

The road wound deeper into the country and the woods closed in around us, the birches with their white trunks like ghostly sentinels among the evergreens and fiery-colored deciduous trees slowly dropping their leaves. A child of concrete and glass, I had never lived outside of a city. In my experience, nature was carefully bottled up in parks and zoos, constrained by walls, gates, and cages. Here it edged so close to the tarmac that it seemed ready to break through, as if at any moment we might take a blind curve and find the road buckled by the gnarled roots of giant trees.

I shivered as Henry turned off the road onto a private drive. As we broke from the trees, a single bird of prey circled overhead. Henry had spoken of crows, but this was a hawk, or even an eagle, its wingspan as large as my arms, and as I watched it swooped, a dark and deadly shadow, on some hapless prey. But then the car bumped to a stop and my attention was pulled to the house.

No English country manor this. The house rose up from the ground in a swift, vertical shear. An abundance of peeling gingerbread decorated narrow windows, and separate mansard roofs over a taller tower and two stepped-back bits made it look as if it were tilting forward, hunching over. A slightly sagging porch ran along the front and right sides of the house, and a wing stuck out perpendicular to the left side, held up by hefty columns. Before it, a brick patio was set with cast iron furniture. A wide window took up two-thirds of the wing. Movement flickered briefly behind the glass and I started. But the moment passed and the front door opened and a black-clad woman stepped out, drawing my attention.

*Here we go.* For a moment, fear knifed through me and I wanted to run. But this was the job of a lifetime. The job that would return both me and Ali to the paths we had been on before

cancer stole our mother and slashed our dreams. Whatever might happen, I would succeed; I had no other option. I pushed open the car door and climbed out.

“You’re Maloney Allworth?” the woman asked. Her steel-gray hair was knotted behind her head with a few wisps fluttering out to soften her round, lined face. But no such softening showed in her cool, assessing eyes.

“Molly, please. No one calls me Maloney.” I held out a hand and she took it, her grip firm and steady.

“I’m Mrs. Vogel, the housekeeper.” She focused over my shoulder. “Bring her things in, Henry.”

He hefted my duffel out of the back of the Volvo.

“That’s all you brought?” Mrs. Vogel frowned.

It was everything I owned. “I don’t need much.”

Mrs. Vogel sniffed as if to say *you don’t fool me, girl*. “Come along, then.”

The atrium had the same run down elegance as the outside. The center hall extended up all three stories, with narrow, precipitous staircases and balconies on each level looking down over the parquet floor. The rails and balusters were worn but gleamed with the shine of real wax. Dark wood panels extended midway up the walls, with slightly stained, butter yellow wallpaper above the chair rail.

Paintings hung everywhere. Pastoral landscapes, beautiful but eerie, with indeterminable light sources. In each, the earth cracked open—sometimes in a corner, sometimes at the center—spilling unnatural hues of electric blue, neon orange, blood red.

“Mrs. Marianne painted those,” explained Mrs. Vogel.

“I’ve never seen anything like them.” It was the most diplomatic answer I could come up with. In truth, the paintings gave me the creeps. The whole house did. There was no denying that the place had a certain faded glory, but for a child who saw ghosts, it must be a nightmare. Even I could feel the presence of generations. Nathaniel Prescott should have taken an apartment in town, a clean, new one, without the history this one had. But of course, he wouldn’t see it that way.

“Liza’s upstairs,” Mrs. Vogel said. “Mr. Prescott will be home shortly. He had to run to Boston last night for a meeting.”

“And the others?”

“Mrs. Jennifer and Hailey are in town shopping.”

The front door burst open and a man strode in. He stopped in the middle of the hallway, his black eyes scraping over me in a single encompassing glance.

Nathaniel Prescott was as angular and forbidding as his house. Dark hair swept back from a tall forehead in a sharp widow’s peak and bony shoulders poked through his heavy wool coat. I knew from the packet that he was only thirty-five years old, but already fine lines fanned out beside hollowed eyes and fine silver threads shot through his dark hair and shone even in the dim light of the foyer.

“My God,” he said. “You’ll never do. I’ll have Henry pick you up.”

“Excuse me?”

Those eyes pinned me. “I am sending you back.” Each word was punctuated with a period, as if he were speaking to an idiot and I repressed a snarl. *Never show emotion, never let them see your spine.* That was my Aunt Nadya, who’d taught me how to get on in the world

when I shifted from conqueror to conquered. “I don’t see how I could have made myself clearer to your boss, but apparently she didn’t take me seriously.”

“We have a contract.” I squared my shoulders and kept my tone calm despite the pit of panic that had opened beneath my stomach. “It’s not my fault you don’t like the look of me. You approved my qualifications and agreed to employ me. You signed the contract.”

He could break it. I wasn’t so naive as to believe a man with his kind of money couldn’t get out of anything he wanted. But damned if I’d let him do so without at least giving me a chance.

Sharp lips thinned into a straight line. “And when you decide to run? Do I hold you to your end of that contract?”

My end. The end that said I would pay Sandy’s fees out of my own pocket.

“I won’t run.” But I wanted to. Already. And the job had not even begun. I was accustomed to dismissive employers, snobby ones, desperate ones...working in care, I’d seen all kinds of families. Some were grateful for the help, but many resented having to ask for it and took their frustrations out on the very people they’d hired to ease their burden. I understood Prescott’s reaction but not my own sick feeling that the house stank of psychological rot. There was a festering here, hidden behind the wallpaper and beneath the carpet. My mother would have felt it. Aunt Nadya, on the other hand, would tell me to buck up, that it was nothing a bit of bleach couldn’t take care of. She’d never had any patience with her sister-in-law’s superstitions, and had done her best to stomp them out entirely once we moved north to live near her.

A squeak above from above drew my attention to the second floor. A child sat on the top step, watching us through owl’s eyes. Dark hair hung in long, untamed ropes around her face and she was perched to run. I remembered Ali at that age, her hair in braids that fell below her

shoulder blades, her bright eyes curious, and my heart thumped. If I abandoned this child, I would be abandoning my own sister; my salary kept us together as my mother wanted, as we wanted.

I glanced at Prescott to see him staring up at his daughter as if he could, by sheer force of will, compel her to meet his gaze. But her eyes, as dark as her father's, remained fixed on me. Her lips parted and all of us in that hallway held our breaths. Would she speak? Her eyes slid to the side as if someone had called her, and she rose and darted away into the shadows.

“My daughter,” said Prescott. “Your charge, should you stay.”

I swallowed. “I’m staying.”