

## Chapter Seven

Abraham let Marcus alone with his thoughts as he drove to the estate. Marcus had to admire the man who always knew when to speak and when to stay silent. He couldn't help the tension that settled in him the closer they got to home. It had been ve years since he set foot here and he wasn't looking forward to it.

He still remembered the day his grandfather confronted him. It played in his mind on an endless loop.

\* \* \*

"Master Marcus," Abraham greeted him as he stumbled home only half remembering what he had done the night before.

"Hey Abby!" Marcus laughed. "Could you draw me up a bath? I'm not sure if I'm going to sit in it or drink it. I'll decide later."

"A spot of coffee would be better," Abraham frowned. "Your grandfather has summoned you. He wanted to know the moment you returned home from your latest...outing."

Those words alone sobered Marcus almost instantly. It wasn't often his grandfather summoned him and even less so when it was for something ocial. With a nod of understanding he headed for the study. There he found his grandfather behind the desk reading a report.

"Have a seat," he said without looking up.

Miles Avery was a calm and generally polite man but that belied a rather fearsome personality when he chose to exercise his authority. His once dark hair was silver-gray though still thick which was a comfort to Marcus since he recalled his father had gone bald rather early.

Like the Worthingtons the Avery's fortunes were specialized in one sector: medicine. It had begun with Miles's great-great-grandfather who had been a doctor and built up a thriving practice. The trend continued with his son and grandsons building and expanding it from a simple private practice to multiple hospitals across the city.

The Avery's had since dictated other doctors to perform actual treatments and moved on to administration. They expanded their realm by funding medical research and investing in new technologies but their focus remained on providing affordable, state-of-the-art medical care.

Marcus sat down not daring to say a word as he studied his grandfather. For most he was a formidable gure, stern yet fair. However in Marcus's memory he was a warm and caring man. His grandfather never had a harsh word for him and was often a coconspirator when it came to thwarting his mother's attempts at even stricter rules.

Yet that warmth was absent now as Miles set down the report he had been handed only an hour ago. Without looking up from his paperwork he asked, "How long has it been since your birthday?"

Marcus hesitated. How long had it been? "Ah...three months."

Miles nodded, "Well you're twenty-seven now. What have you learned?"

Marcus frowned. It wasn't the rst time his grandfather's inquiries seemed to come from left eld. Ever since Marcus was little his grandfather liked to challenge him to think about things from a different perspective. This time he wasn't quite certain what his grandfather intended so he wasn't sure which answer would bring him satisfaction.

"...I'm not sure..."

Miles suddenly pounded a st on his desk. The harsh noise echoed though the room and Marcus jerked to attention. His grandfather's furious gaze bore into him. This was the rst time he faced actual anger from his grandfather.

"How long are you planning to play victim?" Miles demanded. "You lost your father far too young. I know that! But is that any excuse for living like this? A boy refusing to grow up! Alcohol? Parties? Debauchery?"

"Better to work myself to death I suppose!" Marcus snapped surprised by his own anger.

"Of course not!" Miles countered much to Marcus's shock. "But, damn it, there had to be a middle ground!"

Marcus opened his mouth to answer but closed it without a word. He couldn't remember the last time he heard his grandfather curse. The pain and distress in Miles's eyes was very real. There were a lot of things Marcus could endure, but his grandfather's disappointment was not one of them.

"You are smart. You have so much potential," Miles continued. "I have watched and waited for you to realize that but I can't watch this—this depravity anymore. I'm not getting any younger and you are my only heir."

"There's always Elizabeth...she wants it."

Miles snorted, "Don't say that name to me."

Marcus jerked in surprise at his grandfather's harsh words. Elizabeth Quenn was the daughter of his mother's close friends. They had grown up together and since they were little Elizabeth proudly declared she would be the most powerful woman in New York. It was no secret his mother intended for them to marry but Marcus felt no attraction to her in the least. That hadn't changed as they grew up. If anything his loathing towards her only increased.

"That child doesn't have a compassionate bone in her body. She isn't t to be in charge of a toaster let alone a hospital."

"Since when do you need compassion to make money?"

"It isn't about the money, boy. It's about people. We may not be doctors but we can't forget the people who depend on us. Lives depend on us. People are more important than the bottom line. That woman and your mother might think I'll make her my successor but they can't be more wrong."

"...So what are you going to do?"

"I'm giving you the chance to prove your potential," Miles said after a moment. He took an envelope and tossed it over the desk.

Marcus caught it and hesitantly opened it. Inside were a rst-class plane ticket and his passport. Frowning he looked at his grandfather.

"I called in a favor from an old friend of mine, one of my war buddies," Miles said. "He's agreed to have you intern in their European oces."

"Oces? Not a hospital?"

"Administration is administration. There will be time enough to learn the particulars of hospital administration later. This is about getting your head on straight," Miles waved a dismissive hand. "You have ve years to prove yourself worthy of being my successor."

"And if I don't?"

"I nd someone else. For the rst time since its foundation an Avery will not be on our Board of Directors. But I won't compromise our mission for a name. Five years, boy."

Marcus shook his head. And here he had thought Donovan Worthington took the cake with his ludicrous competition between his sons. Apparently he had nothing on Miles Avery. Marcus stood as his grandfather came around the desk leaning heavily on his cane. Miles placed a hand on his grandson's shoulder and squeezed.

"You just have to believe in yourself like I have always believed in you. But make no mistake Julius is a hard task master and I told him not to go easy on you."

Marcus felt himself go cold. His grandfather couldn't mean who he thought he meant. The DaLairs were not a family to be taken lightly. Did his grandfather really make a deal with them? Did he really know Augustus DaLair? He did say they were war buddies.

"I suggest you shower and get yourself packed. You have four hours before your plane leaves. Make me proud."