

Chapter 17: Four Years Later

"Maddy, hurry and put your shoes on, we're running late!" I call out as I frantically gather everything we need for the day.

"All done!" Madasyn announces proudly, appearing in the doorway of her room. I glance down at my three-year-old, dressed in a bright pink dress and mismatched shoes. I can't help but smile and sigh at the same time.

"You did so great, baby! Now go nd the other shoe that looks like this," I say, pointing to one of the shoes she's wearing.

"Okay, Momma," she replies sweetly before running back to her bedroom.

"And hurry, please!" I shout after her.

Once we nally make it out of the house, I drop Maddy o at daycare with a big hug and a kiss before heading to the gallery.

"Good morning, Ms. Manning," the receptionist greets me with a smile as I enter.

"Good morning, Julia," I return the smile and make my way to the back of the gallery to my o ce.

"Hey, Piper," the gallery owner says, not looking up from his newspaper.

"Hey, George. How are things this morning?" I ask, setting my purse down at my desk.

"Same old, same old," he mumbles. "We have a very important client coming in to look at the new oil painting we got in. Can you make sure everything is as it should be?"

"Of course," I reply with a wink.

I grab a few les and head across the gallery to the viewing area. Pausing in front of the painting, I take a moment to admire the strokes of colors. It's a beautiful piece that brings a sense of calm. I make sure the drinks cart o to the side is stocked and that all of the benches are wiped o before returning to the o ces.

I settle at my desk and begin working, only to be interrupted by the phone ringing.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Featherton's client is here," Julia informs me.

"Thank you, he'll be right out." I hang up the phone and glance over at George. "Your client is here."

"Ah!" he exclaims, quickly standing from his desk and walking out into the gallery.

I continue with my work until the phone rings again.

"Yeah, Julia?" I answer, slightly irritated at the interruption.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Featherton has asked for you to join him in the gallery. The client has some questions he thinks you would be better suited to answer."

"Alright, thanks hun," I reply before standing from my desk. I take a deep breath before stepping out of the o ce.

As I walk across the gallery, I can hear George talking animatedly. When I approach them, he turns to me with a large smile.

"Ah, here she is. Ms. Manning can surely help with any questions you have."

As he steps out of the way, the breath is knocked out of me. I freeze, my whole body paralyzed with fear and shock.

Standing before me in an expensive-looking dress and heels, her hair perfectly coi ed and hands pristinely manicured, is none other than Josie Young.

She turns to me, her smug smile quickly transforming into a look of surprise.

"Is this some kind of joke?" she asks haughtily.

"I'm sorry?" George speaks with confusion, his gaze switching between me and Josie. There's a moment of awkward silence before I step forward.

"Mrs. Young and I know each other from a past life. How are you doing, Mrs. Young?" I give her a professional nod before turning to the painting.

She snorts at me. "You can't actually work here..."

"Mrs. Young, I assure you Ms. Manning is the best, most knowledgeable curator I have worked with," George kindly says in my defense, still confused by the situation.

I turn back to Josie. "So what questions did you have about the painting?"

She narrows her eyes at me before stepping forward, her love of art momentarily overshadowing her disgust for me. "How many previous owners have had this in their collections?"

George takes that as his cue to leave, walking back to the o ce and leaving me alone with the witch.

I maintain my composure, holding up my professional facade. "This piece has only had one other owner, which is probably why it's in such amazing condition."

She nods her head as she looks up at the painting before turning to me. "How long has it been, dear?"

"Four years," I reply quietly.

She smirks before continuing. "And how does one of your... status... come to work here?"

I sigh, having seen this line of questioning coming a mile away.

"Everything I told you years ago was the truth. I was studying for my master's in art history and preservation. I was just studying at Boston University, not at a school in New York. I am from here. My family is from here."

She looks at me sideways. "Was your father a professor?"

"Yes, he was," I reply. My father's health has been declining rapidly over the last few months, the disease progressively taking his mind. He has very few good days now. Thankfully, he met Maddy before his mind went completely, and I have a few good memories of them together.

"Hmm..." she hums, not sure if she's going to believe me.

I take a deep breath and look back at the painting. "Any other questions, Mrs. Young?"

She hu s, dissatis ed that she won't be getting any more out of me. She asks a few more questions about the painting before deciding to purchase it.

After sending her to the front desk to take care of payment, I walk back to the o ce, my mind now cluttered and panicking.

"How on earth do you know that woman?" George asks as I collapse at my desk.

"It's a long story..." I mutter. "Just know it isn't a relationship I want brought up." My mind ashes back to four years ago. To her family. To the trip. To Tate.

I shake the thoughts out of my head and attempt to get back to work. After nishing all my work, I decide to head home early. My encounter with Josie has left me a bit rattled.

I pick Maddy up from daycare, and we drive home, the backseat lled with an endless story about her day.

I smile, enjoying her enthusiasm and the way she keeps repeating herself over and over—the way three-year-olds do.

"What would you like for dinner?" I ask as we walk back into the apartment.

"Hmm..." she replies thoughtfully. "Spaghetti."

I chuckle. "Spaghetti it is."

At the end of the evening, after putting Maddy to bed, I walk out into the family room and slump on the couch. I twirl the remains of my glass of wine in my hand before taking a sip.

Has it really been four years? I think for a moment as panic surfaces again in my mind. Josie has found me. What if they come looking again? What if they nd out about Maddy and try to take her from me?

I shake the thoughts away. Those people don't care about me. They won't come looking.