CHAPTER 1

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

This house.

This dynasty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A bet to win. A Hawthorne to best.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I've seen better."

"Jameson!"

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

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

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

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

"I found something."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Circular library."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 4

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

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

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

That wasn't Alisa's handwriting.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jameson Hawthorne was dangerously good at a lot of things.

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

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

We surged upward.

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

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

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

A hidden picnic.

A helicopter ride to the Gulf.

Speeding away from the paparazzi.

Slow dancing, barefoot, on the beach.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But there were no guests.

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

"What *is* this?" I breathed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Surprise!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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