

Chapter Nine

The DaLair children were a common topic of discussion for all levels of the company. Many bragged about meeting them on various occasions. Apparently it was considered a special honor to take care of the kids whenever they visited the oces and anyone who was put in charge of their snacks and needs quickly became the object of envy and awe. As Julius's newly minted assistant the duty fell on Marcus.

Given his only experiences with kids were his mother's pre-approved playmates Marcus was taken by surprise when he met the DaLair children for the rst time. The twins were respectable enough with Caden being particularly reserved but the younger pair was full of energy and not above pulling pranks. Whether it was playing chess with Caden, learning French from Aria, hacky sack with Coda or coloring alongside Lyra it was never boring. Marcus soon learned why so many people were infatuated with the foursome.

It was like recapturing his own childhood in some ways and entertaining the kids became his favorite duty. Idly Marcus reached into his pocket to take out the hacky sack bean bag Coda had given him as a going away present. The kids had been upset when they learned his internship was up and he would be leaving. They each made him promise not to forget them. Aria and Coda in particular insisted he wouldn't forget the things he had been taught. Marcus squeezed the small, bean-lled bag and smiled. Forgetting wasn't an option. If not for his agreement with his grandfather he would have stayed in Paris indenitely.

"Abraham, is grandfather home?" Marcus suddenly asked.

"No sir. Unfortunately he had some work to take care of but he bid me to tell you he will see you at your welcome home party."

Marcus nodded. He was disappointed but that was ne. Julius had been sending progress reports so he was certain his grandfather was well aware of everything that transpired during his stay in Paris. He would have a few hours to relax before his grandfather confronted him about being his successor. Marcus still had reservations but after watching how Julius balanced his life he was beginning to see the middle ground his grandfather talked about.

A two-hour drive from the city and Abraham pulled up to the Avery family estate. Marcus stared at it like a long-lost nemesis but surprisingly felt no emotional connection to it. He had always found it repressive due to his mother's strict upbringing but now he felt nothing. Perhaps he had grown up a little.

Abraham opened the door allowing him to climb out. Marcus breathed a sigh. It didn't feel like home. After spending time with Julius and his family Marcus had learned how warm and friendly a home could be but he felt none of that now.

"Something the matter, Master Marcus?"

"No," Marcus sighed. "It's just strange to be home, that's all."

"Of course sir," Abraham nodded. "I'll gather your things."

Marcus nodded and headed inside trying to shake his pensive mood.

Inside he found the staff bustling in preparation for his return and the party Abraham mentioned. He nodded to those who noticed him but didn't interrupt their activity.

"Marcus! You're home!"

He turned as his mother approached. Cybil was a severe woman used to being obeyed and expecting nothing less than perfection. There were several among the staff terried of her as she was known to dock pay when demands were not met. Her once auburn hair was dulling with age though no one would have the courage to tell her so. As usual it was pulled back into a bun highlighting her angular face and pointed nose.

Her clothes were the typical, high-end pants suit he remembered. It seemed some things never changed. He viewed her less as a mother and more as a headmistress though he was the only child in attendance. Before meeting Macey he assumed all mothers were the same but he was wrong. Macey DaLair was a warm and kind human being who treated her children with care and attention. She was rm but not harsh when it came to discipline and her effort shone from how gregarious and outgoing her children were. It might have been wrong but he couldn't help but be jealous of the DaLair children for the safe and happy childhood they enjoyed.

"Hello mother," Marcus greeted.

"Is that all you have to say? I expected a warmer greeting. We haven't seen each other for ve years!"

Marcus tried to contain a grimace. He had no idea why his mother expected a different greeting as there had never been warmth between them to begin with.

"I have half a mind to wring your grandfather's neck. I don't know how he could have sent you away without even telling me where you went. Surely they could have given you vacation days so you could come home once and awhile."

Marcus was careful to maintain a neutral expression. Not returning to the States that had been his own idea. Instead of going home he used his ample vacation days to travel seeing all different corners of Europe on Macey's suggestion to broaden his horizons. The kids often helped him plan his travels sometimes debating for days over what was the best destination.

He hadn't thought of home once during that time and surprisingly hadn't had the urge to drink either. Without the stressors of home he didn't hang on the bottle like he used to. Or maybe he had just outgrown it?

"Well grandpa sent me there to learn so..."

"I still can't believe that old man went behind my back and sent you away like that. I'll have words with him, believe me."

Marcus once again kept his expression neutral. He doubted very much his mother would carry out such a threat. She may criticize his grandfather but she would never challenge him openly. As long as he remained the patriarch of the family his word was unilateral law so she would adhere to it.

"Well, anyway, you are home again and that is all that matters," Cybil said. "Elizabeth has been waiting for you. You really should have called her every now and again."

Marcus struggled to keep the revulsion he felt from his face. He understood his grandfather's disregard for his mother's favorite. She was cold and dismissive towards the staff and talked about their future as if it was written in stone. In fact she was exactly like his mother so perhaps that's where his dislike for her was truly rooted.

"Well, head up to your room and freshen up. The party doesn't begin for a few hours."

"Right," Marcus nodded and immediately turned on his heel grateful to nally be dismissed.

Reaching his room he immediately headed to the sideboard. There he took a decanter lled with whiskey and poured himself a glass. Sipping it slowly he winced. For ve years he barely touched alcohol. For once he enjoyed waking up without hangovers and paralyzing headaches. His mind was clear of its usual fog and, the sun didn't torture his eyes.

Frowning he looked at the glass of amber liquid in his hand. Not ve minutes at home and he had already grabbed a glass. Deliberately setting it down, he moved to his bed and sat down. Opening the drawer of the bedside table he removed its only contents: a maroon jacket.

Rubbing the cloth between his ngers he again wondered about the mystery woman. Who was she? Where had she gone? Did she still think of him as he thought of her? Would they ever meet again?