate Roger. “Phase one complete.”

“I think it was Morgan and Ellis putting in all the effort by the sounds of it.” Roger smirks. “Who would have thought the little cinnamon roll was so vocal!”

“Yes, well.” I clear my throat. “I believe we can let them take it from here tonight. We’ll check in on their progress tomorrow.”

I glance down at John the Maid, who is on his hands and knees a few feet down the corridor from us and scrubbing the carpet while muttering to himself.

“What do you fancy a spot of to pass the time?” I ask Roger. “We could go and hide all of Mr Pennington’s pens again? Or we could rearrange all of Aggie’s kitchen cabinets.”

He wrinkles his nose and shakes his head. “No, as fun as that was, Aggie gets awfully shrill. And that accent of hers! When she works up a full head of steam, I can’t understand a word she says.” He pauses and thinks for a moment, tapping his finger

against his jaw. “You know, we could?—”

He breaks off suddenly and we turn at the sound of raised voices at the end of the corridor. We watch as Skid strides past, waving his arms and speaking loudly and animatedly, while Stanley follows, listening intently and somehow still managing to write something on his clipboard while walking.

Roger hums. “I do like a man who can multitask.”

“Bloody hell.” I scurry down the hall and round the corner where the two of them disappeared.

“So I said fuck you!” Skid’s dulcet tones reach me and I grimace. “It’s all the government’s plan, you see. It’s about control. I do what I want, when I want, and fuck them all. Nothing’s changed now I’m dead. I refuse to bow to The Man. I ain’t no mindless slave to the establishment. Fuck the establishment!”

“I see,” Stanley says mildly as his pen scribbles across the page. “Fuck the est-ab-lish-ment,” he murmurs as he writes. “So, would you say you are anti authority of any kind? Or do you have your own set of morals that you adhere to?” He waves his pen. “Um, a personal code if you will.” He pauses, pen poised, as he stares at Skid.

“It’s simple karma, mate. If you’re a cunt, bad things’ll happen to ya.”

“I see.” Stanley hums a bit and mouths, C-U-N-T , and the pen starts off scribbling once more.

“Good lord.” I hustle forward to intervene, but before I can utter a word, Skid is off again.

“I like you, Stan.” Skid points at Stanley. “You’re a cheeky little fella, but you seem

decent. You got a job to do, and I respect that, I do. But make no mistake, your bureau don't have no authority here. You're forgetting the most basic right of the human soul."

"Please do enlighten me." Stanley looks up from his clipboard.

"Free will," Skid says simply. "It was bad enough in life. We had governing bodies and institutions set up by petty, small-minded men who were looking for control. We ain't gotta put up with it in death too. We were created with free will, to live out our lives to the fullest and in the best way we can according to our own consciences. You don't have the right to come in here and tell us how to think or what we can and can't do. You may not approve of us, but we're a family. We care about each other and this place. We've never hurt a living being, and none of us ever would. Any fleshies who walk through those doors are safe." He breaks off thoughtfully for a moment. "Well, safe from us, at least. Maybe not safe from their own stupidity, of which the Prof is proof. But Bertie"—he nods in my direction—"she looks out for everyone here. She's decent, and it's not for you to judge her or the way we choose to pass out eternity in our home."

"Well." Stanley tucks his clip board under his arm. "Thank you for your time, Mr Skid." He holds out his hand, and I don't think I'm mistaken when I identify the look in his eyes as grudging admiration.

"Stan." Skid nods and shakes his hand. "Don't forget to check out Penis Envy by Crass. It was their third studio album, and its influence on the punk scene is often underrated. It touches on Freud's ideals concerning sexuality, but it also addresses feminist issues and attacks the sexual repression of the system."

"I can't wait," Stanley says with a straight face. "Good evening," he says to Skid by way of farewell. His gaze tracks over to me and lingers for a second longer on Roger, who is now standing beside me. Then Stanley disappears.

“Skid,” I say, ridiculously touched at his words, “thank you. That was jolly nice of you.”

He winks at me. “No worries. I got your back, old girl. Never doubt it.” He grins widely and shoots us a two-fingered mock salute. “I need a beer. Later.”

I 've been here for days now. The snow has let up some and I have no doubt the flights resumed less than twenty-four hours after the heavy snow descended, but I've not checked to see if the roads are clear yet.

For reasons I don't want to examine too closely.

Last night was the first time I didn't sit in the dining room for my evening meal. Pennington's holed up in the study, declaring his book at a crucial stage of development. I've taken that to mean he hasn't even started writing it yet, but he never joins us for dinner, opting to eat in his room or the study instead. Ellis, being ever accommodating, complies with a smile and a kind word. As for myself, rather than have me eat in the deserted dining room, Ellis invited me to eat with him, Rosie, Aggie, and John the Maid in the kitchen.

I'd enjoyed myself. It had come as a bit of a surprise—I'm not known for being that social unless I have to, which is usually at business meetings masquerading as social functions. But sitting in the warm, cosy kitchen that smelled divine, I'd devoured a pork roast with all the trimmings, followed by warm apple pie and custard. If I'm not careful, I'm going to go home twenty pounds heavier.

It had been comfortable and easy, even though they are all relative strangers.

Dilys is rarely anywhere to be seen unless you need a drink and then she suddenly pops up from nowhere, shuffling along in her pink carpet slippers with a pocket full of little thank you for your custom cards. It's like she has a never-ending supply. She

never speaks and honestly I'm now wondering if she's closer to a hundred years old. I'm beginning to suspect she's some kind of supernatural creature who only appears when summoned and spends the rest of her time napping in her coffin or crypt.

John the Maid has at least stopped glowering at me after the wet-carpet incident. My memories of Aggie are still a bit vague, and she hovers somewhere between fondly indulgent and scarily reprimanding when she looks at me. Rosie has thawed a bit, at least enough when we're around the others that I can see she's loyal and funny, with an edge of quick wit and sarcasm.

Then there's sweet, kind Ellis. It's not hard to see he's the glue that holds this place together. They all dote on him. Sitting at a table with them, watching the way they interact, it's easy to see that they are a family. The inside jokes, the way they tease each other and finish each other's sentences—it's a tight-knit group. I couldn't remember the last time I had anything close to this. Maybe when I was younger, when it was my mom, Royce, me, and Warren.

Royce was all about family, but he's gone now. Mom is always off travelling or shopping on different continents, although she does check in every few weeks. Warren and I call each other constantly and try and squeeze in lunches, but he spends most of his down time on a bear hunt and then getting kicked down by his latest conquest.

Me, I work. That's it. That's my entire existence summed up in one short sentence. Warren's words keep ringing in my head. Had I spent years unconsciously trying to prove myself? Prove that I deserved a place in their family? And why did I always think of it as their family not mine? Mom, Warren, and I are all related by blood, and Royce legally adopted me not long after he married Mom. He chose me. So why then did I always feel like I didn't quite belong? That a part of me was missing.

Now, I wander down the corridor on the fourth floor where my room is located,



studying the paintings and photographs mounted haphazardly on the wall. Some look to be hundreds of years old and some only a few decades. It should have looked unsightly, a mismatched gallery of clashing styles and significance, but somehow it works. Just like the rest of the hotel. It shouldn't, but it does. These pictures tell the story of this place. Ellis is right—it's the stories and experiences of the people who pass through its doors that makes this hotel so compelling.

After the night with the bathroom incident, which I still can't think about without dying of embarrassment, things changed between Ellis and me. It was inevitable, I suppose. If I'm honest with myself, we'd been heading in this direction since the moment he fell off a ladder and into my arms. We've been intimate—some insanely hot frotting and a couple of soapy hand jobs in the shower—but we haven't gone any further.

Not that I don't want to though. I'm desperate to bury myself inside him, to have him under me making those sweet sounds when I make him come, but every time we get close, I pull away. I see the disappointment in those pretty blue eyes, but also an understanding. He doesn't push for anything more than I'm willing to give, which is more than I've ever had from any of the other men who temporarily ran through my life in the past. They'd all wanted something from me: money, connections, favours, you name it. But Ellis doesn't ask for anything at all, not even my help trying to figure out how to save his beloved hotel.

He's everything I never knew I needed and the one thing I can't keep. I can't take him to bed knowing that I'll be leaving him. And I will leave him. I have a whole life and a company to help run back in New York. I can't dump everything on Warren; in fact, I don't even want to think about the pile of problems that will be waiting for me when I return.

The thought of returning has my belly churning uncomfortably. Pushing the thought from my mind, I return to my fascinated perusal of the pictures lining the walls. Ellis

had spent the first few days showing me the whole hotel from top to bottom, then he'd returned to his duties, leaving me to explore on my own. According to him, this entire floor housed the family apartments before it was renovated as a hotel. Most of the family rooms were converted to guest rooms with the exception of my grandfather's suite, which is at the other end of the east wing and far away from the guest rooms where I'm staying, but it doesn't stop me wandering the floor curiously.

I turn down an unfamiliar corridor and pause. This isn't one of the places Ellis showed me, I'm sure of it. Even though all the corridors and rooms look the same, they're not. It's like my subconscious knows every corner of this building, and it's trying to direct where I go next. Everywhere I look, I have this feeling of *déjà vu*, but I can't seem to access the memories to match.

I'm about to turn around and go back the way I came when I hear a creaking. When I look up, there's a door swinging slowly open.

"Ghosts aren't real," I mutter to myself. Yet I still walk tentatively towards the open door. Jesus, I'm like one of the dumb teenagers in every horror movie ever, going down into the basement or walking into the abandoned shack in the middle of the woods.

As I reach the door, I press my hand against the wood and push it open further. I'm not sure what I expect, but it's certainly not the sight that greets me. It's a child's room, but what immediately has me drawing in a sharp breath is the name painted in brightly coloured letters above the small twin bed.

Morgan .

This was my room. I drop my hand to my side and step into the room. Beside the bed is a nightstand holding a night light in the shape of a small blue train. Thomas, I think with a smile, the memory floating to the surface. Thomas the Tank Engine. I loved

trains. How could I have forgotten?

I turn to look at the walls that are covered with pictures of trains, steam engines, and various others, including the Flying Scotsman. Then there are posters of the rest of the characters from the Thomas the Tank Engine children's series, and a bookcase pushed up against one wall is filled with books from the series too.

I also see dozens of other children's books, including what looks to be a series for much younger children about a white bunny named Miffy. On higher shelves are classics: the Narnia books, Alice in Wonderland, Peter Pan.

I turn away from my perusal of the books and towards the armoire. The doors are open, revealing empty wire hangers. I glance down and see a small heap of light-coloured material. Picking it up, I shake the thick layer of dust from it, then pull it out of the piece of furniture. It's a child's T-shirt, one of mine. I release a breath I didn't know I was holding and a strange, unsettled feeling rises in my belly when I hold it up to look at the illustration on the front. My gaze takes in the old-fashioned green steam engine and the little red Welsh dragon sitting on its funnel. I've the Engine, I remember, and the dragon's name is Idris.

Like the information was just waiting in some long-forgotten corner of my mind.

I lay the T-shirt carefully on the bed. The dresser drawers are open too, and empty except for several mismatched socks with holes in them and a pair of pyjamas. Toy boxes filled with balls and stuffed animals line the walls, and a bow and arrow set leans next to one of them. Tucked into one corner is an old-fashioned rocking horse with a cowboy hat hooked over one ear and on the floor in front of it is a huge train track set up with stations and tunnels, and several engines with burgundy and cream-coloured passenger carriages.

I came here on a train... a really big one. It had lots of steam coming out of it and

there were loads of other kids on board. They said they was takin' us somewhere safe where the doodlebugs couldn't get us.

I'm really glad you're here. You're my best friend, Artie.

I stumble back at the vivid memory of me lying on this very floor, watching the little electric trains running along the track, my friend lying beside me. Dropping heavily onto the bed, I stare at the train set for I'm not sure how long.

Finally, I reach into my pocket and retrieve my phone. It only takes me a moment to scroll through to the right number and for it to start ringing at the other end of the line.

"Morgan, darling! How lovely to hear from you. This is unexpected. How's Chicago? Cold, I bet. I don't envy you at all. Your Aunt Sylvie and I are sipping mai tais by the edge of the ocean." She sighs happily. "I do love the Bahamas. You and Warren should fly out and join us. I can't remember the last time the three of us spent any time together."

I can. It was my stepfather's funeral, but I don't remind her of that.

"Mom, I'm not in Chicago."

"Oh, are you back in New York, then? Warren didn't mention it. Or are you off to one of the other hotels? You've always been like that. Itchy feet, my mother used to call it. You never could settle in one place for long. It's like you have a restless soul."

"No, I'm not in New York either." I take a deep breath, not sure how she's going to take the next words out of my mouth. "Mom, I'm in England. I'm in Yorkshire."

There's nothing but silence on the other end of the line. If I couldn't hear my Aunt

Sylvie's voice chatting away to someone faintly in the background, I'd have thought the call had disconnected.

"Mom?"

"What are you doing there?" she says quietly.

I breathe out slowly. "You know what I'm doing here."

"You're at Ashton House," she says, and there's a note of sadness in her voice.

"We've never talked about our life here, never talked about..." I brace myself. "We've never talked about my dad. You never brought it up, and I didn't want to make you sad by asking questions, but maybe I should have. I'm only just starting to understand that the reason I could never settle anywhere, the reason I was always trying to prove myself, is because there's a big part of me missing. I lived here for the first six years of my early life, the most formative, and I have no memory of it, of my dad, of my grandfather. Do you have any idea what it's like to be surrounded by things and people who seem so familiar, yet I don't remember them? It's like there's this black hole in my memories, and you're the only one who can fill in the blanks for me."

"What about your grandfather? Where is he?"

"He's kinda not talking to me," I admit with a sigh. "Ellis says that Grandad told him it's because I look so much like my dad that it was a shock, even though he knows I'm an adult now. In his mind he still thought of me as a little kid."

"Who's Ellis?" she asks and I can hear the curiosity in her voice.

"He's... he works here," I say softly. "But he's lived here since he was a kid. His

mom used to be one of the housemaids. When she moved on, he loved the place so much he stayed.”

She gives a small chuckle. “That doesn’t surprise me. Both your grandparents were always taking in waifs and strays, just like they did with me when I landed up on the doorstep of Ashton House. In fact, that was how I met your father.”

“What?”

Mom sighs heavily. “That’s a story for another day. You’re right, I never should have kept the memory of your father from you.”

“Then why did you?”

She goes quiet again. “Give me a moment to move. I have a private cabana, and I need privacy for this conversation.”

I wait patiently before she finally comes back on the line. “He’s right, you know. Your grandfather. You are the image of your father. There are days when it hurts to look at you, but it’s a good hurt because...” She pauses and I can hear the tremor in her voice when she starts up again. “Because even after he was gone, it’s like I got to carry a little piece of him with me.”

“What happened, Mom?” I ask the one question that’s been burning inside me since I was fifteen years old and have always been too afraid to ask.

“Your father died from an aneurysm, that much you know. One moment he was there, and in the next breath he was gone. Instantaneous. There’s nothing anyone could have done to save him. They tell me he wouldn’t have felt a thing, he wouldn’t have even known anything was wrong.” She blows out a long breath as if trying to organise her thoughts. “I never settled well in Yorkshire. I was a city girl and never

quite got used to the country. That life was so foreign to me, so far removed from everything I knew. I know there was a lot of talk, especially from the local village gossips. They thought I was a pretty American gold digger, a nobody from New Jersey. That I married your dad for his money.”

She huffs. “Little did they know that every generation of Ashton-Drakes struggled with debt. None of the men in that family seemed to have any clue how to manage money, and a fair few of them had gambling problems. When I knew them, your grandfather Cedric was still trying to dig the family out of the abyss of gambling debts his older brother Clifford had gifted them with before his untimely death.”

I snort. “Seems about right from what I’ve heard about the rest of my ancestors.”

“The truth is, Morgan,” she says quietly, “I loved your father with every single fibre of my being. He was the love of my life.”

“He was?” I’d always hoped that she’d loved him, that they’d loved each other, and that I wasn’t just the product of a marriage that didn’t work out and would’ve ended early anyway if there hadn’t been a tragedy. It helps to hear her admit how she felt. It soothes something deep inside me that I didn’t know needed soothing.

“He was so handsome and charismatic.” She sighs happily like a teenage girl with her first crush. “But he was also sweet and kind, had a smile for everyone. He was always the first to offer to help, put the needs of others before his. He was the best man I’ve ever known. When he died...” She swallows tightly, the hurt obvious even after all this time. “After he died, I needed to get away. I needed to go somewhere where I wasn’t surrounded by memories of Elliott. I was drowning in my own grief, in so much pain I couldn’t see your grandfather’s. When I first took you back to New York, I hadn’t intended it to be permanent, no matter what people thought. I just needed to be with my own family, needed time to heal. So I brought you to my mom’s place in New Jersey.”

“I don’t remember that. The earliest memories I have are of living in the penthouse at The Hamilton Manhattan.”

“I’m not surprised,” she says. “For the first six months after your father’s death, you wouldn’t speak. Not one single word. I know it sounds cliché, but I took a job as a maid at The Hamilton—that’s how I met Royce—to pay for you to see a therapist. She said that you being nonverbal was a trauma response to your father’s death. I pushed my own grief aside to concentrate on helping you.”

“I remember that,” I say quietly. “I wanted to speak, but the words wouldn’t come.”

“When you did gradually begin to speak, it became clear you’d locked up all your memories of home, of your father and of Ashton House. I know there must be a small part of you that thinks I didn’t take you back to England because I met Royce, got married, and had Warren. That I replaced our family with a new one, but, Morgan, that couldn’t be further from the truth. I never took you back because I was so afraid it would push you back into that awful grief and that I would lose you. Gradually, you started moving forward, and in order to keep doing that, you had to leave what was behind you in the past. I made the choice not to take you back before I started seeing Royce and certainly before he asked me to marry him.”

“You married Royce barely a year after Dad died.”

“Yes, I did,” she replies contemplatively. “I hadn’t planned to. Meeting Royce was a surprise. He became my friend first. He ended up paying for all your therapy so you could have the best help. I wasn’t looking for another relationship at all, especially so soon after Elliott, but I was so sad and lonely, I didn’t know how to cope with my own grief and was trying to focus on helping my child through his struggle with something I didn’t understand.”

“That must have been hard,” I murmur. I always knew it couldn’t have been easy, but



hearing it in her own words hurts me somewhere deep inside.

“I fell into a relationship with Royce because it was all about comfort. He wanted to take care of both of us. I never lied to him, and that was why our relationship worked. Royce went into it knowing I was in love with another man, one I was also grieving. But he loved me and he loved you too, and in the end we grew to love him too. He was a good man. Falling pregnant with Warren was a surprise and a gift. When he came along, you came out of that dark grief and began to really talk, and smile. I will never forget the first time you held him after he was born. You smiled, a real smile for the first time since Elliott died, and I knew then we’d turned a corner. Having your little brother to shower with your love was when you truly began to heal. Warren saved you in a way I couldn’t.”

“Mom,” I choke out, my eyes burning with tears.

“We became this unassailable little unit, you, me, Warren, and Royce, and we loved each other. Losing your father taught me one very important lesson that I have never forgotten, and that’s to treasure every single moment because you never know how many you have left.”

I scrub my free hand over my eyes, brushing away the moisture, and sniff loudly.

“I made my choices in life,” Mom continues. “And I stand by them. But the one regret I have is your grandfather. He’d lost his wife only the year before, and it had devastated him. Elliott played a large part in getting him through his grief even though he’d lost his mom too. Then Elliott died and Cedric fell apart. I tried in those early days. I tried to help him, but I couldn’t. It was too much. I couldn’t take on his grief as well as my own and my child’s. So I made a choice. I figured that we’d come back at some point, but the longer we were away and with you finally coming out of it, it was harder to overcome my fear of rocking the boat. But I should’ve checked on him.”

“I understand why you didn’t, Mom.” I swallow past the burning sensation at the back of my throat. “Nothing about any of this was easy. You made the best choice you could, and I’m grateful for the life I’ve had and for the family you gave me. I do love you.”

“I love you too,” she whispers.

“You’re not the only one at fault here,” I admit slowly. “When I was younger, I knew I had a grandad in England, but I’d convinced myself he didn’t want anything to do with me because I never heard from him. At any point in my adult life, I could have gotten on a plane and come over here to meet him, but I didn’t.”

“You’re there now,” she reminds me. “Be gentle with him. If he’s as cantankerous as I remember, you’ll have your work cut out, but underneath it all, he’s a good man.” She gives a small laugh. “You’re a lot like him, actually.”

“How so?”

“It’s like your father got all the sweetness and sunshine in your family. You and your grandfather are two peas in a pod. Grumpy and as prickly as a porcupine, but when you love, you love with everything in you. So go, get to know your grandfather, and I’m here anytime you need to talk.”

“Actually, there was something I wanted to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“When we lived here at Ashton House, did I have a friend who came to play? He would have been a little older than me, maybe eight or nine? His name was Artie.”

“Artie?” She sounds surprised. “Wow, that’s a name I haven’t heard in over thirty

years.”

“Was he a friend of mine, then? Did he live locally? I was just wondering if he still lived around here.”

“Morgan,” she says gently. “Artie wasn’t real. He was your imaginary friend.”

“What?”

“It started as soon as you were able to talk. You were always going on about your friend, Artie. Your father and I would watch you have entire conversations with him in front of us, but there was no one there. I was a bit worried about it when you hadn’t grown out of it by the time you started school, but Elliott...” She trails off.

“What?” I ask curiously.

“Whenever you talked about Artie, Elliott would have this little smile on his face, like it was a secret only the two of you were in on. He said to just leave you and that eventually you’d grow out of it. I guess you did because you never mentioned him once we moved to New York. It was like you left him behind with all of your other memories.”

“I guess,” I mutter.

“So,” Mom says, and I smile because I know that tone. “Tell me all about this Ellis.”

I find myself taking a deep breath as I stand outside my grandad's room. This will either go well or very, very badly. Raising my hand, I knock and wait. And wait... and wait.

I know damn well he's in there. Ellis said he hasn't left his room in decades, not since my father died and we left. A small kernel of guilt lodges in my chest and no matter what I do, I can't seem to dislodge it. I may have only been a kid at the time, and Mom did what she had to do, but I can't help thinking about the fact we had each other and then Warren and Royce. Grandad had no one, and he'd lost his wife as well as his only son.

Turning up now is probably too little too late, but I have to give it a shot. Not to soothe my conscience or because of some misplaced sense of guilt, not even out of pity, but because I'm his only remaining family and I want to get to know him. I'm glad he has Ellis and the others. They all stepped up and took care of him when we didn't.

Maybe we should have.

I shake my head—going around in circles isn't going to help. Raising my hand to knock again, I freeze when the door opens a crack and my grandfather's face appears, his eyes narrowing suspiciously as he looks me up and down.

"Oh, it's you," he mutters. "Should've known. Ellis just knocks and walks straight in."

“Hi,” I greet him awkwardly. It’s weird looking at him. It’s like looking at a much older version of myself in the mirror, not just his features but right down to the drawn-down brows and the glower. “Can we talk?”

He stares at me for a moment and huffs, then turns around and disappears, leaving the door to swing open. Right or wrong, I take that as an invitation, however gruffly offered. I step inside and close the door behind me with a quiet click.

Grandad doesn’t stop or sit down, he just continues across the room, his slippers making a swishing sound on the carpet. He enters another room and leaves that door open as well. I stand uncomfortably in his sitting room, not sure if I should follow or not.

“Are you coming in or not?” he shouts in annoyance after a moment. “I haven’t got all day. I could be dead soon.”

My mouth twitches and I remind myself to have patience. After all, this is probably going to be me in fifty years. I head through the doorway, only to draw up short and stare, my mouth falling open. I think I’d expected this to be his bedroom, but instead it’s a huge room with the largest train set I’ve ever seen set up in it.

There’s enough space to walk the periphery of the room, the train table sitting right in the middle. Clearly custom-made, it’s a massive oval shape with the centre cut away so you could stand in the middle of it. I’m guessing it has a hinged pass-through somewhere to access it.

The table itself is covered with tiny fields and valleys, tunnels and stations. There’s a little village and some roads, and tiny little people stand along the platforms edging the train tracks. The tracks themselves wind around the table and intersect at little signal boxes and sidings. A small version of the Flying Scotsman chugs around one track, pulling pretty passenger carriages. On a second track is a goods train with

trucks and cargo.

I draw in a breath and kneel so I'm at eye level with the table and can study the details. It must have taken years to build this... or decades, I think, glancing up at my grandfather, who watches me intently.

"You built this?" I rise, taking in the small paint stains on his fingers and a half-finished cow shed sitting on top of a piece of folded newspaper on a table behind him.

He shrugs.

"It's incredible," I tell him.

"It helps kill the time until I die." He shrugs again and shuffles towards the small table where he picks up the cow shed and resumes painting with a thin paintbrush. The table's obviously his work desk; it's covered in plastic containers filled with grass, trees, and shrubs. Spare tracks, tiny pots of model paint, and jam jars filled with different sized brushes also litter the surface.

"You bought me my first train set," I murmur as another memory flickers through my mind. "For Christmas, when I was little."

He pauses his painting for a second but doesn't look at me. "You were three."

"I'm sorry," I say quietly and although he still doesn't look at me, I can tell he's listening because the strokes of his brush have slowed and he's painting the same spot over and over. "I should've come to see you sooner."

He doesn't respond so I keep talking. Maybe it's easier this way. I can get out everything I need to say in one go.

“I barely remember being here. Mom told me that the therapist said I’d repressed my memories because of the trauma of losing my dad, and I guess... I guess it was easier to stay away as I got older because I didn’t think you’d want to see me.”

He stops what he’s doing and finally looks up at me, those dark eyes so turbulent and so similar to my own.

He opens his mouth to say something, then stops and stares at me for several long moments. “Did you have a good life?” he finally asks. “In America, with your mother?”

“Yes,” I say honestly. “My stepfather was a good man. He loved me like I was his own and treated me and Mom well. I have a brother too. We were inseparable when we were younger, and we’re still very close now.”

He continues to watch me, something working behind that pensive gaze. “I’m glad,” he says. “Your mother was right, you were better off. There was nothing here for you but sadness.”

“Once perhaps, but I’m here now,” I murmur. “Can’t we start over?”

“You look like him.” He nods to the wall behind me.

When I first entered the room, my attention had been captured by the trains, and I’d missed the walls. The walls filled with framed photographs of me, I realise with a start. The first six years of my life captured in colour. Not just me, though; my mom is in some of the pictures, so young and happy. Grandad is there too, with an attractive woman who I think was my grandmother. There’s a fleeting recognition there, a brief memory of the smell of violets and of being held gently.

Finally, my gaze lands on the pictures of my dad. Elliott Ashton-Drake. I could have

been his twin when I was in my twenties, but now I've already outlived him by over ten years. It's hard to think he only made it to his twenty-ninth birthday, so that's where our similarity ended. He never had the chance to age, instead remaining that smiling young man immortalised in photos. It hurts deep inside, in a place that I'd thought had long since healed.

A life cut short, and so many people hurt.

I take my time studying the pictures, ones I've never seen before. My mother had told me once when I was ten years old that she had a photograph of my father for me. That if I wanted it, I could have it. Most of the pictures of him she'd left here because at the time she hadn't intended to make the move permanent, but there was one picture of the two of them, a strip they'd taken in a photo booth when they'd first met.

She'd seemed so sad when she offered me the last part of my father she had, and I hadn't wanted her to be sad, so I said no. I didn't need to see it, and we never spoke of it again.

Now, seeing the story of his life told in still images hurts in a way I never allowed it to before. I pause at a picture of me and Dad together. I don't know where we are, but I can't be more than four or five. I'm sitting in the cab of a locomotive and grinning widely with his arms around me.

"We took you to The National Rail Museum in York that day." He nods towards the photo. "It was like all your Christmases had come at once. You cried for an hour when it was time to take you home. Wanted to take all the trains home with you. I think you'd have had them all parked on the front lawn if we'd let you." He chuckles and it's so unexpected that I find myself staring at him in surprise.

"Elliott got all the sunshine in the family," he continues as he keeps his eyes on his



model and half-heartedly swipes the paintbrush over it. “Got that from his mother. You always took after me. Grumpy little shit when you didn’t get your own way. Bossy too.”

“The apple didn’t fall too far from the tree, then.” I raise one brow, and he looks up and grins, which transforms his whole face.

“No,” he says. “Just skipped a generation. Ellis reminds me a lot of your dad. Kind and sweet, smiley. Always ready to help, always thinking of other people, sometimes to the detriment of himself. I suppose that’s why I took to the lad. That and the fact that you can’t help but love that boy even if you tell yourself not to.”

I know he’s talking about himself, but it hits a little too close to home, and I turn to the photos while my heartbeat settles.

“Ellis says you don’t leave your rooms.” I turn back to him once I have my equilibrium under control once more.

He shrugs. “It wasn’t a conscious decision. I didn’t wake up one morning and say to myself, I’m never leaving this room again. It happened so gradually. A day became a week, a month... a year... ten. There was nothing left out there for me.”

“But there is. There’s Ellis, Rosie, Aggie. People who care about you.”

He shakes his head. “There were always other people around, guests, and I don’t much like strangers. I’m too old to be bothered with being civil to people.”

“Why make it a hotel then?” I ask curiously.

“My older brother inherited the house, but he was a consummate gambler and a drunk on top of it. He lost every last penny of the family fortune, which wasn’t that plentiful

to start with. Our bloodline seems to have an inordinate amount of scoundrels, drunks, and gamblers. They've always been good at marrying into money and lousy at keeping it or their marriage vows. Clifford spent every last penny and took out several loans. Then, rather than face the consequences of his choices, he ended up with the easy way out. Heart attack in his sleep, leaving me to clean up his mess as usual. We barely managed. We were just scraping by when you came along."

"So you decided to open the house as a hotel?" I guessed.

"Actually, it was your father's idea," he replies. "Elliott thought it was the perfect solution. We poured every last penny we had into the place to pay for the renovations. Elliott was going to manage the hotel while I cared for your grandmother, who was very poorly by then. She had MS and it had worsened. Then she died and everything snowballed from there. The work had been done to the house, but we had to delay opening as a hotel while we paid for the funeral and dealt with our grief. Then Elliott..." He trails off and breathes heavily.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper, not knowing what else to say to him.

"I was in no fit state to run a hotel, but I'd already committed and all the money was tied up in it. Aggie, who was already the cook here and had been for years, had a cousin who ran a hotel in Strathclyde. He agreed to come and stay for a few months while his wife ran their hotel. He came in and interviewed staff, trained them, got a manager in place, and I left them all to it."

"You left them to it?" I parrot.

"In the beginning, they'd report back to me, but as the years went on, I was less and less involved. In the last couple of years, I've left Ellis and Rosie to do everything as we can't seem to get and keep decent managers. Then again, we can't exactly pay a competitive wage, so we tend to end up with the dregs of the employment pool

anyway. I should just promote Ellis. He'd probably do a better job than all of them, and he loves this place."

"I noticed." I can't help the small smile tugging at my lips, and my grandfather's eyes sharpen in interest.

"You like fellas, then?" he asks rather bluntly. "Ellis does. You sniffing around him?"

"What a charming phrase," I say stiffly.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist." He huffs out a husky laugh. "I was only asking. I'm too old to tiptoe around people; if I want to know, I'll ask. I don't mean any offence by it. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"I'm gay, if that's what you're trying to get at." Carefully omitting the fact that I am, in fact, sniffing around his favourite employee. Although I'm now starting to realise Ellis is a lot more to him than just an employee.

"Hmm," he grunts. "You want some dinner?"

I glance down at my watch and realise how late it is, then look back at my grandfather and the olive branch he's offering. "I'd love to have dinner with you. Will you come down to the dining room with me?"

"No need." He shakes his head and picks up the receiver of an old-fashioned black phone mounted on the wall.

Jesus, last time I saw something like that, I was being tortured with watching Casablanca because Aunt Sylvie insisted it was a classic.

I watch as Grandad dials a couple of numbers. An extension number, maybe? He

holds the phone to his ear and waits for a moment.

“Aggie,” he says gruffly. “Send up two plates tonight, will you?” He listens for a moment to the muffled voice. “Morgan’s joining me this evening. Don’t worry about bothering Ellis, just send it up in the dumbwaiter. Oh, and Aggie, send up some spotted dick for pudding if there’s any left.” He pulls the phone away from his ear and looks at me. “Do you like spotted dick?”

“Spotted what?” I say a little too primly.

He rolls his eyes and returns to the phone. “Just send up two portions. I’ll finish his off if he doesn’t like dick.” His chuckle turns into a dirty laugh. “I’m guessing that’s not the case though.”

This time it’s me rolling my eyes as he hangs up the phone.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” I say impulsively.

“What? You haven’t been all evening?”

I smile slightly and then sober. “Can you actually leave your room, or do you just not want to?”

He stares at me for a long time, carefully considering his answer.

“I honestly don’t know,” he finally says. “I haven’t tried.”

“Do you want to? We don’t have to go far, just down the corridor and back.”

He turns his head and looks at the door, tapping his fingers against the edge of the table.

“No,” he says quietly. “Not today. I’m tired.”

“Okay.” I nod, not wanting to push him. “Okay.”

“Are you going back to New York soon?” Grandad asks, abruptly changing the subject. “I heard the weather’s turning and although the snow’s deep, most of the roads are being cleared.”

For the first time, the thought of leaving has me feeling unsettled. “Yes, soon,” I murmur, not feeling the relief I should. “I’m not sure when, exactly, but...”

“But?”

“I don’t want it to be like last time,” I say. “I’d like to keep in contact, maybe phone to see how you’re doing. Maybe come and visit?” I offer, holding my breath.

I mean every word. As prickly as the man is, I want to get to know him, find out what sort of man he is and what his life had been like before it imploded. I’d like to know more about the house and the family of infamous reprobates I was born into, and I’d be lying if I said the thought of seeing Ellis again wasn’t extremely appealing

Grandad looks over at his trains and a myriad of emotions flits across his wrinkled features too quickly for me to register. Eventually, he turns his gaze fully back to me.

“I think... I think I’d like that.” He hesitates. “Can I ask something of you though?”

I nod, wondering what he could possibly want.

“I don’t know how long I have left.” It’s not said with any kind of fear or sadness. It’s as if he’s just stating a fact. “I’m eighty-eight years old, Morgan. I could have another ten years, or I could die in my sleep. When I die, the house will come to you as the

only living heir. I don't know if that's a blessing or a curse. For me, it was both. I personally don't care what you do with the house once I'm gone, but can you make sure Ellis is okay?"

"Ellis?" I repeat.

He nods. "Don't get me wrong. I love this house as much as I hate it, but Ellis... he wormed his way into my heart from the moment his mother brought him here. I thought I could keep some sort of distance if he continued to call me Mr Ashton-Drake rather than Cedric, or even... Grandfather."

My eyes widen but not in jealousy—surprise, yes, but there's also a part of me that is so grateful that my grandfather had someone to love instead of being all alone, and although it doesn't make up for the past three decades, it eases something inside me.

"You love him?" I say softly.

"I do." He sighs. "He's impossible not to. He's like pure sunlight, just like your father. He's been my family since the first moment he smiled at me. I'd leave him something in my will, but honestly, there's nothing left to leave him. All I have are the bricks and mortar around me and a mountain of debt that just keeps growing. Promise me you'll take care of him. I don't mean financially. I mean just... check in with him, make sure he's not sad or lonely."

It's the easiest promise I've ever made.

"I swear."

He pushes himself up from his stool, his knees cracking loudly. I watch as he shuffles towards me, and I stand still like a deer caught in the headlights. I stiffen up, not sure what exactly to expect when he wraps his arms around me and pulls me in. Then I lift

my arms and pat his back, not sure what to say.

We awkwardly embrace in silence, the quiet only broken by a whistle and the chug of the tiny train as it powers along the tracks. After a few more uncomfortable moments, we shift. It's like both of us aren't quite sure how we ended up in a hug situation and we're not sure how to get out of it.

Damn, Mom was right; maybe I am just like him.

"So, uh, this is nice," I say after a few more moments. "Do you maybe wanna put some pants on?"

"Nope." He releases me, turns around, and shuffles back to his trains. "I like the breeze on my nads."

I snuggle further down into my blanket, my book forgotten in my grip as I rest my head on the pillow and turn to stare out of the window, sighing in pleasure. This is one of my favourite places to be.

I'm tired. It's been a long day of helping John the Maid clean the stairwells and bannisters. My muscles ache and I feel like I haven't had a day off in forever. Which, to be fair, I haven't. Not that I mind, but sometimes it does catch up with me.

Although I'm still wearing my black trousers, white shirt, and my black waistcoat, now unbuttoned, I've removed my tie and the apron John the Maid loaned me, and my shiny black shoes have been replaced by the comfy pair of tan Uggs my mum gave me for Christmas. I've also pulled on a chunky cardigan with oversized buttons that I knitted myself. I miss knitting, but I haven't been able to make anything new recently because I can't afford the wool.

Still, at least reading's free, even if this is a book I've read dozens of times already. But I find myself staring down at the page and reading the same paragraph over and over again. Nothing's going in—my mind is completely someplace else tonight.

Settling into the pillows, I draw my blanket closer. It's not really that cold, I just like to snuggle. It's a comfort thing. Stretching out on the generously sized and well-cushioned chaise, I go back to watching the snow drift down outside the huge glass windows of the conservatory. Last summer, Rosie and I strung dozens of white fairy lights around the black iron framework in here, and to me, this room is just magical. Lying here in the soft light with the snow fall all around outside feels like I'm inside



a giant snow globe.

Shifting around so I can look out the glass roof, I catch sight of a figure watching me from the doorway. I smile at Morgan leaning up against the doorframe. He's dressed casually in jeans and a sweater, and he looks relaxed.

"How did dinner with your grandfather go?" My voice is low so as not to break the magic of the dimly lit atmosphere.

His mouth quirks at the corner. "Do you know everything that goes on in this hotel?"

I chuckle. "We do like to gossip. It helps pass the time."

He lets the door close behind him and crosses the room like he has all the time in the world, a confident swagger that warms my blood when paired with the intense way his eyes have locked on mine. Like I'm the only person in the world.

Morgan moves to take a seat and I shuffle over so he can perch on the edge of the chaise at my side.

"We talked about my dad, about..." He stops and gazes out of the window. "We talked about a lot of things. It's not perfect, but it's a start." He draws in a breath and slides his gaze back to me. "I'm going to keep in contact with him when I return to New York. Call each week, maybe sometimes come to visit."

My stomach clenches at the thought of him leaving, even though he was always intending to. I went into this—whatever it is between us—with no expectations, just a genuine desire to be close to him in whatever way I can while I can. But I can't deny that I'm beginning to feel things for him I shouldn't, things that will only end up hurting when he's gone. I can't seem to stop though; he's like a drug that I crave. Not just his touch and his taste, but also the smile that I know he doesn't give just anyone

and his laugh that doesn't come easily but I somehow always manage to tease out of him.

"It's cosy in here," Morgan says as he surveys the room with interest. "Pretty too."

"We have the old freestanding Calor gas heaters in here." I point to a couple of them tucked into the corners of the room. "Keeps it just the right level of warm. The blanket is just for comfort. This is one of my absolute favourite places to be, especially during storms. Watching the lightning through the glass ceiling is incredible, and being all snuggled up with a book and a hot drink when it rains is one of the most comforting things in the world to me."

"I can imagine." The amusement in his warm, dark eyes makes my stomach go all jittery and my cheeks flush.

Soft music suddenly fills the air around us.

"Where did that come from?" Morgan asks, and I point up to the speakers mounted on the conservatory framework, then glance over to where Bertie and Roger give me a couple of thumbs up before disappearing completely.

"I think Roger and Bertie are matchmaking." His brow creases at my words and the motion makes me chuckle.

"Bertie and Roger? The ghosts?" I nod, laughing outright at his expression. "Sometimes I can't tell if you're pulling my leg or being serious." He pushes the blanket off me and stands up, holding his hand out.

"What?" My laugh has changed to a wide smile as I swing my feet off the chaise, then take his hand and allow him to pull me to my feet. "What are we doing?"

He entwines our fingers together and slips his other arm around my waist. Slowly, he draws me close and sways to the music, so I grip his bicep with my free hand and follow his lead.

“Dancing,” he murmurs as he gazes down at me.

It’s less dancing and more staring and swaying as we turn in a slow circle, but it’s the most romantic thing I’ve ever experienced in my life.

I’ve had moments on the dance floor with random guys in clubs, which really were nothing more than me in a pair of booty shorts grinding on their crotches and looking for a quick, no-strings hookup. This, though. This is something else entirely.

My heart trembles in a way I’m not prepared for but don’t have the will to fight.

“Ellis,” Morgan whispers.

Unable to stop myself, I rise on my toes and press my lips to his in a soft, slow kiss. We stop swaying to the music, but he keeps holding me, his grip firm but gentle. My mouth parts and lets him in for a slow, sexy glide of tongues. Then my head falls back on a gasp and his soft, warm lips trail over my jaw and down my neck to the open collar of my shirt.

“Ellis,” he whispers again. “I want you so badly. Let me have you. Please,” he begs against my flushed skin.

“Yes,” I breathe. His hand next goes to work on the buttons of my shirt until he can fully push the fabric aside.

Practically holding me upright, his mouth lowers so his tongue can trace my nipple. I stare up at the snow sliding down the glass, but I’m lost to sensation, unable to truly

process anything but the hot suction of his mouth as he tugs and suckles first one nipple and then the other.

My skin prickles and I shiver. I've never felt taken apart by something so simple yet so intimate. We've created a little mini world of our own. Our own personal snow globe.

I wish I could freeze this moment in time and exist in it forever. The thought of him leaving creates a sharp stab of pain that I try to ignore; instead, I focus on the way he tastes and the scent of his skin, imprinting both in my memory.

His hands skim down my back to cup my buttocks, and as he lifts me effortlessly, I wrap my legs around his waist.

My mouth crashes down on his and my equilibrium shifts. He moves us onto the chaise and lays me down next to the discarded blanket, his weight pressing me into the plump cushions. I groan when his deliciously hard cock rubs against mine through the fabric of my trousers.

Sliding my hands underneath his sweater, I skim my fingers up his hot skin, raising the sweater and T-shirt beneath it with my efforts. We break our kiss long enough to pull them over his head, then I toss them to the flagstone floor.

My lips ache, swollen from his desperate kisses, and I have beard burn along my jaw, but I don't care. I can't stop, don't ever want to stop. I want him to mark me in every way possible because soon he'll be gone, and all I'll be left with is the memory of this.

Running my hands up his arms and over his shoulders, I dip down to drag my short nails over his nipples and thrill in his hiss of pleasure. God, I love a hairy chest, it's my kryptonite. Morgan checks every single box I've ever had and some I never knew

about before.

He pulls back, straddling my legs, and I chase his mouth with a little whine of protest. As he sits up, he smiles down at me, a smile that's wide and natural and so fucking beautiful.

Helping me up to a sitting position, he pushes my cardigan, waistcoat, and shirt off my shoulders, then drags them down my arms. He pauses for a moment to give me a cheeky little wink that makes laughter bubble up my throat while he drops my clothing to the floor. With that secret, seductive smile still playing on his lips, he unbuckles my leather belt, slipping it through the loops of my trousers and tossing it to land with a small clatter against the pile of clothes.

He leans in and takes my lips once more, but the kiss is chaste and fleeting, a tease of more to come as his fingers deftly unbutton my trousers. Climbing off me, he starts to pull them and my briefs down my legs. My cock, damp with precum, slaps against my belly as he strips me of the remainder of my clothes, leaving me splayed out on the chaise.

I'm gloriously naked, my cock hard and my eyes heavy with desire as they meet his.

He lets his gaze pass over my body, as if imprinting this moment in his memory forever. Unable to help myself, I slide my hand down my stomach and fist my dick, giving it a slow, teasing stroke as he watches.

Christ, he's so gorgeous. He's all I want... all I can see. His almost-black hair is mussed from where my fingers have tangled in it, the grey streaks at his temples glowing under the twinkling fairy lights. My fingers itch to trace over the sexy stubble at his jaw. His intense gaze turns molten and my eyes drop to his swollen lips as he licks them slowly and deliberately.

His firmly rounded pecs are liberally dusted with hair, and his nipples are flat, dusky discs that I'm aching to get my lips on. His stomach is a little softer, but it's obvious he takes care of his body. There's a mouthwatering trail of dark hair from his belly button that disappears into the low-slung waistband of his jeans.

That luscious mouth tilts up into a cocky smile as he retrieves a couple of foil packets from his pocket and tosses them onto the chaise by my hip. I watch avidly, hoping I'm not drooling, as he unbuttons his jeans with a slow, teasing pop pop pop...

Okay, I may actually be drooling. Why is it that buttons are so much sexier than zips? He hooks his thumbs at his hips and draws his jeans down, stripping off the rest of his clothes before he straightens up and smirks as I ogle him shamelessly.

Lowering himself back to the chaise, Morgan settles his warm, bare skin onto mine, and I groan. We rub and frot against each other, my hands once again tangling in his hair.

"You're so beautiful," he pants against my mouth. "I want to be inside you."

"Yes." I arch my back, moaning sluttily as he nips and sucks at the sensitive juncture where my neck meets my shoulder, an action that makes me shudder. "I want everything."

He groans and moves so he can open the condom and roll it down his thick cock, then opens the packet of lube and wets his fingers.

"It's been a while," I gasp, my eyes rolling back in pleasure at the touch of his slippery fingers at my entrance.

"Me too," he whispers. His mouth takes mine and swallows my moan as one long finger slips inside me, joined a moment later by a second.

“Morgan,” I breathe, rocking my hips. Then we’re back to kissing again. I seriously could spend the rest of my life attached to this man’s mouth, he’s so addictive.

He curls his fingers and searches for my prostate, and when he finds it, I let out a rather embarrassing sound somewhere between desperation and ecstasy. Fuck . I ride his fingers, feeling the stretch and burn, but I don’t care. I want him inside me.

By the time he adds a third, I’m impatient and fighting the urge to come already.

“Now, now, now,” I chant against his lips. “Morgan, please. I need you.”

He groans at my words and pulls his fingers out. Quickly, he slicks his cock with the rest of the lube, then lines up the head with my hole. I clutch at him tightly, my fingers digging into his skin hard enough to leave marks, as he sinks inside me. He grasps my thighs and pushes them up, almost folding me in half, canting my hips to get a better angle. Something gives at last, and he slides in all the way to the root.

We both moan and I wrap my arms around him as he buries his face in my neck. For a second, we just rest, our heavy breathing in sync, and relish the feel of our bodies joining for the first time.

I feel so full, and not just from the way his huge cock stuffs me. Every part of me feels this way—even my mind and heart are filled with his presence. He begins to push in slowly, grinding when he’s buried deep. My eyes roll and I let out the longest, sluttiest moan I’ve ever made in my life.

Fuck me . Sex has never been like this for me. I can’t remember experiencing such intensity. I move with him in perfect synchronicity. He thrusts deep into my body, that thick, heavy cock dragging over my prostrate with every movement.

I hope to god there is no one else in this part of the hotel because I’m very loud, but

there's no way to stop my cries of pleasure. I've always been quite vocal, but this is next level. I don't know if it's him, the fact I haven't had sex in ages, the ambience... or the way he makes me feel every single time I'm with him.

All I know is that he's probably ruined me for anyone else.

"Harder," I beg. "Oh god, please, harder!"

He grabs the edge of the arm of the chaise above my head with one hand while his other cups my arse cheek so he can get as deep as possible. He growls once more and the sound sends a shiver down the back of my neck as he sets a punishing pace. I'm in heaven and just hold on tight for the ride. There's no more finesse—it's deep, it's hard, and it turns my whole world upside-down.

He continues to batter against my prostate until lightning races down my spine and stars burst in front of my eyes, and I come so hard I almost black out. My orgasm makes me clamp down hard, strangling his dick. Morgan cries out and thrusts so hard that I'm shoved further up the chaise. Once inside me at his deepest point, he stills, and his cock pulses as he unloads into the condom.

His body is trembling, so I pull him into a hug, wrapping my arms and legs around him and plastering our sweaty bodies together while our breathing slows.

I don't know how long we stay tangled up in each other, but I finally relax my legs, stretching them out to link with his as he lays between my thighs. His head rests on my chest right above my heartbeat, and I lazily card my fingers through his hair.

"It's never been like that before." Morgan's whisper has a puzzled tone to it.

"Not for me either," I confess.



We lie for a few more minutes and watch the snow, which has lightened up to a few tiny flakes drifting past the conservatory windows.

“Tell me about your life in America.” I want to know everything about this complicated, contradictory man.

“What do you want to know?” he mutters. “It’s not really that interesting. I go to work, I travel for work, I work out in the gym between work.”

The corners of my mouth tug up. “Sounds like you work a lot.”

“Yeah. Honestly, I think I’ve done it for so long that I’ve forgotten how to do anything else.” He twists his head so our eyes can meet. “I came here because I was mad about what had happened. Pissed that the papers had connected my name to this place.”

“That’s understandable.”

“The thing is,”—he settles his head back on my chest and turns toward the window, as if it’s too hard to look at me while saying the next words—“I came here because I was angry, but it gave me something I didn’t know I needed.”

“And what’s that?”

“Peace.” He says the one word so softly I almost don’t hear it.

My heart gives a hard knock and I close my eyes.

Damn this man. He’s going to break me, I just know it.

22

As I enter the dining room from the kitchen with a silver warming dish full of bacon and sausage in my hands, I resist the urge to wince.

Or smirk.

I'm a bit undecided.

There's definitely something to be said for having an older lover. He's not only sexy as hell, but he's also very thorough. I don't think there's a single inch of my body he didn't worship last night.

Once our overheated bodies had cooled, the conservatory became too cold for lounging around naked, with the added, albeit small, risk of someone stumbling across our intertwined bodies on the chaise. It was so late that most of the staff was probably in bed, but still.

Although you never know with Mr Pennington. I caught him wondering around the hotel in the middle of the night a few days ago so he could, in his words, experience the nighttime terror of a haunted hotel as research for his book.

Yes, it may be haunted, but there's really not that much terrifying about it at all.

Morgan and I had snuck up the stairs half-dressed and covered in sweat and cum, trying not to get caught, then showered together in his room, and I spent the rest of the night in his bed.

I pause and close my eyes to fully immerse myself in the memory. I've never spent the entire night with someone before. He'd made love to me all night long. It was as if he was aware, just as I was, that the clock is ticking on this thing between us.

I'd left him in bed this morning tangled up in sheets that smelled of us. I had to get up since I had duties in the hotel, but god, I hadn't wanted to leave that warm cocoon or the heat of his naked body. Setting the dish on the table, I look up to see Morgan saunter into the dining room. His dark eyes immediately zero in on me, and I smile.

It's such a marked difference from when he first arrived. Gone is the tightly buttoned, overly stressed, extremely grouchy man with perfect hair and a thousand-dollar suit, and in his place now is a relaxed and happy man wearing jeans and sweaters, looking perfectly at ease with himself and the world.

He comes up and drops a kiss onto my lips. "Good morning," he mutters against my mouth, then kisses me again.

"Morning." Heat travels to my cheeks as my mouth curves into a wide smile.

"Missed you this morning."

At his words, that flush of pleasure decides to travel from my face down to my chest—suspiciously in the direction of my heart.

"I had to get up and help Aggie in the kitchen," I reply with a chuckle. "Although helping Aggie in the kitchen is restricted to fetching and carrying whatever she tells me to. None of us are allowed to so much as toast a slice of bread."

He looks over at the full English breakfast set out in the deserted dining room.

"Why do you go to all this trouble when there aren't any guests?" There's no censure

in his voice, only curiosity.

“Well, there’s Mr Pennington, and you, and all the staff will pop in at some point and eat too. Either me or Rosie will make a plate and take it up to Mr Asht—” I shake my head and laugh. “I’m still getting used to calling him Cedric. Anyway, we could just send it up in the dumbwaiter, but we like to check in on him every morning. Even though he grumbles and says we’re annoying him, we make sure he has plenty of company through the day. He may refuse to leave his rooms, but it’s not good for him to be on his own too much.”

His hands gently cup my face. “You’re incredible, you know that?” Leaning in, he kisses me again, but this time there’s nothing chaste about it. He kisses me so thoroughly I feel it all the way to my toes, and when he straightens again, I sway into him. “Thank you for taking such good care of my grandad when I should have been.”

“Ah, no!” I shake a finger at him. “No self-recriminations before breakfast. The situation was what it was, so draw a line under it and move on. You’re here now and that’s what counts.”

“Ellis!”

I turn towards the door at the sound of my name. Rosie is hurrying in with a piece of paper clutched tightly in one hand, her face a mask of worry.

“Rosie, what’s wrong?” I ask in concern as, slightly out of breath, she stops in front of me and Morgan.

“I just got an email.” She thrusts the paper towards my face. “I printed it out for you to read.”

I reach up and take it from her hand, then read it quickly. My heart begins to pound,

and my stomach sinks. I return to the beginning and read it again to confirm I didn't misunderstand the message.

At my obvious distress, Morgan asks, "What? What is it?"

I can't find the words to respond.

"It's the bank," Rosie says. "Apparently, they took us to court over all the outstanding debts, and since we didn't show up, they've ordered a full valuation and audit of the house and its contents so it can be put up for auction."

"What?" His eyes widen. "Why would you ignore a court summons?"

"We didn't know," I whisper.

"How can you not know? There should have been letters?—"

He cuts himself off with a curse and then, gripping the paper, stalks towards the door.

Rosie and I scramble to catch up with him, but he doesn't stop until he's on the fourth floor and hammering on his grandfather's door.

"Hold your horses," declares angry muttering from the other side of the door. "The house better be on bloody fire."

The door opens and Cedric appears scowling at the three of us. Morgan holds up the piece of paper.

"Where are they?" he demands.

Cedric glares at him. "Where are what?"

“The letters, the court summons?” Morgan says coolly.

Cedric’s eyes narrow and he juts his jaw out stubbornly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Now go away.” He turns and shuffles back into his room, but Morgan reaches out and catches the door before it slams closed, then strides into the room after him.

“Oh no, you’re not getting off that easy.”

Cedric turns to face him, his cheeks blotchy with anger. “Get out!”

“No,” Morgan snaps, and honestly, it’s like watching two very stubborn goats butt heads and bleat at each other. “Where. Are. They?”

Cedric’s lips purse shut, but his eyes betray him when they inadvertently flick to the bottom drawer of the sideboard.

Following his gaze, Morgan crosses the space in three strides and yanks the drawer open, allowing letters to spill out and tumble to the floor.

“Jesus Christ.” He grabs handfuls of them and, realising just how many there are, straightens up and holds some out to his grandfather. “How long have you been hiding this from them?”

“None of your business,” Cedric snaps.

“The hell it isn’t,” Morgan shouts back, shaking one handful at his grandad. “You’re about to be homeless! When you didn’t show up at court, they decided to send out an auditor to value the house, grounds, and contents for auction. You’re going to lose your home.” He points the other handful of letters in the direction of me and Rosie. “They’re going to lose their home. Don’t you care?”

“That’s rich coming from you!” Cedric’s voice breaks on the last word. “You weren’t here, so don’t think you can come in here and start throwing your weight around and judging me. I didn’t need you before and I don’t need you now, so why don’t you fuck off back to America, to your fancy hotels and la-di-da lifestyle.”

“I can’t!” Morgan shouts. “Because like it or not, I’m your family and that makes you my responsibility.” He throws his hands up, letters still in a death grip. “Otherwise, you’ll end up homeless and living out in the orchard until you freeze to death like that dumb-ass ancestor of ours.”

“That’s really very rude,” Edwina’s posh and slightly affronted tone murmurs behind me, but I don’t pay her any attention. The ghosts are the least of my problems right now.

“I don’t need you! And they can fuck off if they think they’re setting one foot inside my house! I’m not going anywhere! They’ll have to burn the place down around me because the only way I’m leaving is in a coffin!”

He whirls around, well as much as he can with his bad arthritis, and hobbles back to his train room, slamming the door. Morgan moves to follow him, but I grab his arm to stop him.

“Morgan, don’t,” I say softly. “That’s not how to handle him. He’s an old man, and this house is all he’s ever known. He’s scared, and he doesn’t know what to do, so he’s trying to push it all away and ignore it.”

Morgan growls in frustration. “That’s not going to solve the problem. That’s how he got into this mess in the first place.”

“I know.” I pet his arm and continue to talk softly to try and calm him down. “But this is partly on Rosie and me.”

“How do you figure that? Did you ignore a drawer full of legal correspondence and court summons?”

“No,” Rosie interjects with a troubled frown. “But we gave him the letters. Anything official-looking we’ve always passed to him so he could preserve some of his privacy. In reality, we should have opened all of them. If we had, we might’ve known, and we might’ve been able to do something in time.” Her voice catches and she shakes her head.

Morgan takes a deep breath, hands me the stacks of letters, and goes back to the drawer to get the rest. “Show me the books. All of them.”

I hesitate. Yes, I probably should do as he asks, but Cedric hasn’t given me express permission to allow his grandson access to the financials, and I don’t want to upset him further. It’s not good for his blood pressure.

“I’ll do it,” Rosie says firmly. “I’ll show all of it.”

Carrying all the correspondence we could find, the three of us trudge down to the office. Morgan pushes up the sleeves of his sweater and plants himself at Rosie’s desk, and we ply him with a never-ending stream of coffee and hand over reports and letters from the bank and creditors when he requests them.

The next couple of hours are excruciating. It’s clear the others know something’s going on. John the Maid has cleaned the reception desk on the other side of the open office door so many times that I wouldn’t be surprised if I could see my reflection in the work surface by now. Aggie brings in bacon sandwiches around mid-morning, her expression worried, but she leaves us to it without a word. Every now and then, I even see the ghosts stick their heads around the door, but I don’t engage with them either.



All my focus is on Morgan, who mutters to himself as he sits and taps away at a calculator. The sexy, laid-back man from earlier is gone, once again replaced with tight shoulders and a scowl etched between his brows. Which, honestly, is still really hot.

Finally, he slumps back in the chair and rubs his eyes. “I’m missing payroll.”

“There isn’t a payroll,” Rosie says.

Morgan’s frown deepens. “What? Why wouldn’t you keep a record of payroll? From what I can see here, you’ve been meticulous about documenting everything. It’s incredibly professional.”

“It’s not that we didn’t keep a record of the payroll,” Rosie explains. “There isn’t any payroll.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense.” He shakes his head in confusion. “The only reason you wouldn’t have a payroll is if you haven’t been pay?—”

He breaks off and stares at the two of us as his brain connects the dots. Sucking in a sharp breath, he pinches the bridge of his nose. Either he has a nasty headache brewing or he’s searching for his patience, possibly both. Probably both.

“How long?” he grits out, looking up at the pair of us. “How long haven’t you been paid for?”

Rosie and I look at each other. “A year,” I finally answer.

“A year!” he exclaims, caught somewhere between horror and disbelief. “You haven’t been paid for over a year?”

“Slightly longer if we’re going to be totally honest here,” Rosie adds.

“How the hell have you all survived working for free for over a year?”

I shrug. “It’s inconvenient, but it’s not as bad as it sounds. We don’t have to pay rent or utilities, and we get fed. John the Maid was discharged from the army on medical grounds so he has a pension he lives off. Dilys and Aggie both have savings and have always lived frugally anyway.”

“And you two?” he says. “Because, given your age and how long you’ve worked here, I can’t imagine either of you have savings worth a damn.”

“My parents help me out when I need it,” Rosie offers.

“So does my mum,” I say. “She bought me some new clothes and underwear for my birthday and Christmas, and she pays for a basic phone package for me. I don’t need much else. I do miss being able to buy wool for my knitting though.”

“That’s probably too much information, babe,” Rosie suggests. “Although, judging from the sounds coming from the conservatory last night, I expect he’s already seen said underwear.”

From the heat in my cheeks, I’m guessing it’s safe to say I’m several shades past fire engine red right now.

“You’re missing the point,” Morgan interrupts. “I mean, not about Ellis’s underwear—which is very nice, by the way—but you worked. You should have been paid regardless.”

“There wasn’t enough money,” I reply. “We all met together as a group and decided we’d give up our wages and support each other while we tried to save the hotel.

Please don't be mad at your grandfather. He didn't know we weren't being paid. That was the only thing we kept from him."

Morgan sighs and drops his head into his hands.

"Is there any hope?" Rosie asks. My heart sinks when Morgan looks up and slowly shakes his head.

"Even if we could get a lawyer and delay the auditor to work out terms with all the creditors, there's just no income to cover it. Everything has been paid with credit, on accounts that are now dried up. There's not enough left to even continue at the level you have been, let alone begin to pay off the debts."

"But," Rosie says, "you own a hotel empire. Can't you?"

"Rosie!" I say sharply. "It's not Morgan's responsibility to pay off the hotel's debts."

"I couldn't if I wanted to," Morgan admits. "This is multiple decades of mismanagement coming home to roost and very little left in the way of any actual wealth. The family was almost bankrupt by the time I was born. Frankly, I'm stunned you've managed to keep this place going for as long as you have."

"But can't you?"

"I'm sorry, Rosie." Morgan shakes his head. "I know you want me to be some kind of saviour. Yes, my brother and I inherited a high-end hotel chain from my stepfather, but all the decisions on acquisitions are decided by the board, and there's no way they'd invest in this place. Not when there are mountains of debt and no discernible profitability in the near future. Even if by some miracle I managed to convince them, they'd gut the whole place, strip it of everything that makes it special, and turn it into another bland carbon copy of all the other hotels."

“But—”

“Before you go ahead and ask another extremely personal and intrusive question because I can see you’re going to, yes, I do have my own money. But I could pour every last cent I have into this hotel and it wouldn’t be enough.” His eyes are filled with sadness as he looks at us both. “I’m sorry. There’s just nothing I can do.”

I feel like I’m choking on a hot, hard ball of misery burning at the back of my throat, and my eyes sting from the tears threatening to spill.

“I thought we’d have more time,” I whisper painfully.

“Ellis.” He pushes to his feet and comes to me, one hand lifted, but pauses when his phone starts ringing in his pocket. Swearing under his breath, he pulls it free and connects the call, and whoever’s on the other end is so loud that I can hear their greeting clearly in the small, cramped office.

“Warren,” Morgan replies, his eyes linked with mine, “this isn’t a good time.”

“No kidding,” says his brother. “I need you back in New York straight away.”

Morgan scowls. “What?”

“The board has called an emergency meeting and your presence is required... in person.”

“What? Why?”

“No idea. They didn’t say,” his brother answers. “Play time’s over. I’ve had your assistant check everything on your end. The roads are clear enough, so we’ve got a car coming to pick you up in an hour. Your flight is at six p.m. from Manchester.

Don't miss it."

Morgan hangs up the phone, his gaze still on me, his expression a myriad of emotions I'm too tired to try and identify.

"Ellis," he whispers.

But I give him a small smile, one tear spilling over and escaping down my cheek. I brush it away quickly.

"You have to go." I nod. "You should go and pack."

I bite my lip to keep myself from crying. It's not fair that I'm losing my home, my family, and now him too, even if I knew deep down he was never really mine to begin with. I swallow hard and raise my chin, then turn to Rosie, who looks just as heartbroken as I feel. "We should call a staff meeting. The others will be worried and they deserve to know the truth. And if this place is going to close, we need to make sure Dilys is taken care of."

"Ellis," Morgan says again. I can hear the sadness and regret in his voice, but I can't deal with it now. It's time to deal with the practicalities. I can cry later in private, where no one can see me. Right now, I need to be strong for the others.

"It's okay, Morgan," I tell him. "Really."

"Maybe I could get a lawyer or something. They might be able to stop the audit and arrange for a new hearing."

I shake my head slowly. "There's no point. Like you said, without investment, we can't save this place, and no one is going to want to take on a failed business and a Grade II listed building in desperate need of repairs and drowning in debt."

“I wish—” he begins, but I don’t let him finish.

My heart can’t take it.

“I know,” I say, reaching for Rosie’s hand as she wipes her eyes with a tissue from her pocket. “I do, too.”

Then I pull Rosie from the office and go in search of the others so we can tell them we’re going to lose our home.

By the time I drag my suitcase into the lobby, it feels like it's lined with lead.

Or maybe that's just me. I'm the one that's lined with lead. There's a heavy, sinking feeling in my chest I can't shake.

John the Maid, Aggie, and Dilys are all seated on the worn sofa opposite the desk. Aggie has her arm around Rosie, who's blowing her nose quietly. A plate of Aggie's cookies sits untouched on the low coffee table, as do the cups of tea surrounding it. Dilys looks sad and John the Maid seems kind of shell-shocked.

Ellis waits for me by the reception desk, his beautiful blue eyes no longer bright. I prop my case beside the desk and move closer, feeling my stomach clench painfully when he gives me a smile that's a pale shadow of the ones I've come to treasure.

"Ellis," I whisper, feeling helpless.

"It's okay," he says with so much understanding that my eyes sting. "Once he's calmed down, I'll speak to your grandfather. Just promise me you'll still call him. I'm know that talking to him is sometimes like trying to handle a live grenade, but I don't want you to miss out on a relationship with him, not when I know the man beneath the grumpiness." His small smile takes on a touch of humour. "And that's true of both of you. You clash because you're so similar, but if you leave things unsaid, I think you'll both be missing out on something special."

I nod. "I will. Of course I'll call him."

“Good.” Ellis swallows hard. “That’s good because we’ll have to—” He breaks off and draws in a steadying breath, then continues. “When the time comes, he’ll need somewhere to live. I’ll be going back to my mum’s, but I can take him with me. He can have my room, and I’ll sleep on the sofa until we can find something else.”

I frown at the thought. “I’ll make sure he’s taken care of, no matter what he needs. I promise.”

Ellis nods, staring down at the floor. I slip my fingers under his chin and lift so his eyes meet mine.

“I’m so grateful for the time we had together,” he whispers before I can say anything. “I don’t have any regrets, and I hope you don’t either.”

“I wish we had more time,” I confess.

“So do I.” He reaches up and smooths down my jacket. “But life isn’t like that, is it? You have a life in New York to get back to. But I’ll always treasure what we shared.”

Unable to look into those sad blue eyes any longer, I turn my gaze to the others. I’m not sure what to say to them either.

“Take care of yourself, Morgan,” Aggie says. “Despite the way things have turned out, I’m glad I got the chance to see you again. Give my best wishes to your mum.”

“I will.” I swallow tightly and nod to the others, who don’t seem any more inclined to speak than I am. Grasping the handle of my case, I force a smile at Ellis and walk toward the front door.

I’ve barely made it two steps when I stop abruptly and turn around. The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. “Come with me.”



Those beautiful baby blues widen. “What?”

“Come with me to New York,” I repeat with more conviction, even though part of me knows he won’t. I can see in the yearning look on his face how much he wants to say yes.

“I can’t,” he whispers, just as I knew he would. “I wish I could, you don’t know how much I wish I could, but I can’t leave them, not now, and even if I could, I don’t have a passport.”

“I don’t?—”

“I know.” Ellis steps into me, his small, lithe body pressing against me. “Just kiss me and say goodbye, Morgan.”

I’m not prepared for the sharp pain in my heart when he rises up on his toes and plants a sweet, lingering kiss to my lips.

“Safe journey,” he whispers.

Not trusting myself to say anything more, I turn around and walk out of the hotel that I’d wanted so badly to hate and ended up loving in a strange way.

I head down the main steps outside, which are slippery with slush and ice. The car is parked in the drive, the door open and the driver waiting to take my luggage, so I hand it off to him without a word.

Sliding into the soft leather seats, I close the door and take one last look up at my ancestral home that’s filled with quirky people I’ve come to care for. My heart gives a dull thud. The driver climbs in and starts the engine, then navigates carefully down the long, freshly cleared driveway to the road beyond.

I'm not sure how long it takes to get to Manchester, but I'm only ten minutes into the journey when my phone rings. Pulling it from my pocket, I see it's Warren wanting to video chat.

"No need to check in on me. I'm in the car heading towards Manchester, should make the flight with time to spare."

"You're in the car? On your way to the airport?" he says, and something in his voice pings on my Jesus Christ, fucking Warren radar.

"Why are you repeating it like that?" I ask suspiciously.

"Oh, you know, no reason."

"Warren, there's always a reason with you."

"Okay, fine." He gives me a rather toothy grin. "There's no board meeting, and in the interest of full disclosure, there's no flight either."

"What?" I fumble my phone, almost dropping it.

"Surprise!"

I suck in a slow breath and try to rein my temper in, then lean forward and tap the driver on the shoulder. "Excuse me, would you mind pulling over for a minute so I can explain in great detail to my brother all the ways I'm going to murder him when I get home?"

I see the curve of the driver's cheek as he does what I've asked with a polite, "Yes, sir, of course."

Taking another calming breath, because in this family it's never too young to start thinking about your blood pressure, I lift my phone and fix my brother with a glare.

"Explain."

"I was trying to help," he says quickly. "I mean, this past week I've never seen you so relaxed and happy. Fuck, Morgs, you smiled! I haven't seen that many of your teeth since you got your retainer removed. Whatever is going on in that crazy English manor house is obviously what you need."

"So you thought you'd drag me from the crazy English manor house and make me drive needlessly to a city seventy miles away to get on a nonexistent plane to attend a nonexistent board meeting because that helps how?"

"I know you, Morgan, and you always overthink everything and get all up in your head. I just thought I'd give you a little nudge in the right direction."

"I'm still not following your insane thought process."

"I thought you'd choose not to go if you were faced with the choice." He shrugs a bit diffidently, and I'm not falling for it. "I figured that, rather than come back to New York, you'd realise how you felt about the little blonde cutie—who I guarantee was the one to put that smile on your face, not some drafty old building—and decide to stay. When I called to tell you to get your ass home, I kinda hoped you'd tell me to fuck off."

"Fuck off."

"Too late now."

"Warren." I pinch the bridge of my nose to stave off the migraine I'm sure is

brewing, one whose name is Warren. “Sometimes I don’t know whether to hug you or strangle you.”

“And that’s why I’m calling you now, while you’re still freezing your ass off in the middle of the English countryside and I’m safely tucked away on a different continent, instead of when you’re back in the same city as me and can cause actual bodily harm.”

“You exhaust my brain.”

“What a coincidence.” Warren grins. “I exhaust my brain too.”

I let out a loud sigh and look up at the roof of the car while I try to sort through my tangled thoughts.

“You don’t have to come back, you know,” Warren offers softly.

“That is evident by the fact that I’m not actually booked on a flight,” I grumble.

“No, I mean you don’t have to come back.”

I frown at the phone screen. “Thanks for clearing that up.”

“Morgs, you can work remotely, you can fly back for the occasional meeting—hell, you could cut back completely. We can hire another CEO and you can just live off your share of the profits. I know you love the hotel business, but this high-end, rich people’s bullshit was Dad’s dream.”

“You do realise we are part of the rich people bullshit,” I point out.

“Why actually yes, Morgs, I do, and that is making my point for me. You have

choices. You don't have to kill yourself flying back and forth for an endless stream of meetings you hate. You were always happiest on the hotel floor, running things on the ground. This CEO shit makes you miserable. I've spent years watching you slowly disappear, and you know what I've seen every time we've spoken this week?"

"What?"

"My brother," he says simply. "The one who used to laugh and smile."

"Ren." I blow out a breath. "It's not as simple as that. My grandfather's hotel is on the verge of closing and is about to go to auction, and all the people living there, including him, are about to be homeless."

"So go and save it." He grins, and it's the same grin he always used when he dared me to do something that would no doubt result in both of us being grounded. "I know you love a challenge."

"It isn't?—"

"As simple as that. Yes, I know, you already said so. But things that are simple are rarely worth it," he replies a little more soberly. "Things have been crazy this last year since Dad died, and we both just slid into the roles he'd carved out for us when we were kids. Maybe it's time to reevaluate what we want out of life, whether that's continuing his legacy or carving out something of our own."

"You're very introspective all of a sudden. What's going on?"

He shrugs.

"Warren? What's going on."

“I ran into Jonah,” he says quietly.

“Ah, your unicorn,” I murmur.

“Don’t call him that.” He shakes his head. “Anyway, this isn’t about him. This is about you and what you want for yourself, and forgive me, but I think what you want might just be a run-down, quirky hotel with a gorgeous twinky desk clerk. So the question now is, what are you going to do, big bro?”

“I love you. You know that, right?”

“I love you too.” Warren smiles. “And enough of all this mooshy shit. Go get your twink.”

“Stop calling him that.” I sigh and, rolling my eyes, hang up on the sound of Warren’s cackle of laughter.

It feels like I can't breathe as I watch him walk away, but I keep my back stiff and pull my cardigan around me tighter, as if it can keep the pieces of me from flying away. Blinking away the tears in my eyes, I swallow against the lump in my throat.

"Are you okay, Sparky?" Rosie's hand lands on my back when her soft voice calls me by the same nickname my mum uses.

I bite my lip and draw in a shaky breath. "Well," I say, forcing a brightness I don't feel into my voice. "Anyone got any ideas?"

The phone rings in the office, and Rosie's hand drops from my back. "I'll get it."

I nod again. "Well?" I ask the others.

They all stare at me in various states of frustration and distress.

"I can't believe it's come to this," Aggie says quietly. "I thought we'd be able to save it."

"It's not your fault," a familiar voice says from behind me and I gasp and spin around.

There, standing at the foot of the stairs, a little pale and shaky, is Cedric. He looks around the lobby, refamiliarising himself with a room he hasn't seen in decades, then turns his attention back to us.

“None of you are to blame,” he says sadly. “This is all my fault. Firstly, by locking myself away and not fighting for this place like I should have, then by hiding the court summons and keeping how dire the situation really is from you.”

“It’s okay, Cedric.” Aggie’s expression is the softest I’ve ever seen it.

“It’s not okay,” he says with a tremor in his voice. “And now we’re going to lose our home because no matter how hard I try, I can’t come up with a way to save it.”

I rush over to his side and offer him support as he crosses the floor towards the seated area. John the Maid leaps up and takes Cedric’s other arm, the huge, burly man guiding the shorter, more fragile one to the chair he just vacated and helping him to sit.

“Tea, Cedric?” Aggie offers, picking up the teapot on the low coffee table, and he nods.

“It’s what we do in a crisis, isn’t it?”

Aggie chuckles, and the sound’s tinged with sadness. Dilys, silent as ever, picks up the small plate of cookies with shaky hands and holds them out to Cedric and then John, both of whom take a cookie, although I’m sure neither of them have much of an appetite. Watching all of them, I’m filled with so much love for this quirky hodgepodge of people.

“It doesn’t matter,” I state firmly. “I love this place every bit as much as you all, but at the end of the day it’s bricks and mortar. What’s important is this right here.” I point to them. “We’re a family and as long as we all stick together, we’ll be okay.”

“Well said, Ellis.” John the Maid lifts his cookie in a toast. “We’ll be all right. I’ve got a sense about these things.” A smile plays on his usually austere lips as he looks over my shoulder towards the door.



I follow his gaze and my mouth drops open in surprise as Morgan rushes through, practically falling over the threshold and then skidding along the flagstone floor.

“Oh my god. Morgan?” I rush towards him in worry. “You’re going to miss your flight. Did you forget something?”

He takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly.

“Are you okay? What did you forget?”

“You told me to find a reason to smile every day,” he says in a rush. I stare at him in confusion. “What if I want that reason to be you?”

Warmth blasts through me as his words register, and my smile, no longer forced, becomes so wide that I’m sure my cheeks will start aching soon. “And,” he continues, “what if I want that smile to happen in person every day, not on the other end of a video call or during the odd visit to the UK. What if I want to be here—with you—each day?”

“Are you serious?” I whisper.

“As a heart attack.”

“I wouldn’t say that around here too loudly,” Cedric mutters behind me.

“Yes.” I grin even wider if that’s possible. “YES!” I jump into his arms, winding my legs around his waist as my lips crash against his.

His mouth lands on mine and it’s as if my world has righted itself again. It’s a comforting feeling, like coming home after a long, tiring journey. I clutch his pert little bottom as he wraps himself around me like a monkey, and we kiss like we’re the only two people in the world. That is, until someone clears their throat.

We part and turn to look at my grandfather, who stares at the pair of us with his brows raised so high they almost disappear into his hairline. Ellis slides down my body and I set him gently on his feet, then give the old man my attention.

“Grandad,” I say softly. “I’m sorry about earlier. I shouldn’t have yelled at you like that.”

“No, you were right, lad.” He shakes his head. “About a lot of things, starting with me needing to come out of my room. It’s not easy. Right now, I feel like my skin’s trying to crawl off my body. I’ll have good days and bad days, but I’ll try.”

“And I’ll be here to help you,” I reply, and his lips twitch.

“Welcome home, Morgan,” he says, holding his arms out. “Want to try that hug business again?”

I smile and stoop down to step into his embrace. It’s awkward, but easier than the first time, and we pull back after a moment.

“Good job on the pants.”

He shrugs. “I thought I’d dress up for the occasion.”

“Are you staying?” A small child’s voice asks from my side. As I look down, I jolt in shock.

A small boy stands next to me. He’s about nine years old and is wearing short pants, a faded checked shirt, and a sweater.

He looks just like I remember.

“Artie?” I sink to my knees so I’m eye level with him.

His expression is a mixture of sadness and frustration. “You said we’d always be friends, but then you went away and didn’t come back,” he says sullenly.

“I did come back,” I give him a small smile. “It just took me a little while to find my way home.”

“But are you staying this time?”

I glance up at Ellis and Grandad, then back to the little boy. “Yes, I am.”

“Huzzah!” A gruff voice bellows, and I see an old man wearing an old-fashioned naval uniform standing beside a potted plant.

I blink and rise slowly as figures begin to appear one by one throughout the lobby. A young woman in an Edwardian gown wearing a sash declaring, Votes for Women! A punk with a lime-green mohawk and leather pants decorated with safety pins and chains. An old woman in a high-necked white nightgown holding an antique ear trumpet and cane. A petite woman who looks a little like the human version of Betty Boop, wearing a black-fringed dress, whose short black hair is sculpted into large, defined waves.

But front and centre is a skinny blonde man with a neat moustache wearing the tiniest pair of white shorts I’ve ever seen. He also has on a matching shirt and sweater, with a tennis racket resting on his shoulder. Right beside him is a short, rotund woman with wild grey hair who’s dressed in tweed, a woman I recognise from the upstairs portrait gallery.

“Bertie?” I ask. She grins, bowing theatrically. “Roger?” I turn to the blonde man, who curtsies and blows me a cheeky kiss. “Leona?” I greet the tiny woman in the fringed dress. She smiles and waves.

I find I can easily identify each person from the stories Ellis has told me about the

hotel. Turning to him, I raise a brow, and he grins in reply.

“So you weren’t kidding about this place being haunted?”

He shakes his head, the smile fading. “Nope. It’s all real. If we lose this place, we don’t just lose our home. They do too.” He points to the ghosts.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, did you not listen to a word I said!” Another ghost appears, this one carrying a clipboard and pen and looking very annoyed. “How many times do I have to tell you? You’re not supposed to show yourselves to the living! It’s just not done. It’s against?—”

“Yes, yes,” Bertie booms, rolling her eyes. “Against the rules. We know, but I say sod the rules. Up the establishment and fuck a man. I mean, not me personally I don’t do chaps but you know what I mean, right, Skid?”

The punk grins. “Actually, Bertie old girl, it’s fuck The Man, but close enough. The inmates are taking over the asylum Stan, so get on board or get out of the way.”

“Oh my lord.” The one he called Stan sighs long suffering. “What did I do to be cursed with you lot?”

“Got lucky?” Roger offers.

“See here. The thing is, Flibblebottom,” Bertie begins.

“It’s Stanley Fitzgerald Longbottom,” he corrects her.

“Whatever.” She waves a hand. “This is our home. It’s just as important to us ghosts as it is to the fleshies. There’s hundreds of years of history and countless ghosts here. This place is just ripe with psychic energy, and we can’t just abandon it willy-nilly. I don’t give a toss what your bureau says. We’re staying, and we’re going to help the

fleshies save this place.”

“Well, it just so happens you’re right,” Stanley says grudgingly.

“What? I am?” Bertie seems very smug at the thought. “Of course I am.”

“I can see the bond you all have with this residence and the living who inhabit it. You are also correct about the psychic energy of the place. Therefore, when I submitted your case to my superiors, I proposed that you be allowed to remain in the house and grounds, and to have limited contact with the living.”

“Oh, jolly good show,” Bertie cheers. “This deserves a celebration.”

“I wish I hadn’t used those confetti cannons on Ellis and Morgan now,” Roger pouts.

“That was you!” I exclaim loudly. He just grins.

“There will, of course, be rules!” Stanley interjects.

“Of course.” Bertie rolls her eyes again.

“You are not completely in the clear. You have been placed on probation.” He tears off a piece of paper from his clipboard and hands it to Bertie to read. I’m not exactly sure what’s going on, but she looks at Roger, who shrugs.

“Probation’s okay,” he says, and then he and Bertie high-five each other.

“I will also be remaining in the house under a supervisory capacity to ensure you are adhering to the rules,” Stanley says pompously.

Skid snorts. “Good luck with that.”

“What exactly is going on, Bertie?” Ellis asks.

“Well, we got into a spot of hot water with the Bureau of Domestic Hauntings after the old murder mystery weekend shenanigans.”

“Oh my god,” Stanley says in exasperation. “You’re not supposed to tell the living about the Bureau. It contravenes rule number six thousand five hundred and forty-two, paragraph E subsection—”

“Yes, yes.” Bertie waves him off again, and I didn’t think it would be possible for a ghost to turn that shade of red. “Anyway, we’re now on probation, so we’ll have to go easy on the whole haunted hotel aspect.”

“I hate to tell you, Bertie, but there won’t be a hotel anymore,” Ellis says quietly. “They’re sending someone to value the house and contents for auction.”

“No!” Roger gasps loudly.

Leona raises her hand to her forehead and faints rather dramatically into the arms of the admiral, who seems to be trying to cop a feel until Leona stands up sharply and slaps his face.

“Are they always like this?” I mutter to Ellis.

“Pretty much. You kind of get used to it.”

“Well, if I could break up this little—whatever it is,” I say as I turn to Ellis and my grandad, “I may have a temporary fix. I’ll hire a new lawyer and see if we can go back to court to argue our case.”

“Our case?” Ellis smiles at me, and that’s the smile right there that nails me square in the chest, as opposed to the sad, fake smile he did when I was leaving.

“Yes, our case. I told you I’m staying and more than that, I’m investing my money in the hotel.”

“Morgan, you can’t do that,” Ellis objects. “What if we lose and this place still closes? You’ll lose everything.”

“Not everything.” I take his hand and pull him against me. I smooth that one errant curl of his that’s hanging forward into his eyes and brush my thumb over his chin. “Like I said before, my money’s not enough to save it, but it’s enough to buy us some time to come up with a viable plan, one that’s not stuff it in a drawer and hope it goes away.” My gaze flicks to my grandfather, who has the good grace to look slightly ashamed.

“I’ll invest!” A familiar voice yells above the chatter of the ghosts.

“Who’s that?” Grandad frowns and turns to look.

I glance over to the front desk to see Rosie holding up her phone, and on the screen is my brother’s face.

“What the hell, Warren?” I sigh.

“What?” he says. “Did you really think I was going to miss this? It’s like watching my own private Hallmark movie, only with pirates and tennis twinks.” He squints into his screen. “Are you guys having a costume party?”

“No,” I snort. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Well, I called the hotel while you were on your way back and got the lovely Rosie to put me on video call on her phone so I wouldn’t miss you declaring your love to Ellis. Is that him?” He shifts his face on the screen. “Morgan, move over and let me see him, he’s much prettier than you.”

Ellis waves, smiling widely. “Hi, Warren.”

Warren stares for several long seconds and blinks. “Wow,” he mutters reverently. “It’s like looking directly into the sun.”

I snort. “Back up. What were you saying?”

“Oh.” Warren shakes his head as if coming out of a stupor. “Um, I witnessed your declaration of love. Seriously, bro, you really need to work on that. I saw the old guy hug you—hey, Morgan’s grandad. I’m his brother, Warren, and I’m way more loveable than he is!”

Grandad chuckles behind me.

“Can I call you Pops?” Warren calls out. “I’ve always wanted to call someone Pops.”

“If you must,” Grandad snorts.

“Just be grateful he’s wearing pants,” I mutter to my brother.

“Anyway, I say the declaration, I give it maybe a 4.6. It needs work. Saw you hug Pops, oh, then the screen went a bit fuzzy. Got some sort of interference, couldn’t really hear anything.”

I lean over and Stanley smiles a little smugly.

“Oh yeah, and then I said I’ll invest in your hotel.” He leans to the side as if he can see around me. “Did you hear that, Pops?” he calls out. “I’ll invest in your hotel, you can name a wing after me or something.”

“I don’t think we could fit your whole personality in one of the wings.” Grandad chuckles.



“Oh that’s weird.” Warren gives a mock shudder. “He sounds just like you.”

“Uh guys?” Rosie says. “A whole coach load of people just turned up.”

We all turn to peer out of the window when the front door bangs open and a stream of pensioners barge in with wheelie suitcases, chattering loudly.

“Oh my goodness!” Ellis exclaims in delight. “Essie! Martha!”

Two tiny identical women who must be in their eighties, at least, rush over to Ellis and start petting him and cooing over him. He hugs each of them in turn, so I guess he knows them. I glance over to my grandfather to find him smoothing down his hair and breathing into his palm to check his breath.

I can see I’m going to have my hands full with him.

“Morgan,” Ellis beckons me over. “This is Essie and Martha Gordon, they’re twins. They came for the murder mystery weekend.”

“Best weekend ever!” The ladies grin. “My goodness, you’re a handsome boy and tall too.”

“May I introduce you to my grandfather.” I grab his arm and tow him over.

“Oh.” Martha and Essie both turn their attention to him. “Good genes. Obviously the looks run in the family.” They scurry over to him, flanking him and wrapping their arms through his. “How about a drink, handsome? Let’s get Dilys to pour us something naughty.”

Even over the din in the lobby I can hear my brothers laugh. “Oh my god,” Warren laughs calling government his shoulder for his assistant. “Celia, get me booked on the next flight to Manchester. I have to see this with my own eyes.”

“Great,” I mutter, that’s just what I need. My brother, let loose with a bunch of badly behaved OAP’s.

“Essie, Martha, not that I’m not thrilled to see you but what are you doing here?” Ellis asks the octogenarian twins.

“Oh we told you we’d be back,” Essie says. “We’re selling the flat and we’d like to rent permanent rooms for me and Martha, plus we told a few friends about the—” she glances around, “ghosts ” she mouths.

I look across the lobby myself and see Bertie and the others have disappeared.

“Of course everyone was madly curious, so here we all are!”

Ellis laughs in delight, clutching my arm. “I should go and help Rosie get everyone booked in.”

“Wait, a minute,” I pull Ellis away from everyone else, leaving my grandad being fussed over but the two elderly women.

“What is it?”

“I just wanted to say,” I run my hand through my hair. “Actually, I don’t know what I want to say.” I laugh. “My minds gone blank.”

“That’ll happen a lot here,” he says looking over at all the noisy pensioners most of whom appear to have forgotten to turn their hearing aids up judging by the decibel level they’re speaking at.

“Morgan,” Ellis says shyly. “I’m glad you came back. I... I didn’t want you to go.”

I cup his jaw gently and trace his cheek with my thumb. “I didn’t want to go either,

not just because of this place but because of you.”

“Really?”

I nod. “I’m not ready to put a label on whatever this is between us, but I know it’s something that doesn’t come along every day.”

He rises up on his toes and kisses me, snaking my arms around him I pull him in closer breathing him in until we’re finally forced to part.

He laughs breathlessly, pressing his forehead to mine. “Now what?”

“Now,” I reply, dropping a soft kiss on his lips. “Now we find a way to save the hotel. Together.”