TWELVE AND A HALF YEARS AGO

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

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

That was the trick. The challenge. The game.

"I did," Grayson confirmed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No stepping." Xander grinned. "I win!"

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

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

Christmas at Hawthorne House was *magic*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That was the thing about games: Sometimes you lost.

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

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

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

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

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

There was something inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Try the light on the puzzle, Jamie." Even Nash couldn't resist the lure of this game.

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

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

The Hawthorne estate, like Hawthorne House, was sizable.

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

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

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

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

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

This was the tree house to end all tree houses.

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

CHAPTER 1

GRAYSON

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

But you could always be faster.

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

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

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

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

And Hawthornes didn't lose.

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

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

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

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

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

"You are a man obsessed," Xander declared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Xander shrugged. "They're recreational patents."

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

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

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

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

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

Grayson's eyes narrowed to slits.

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

JAMESON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jameson felt Avery's approach before he heard it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do not send me a picture—"

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

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

"It's me, Grayson." Avery examined Nash's text herself. "We'll see you in London."

CHAPTER 3

JAMESON

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

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

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

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

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

"*Our* look."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Very perceptive, Avery Kylie Grambs.

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

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

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

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

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