

# Verity

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# Chapter 1

I hear the crack of his skull a split second before the spray of blood hits me.

Gasping, I stumble back onto the sidewalk. My heel catches the curb, and I grab a "No Parking" sign to keep from falling.

Just moments ago, the man had been standing right in front of me. We were part of a crowd waiting for the light to change when he stepped into the street without looking, right into the path of an oncoming truck. I had lunged to pull him back, my fingers closing on empty air as he went down. I shut my eyes just before the tire went over his head, but I still heard it pop like a champagne cork.

It was his own fault, really. He was glancing down at his phone, a casual act born from crossing this same street hundreds of times without a problem. Death by routine.

A few people gasp, but no one screams. A passenger jumps out of the truck, immediately kneeling beside the body. As others rush forward to help, I back away. I don't need to look to know he didn't survive. A glance at my once-white shirt, now splattered with crimson, tells me a hearse would be more useful than an ambulance.

I turn to get away from the scene, to find a place where I can breathe, but the crosswalk sign flashes WALK. The crowd surges forward, making it impossible for me to move against the current. Some people don't even look up from their phones as they stream past the accident. I give up trying to fight it and wait for the throng to thin. When I look back, I'm careful to avoid looking directly at the body. The truck driver is at the back of his vehicle, wide-eyed and talking on his phone. Three or four people are helping, while a few others, driven by morbid curiosity, are filming the gruesome scene.

If this had happened back in Virginia, the reaction would have been completely different. Everyone would have stopped. There would have been panic, screaming, and a news crew on-site within minutes. But this is Manhattan, where a pedestrian getting hit by a car is little more than an inconvenience—a traffic delay for some, a ruined shirt for me. An incident like this probably happens too often here to even make the local news.

As much as the city's indifference disturbs me, it's the very reason I moved here ten years ago. People like me thrive in overcrowded places where personal stories get lost in the noise. In a city this large, the state of my own life is irrelevant.

Here, I'm invisible. Unimportant. Manhattan is too busy to give a damn about me, and for that, I love her.

"Are you hurt?"

I look up to see a man touching my arm. Deep concern is etched on his face as he scans my blood-splattered shirt, checking me for injuries. His reaction tells me he's not one of the hardened New Yorkers; wherever he came from, it was a place that didn't manage to beat all the empathy out of him.

"Are you hurt?" he asks again, this time looking me directly in the eye.

"No," I say, my voice trembling slightly. "It's not my blood. I was standing right next to him when..." I trail off. A man just died so close to me that I'm wearing his blood.

I came to this city to be invisible, not impenetrable. I've been trying to become as hard as the concrete beneath my feet, but it's not working. The full weight of what I just witnessed is beginning to settle in my stomach.

I raise a hand to cover my mouth but pull it away when I feel something sticky on my lips. More blood. I look down at my shirt, pulling the fabric away from my chest where it's starting to dry and stick to my skin.

I need some water. I'm feeling light-headed and want to rub my forehead, but I'm afraid to touch my own face. I look up at the man who is still holding my arm.

"Is it on my face?" I ask.

He presses his lips together and glances around before gesturing to a coffee shop a few doors down. "They'll have a bathroom," he says, placing a hand on the small of my back and guiding me toward it.

Across the street, I see the Pantem Press building—my destination. I was so close, maybe twenty feet from a meeting I couldn't afford to miss. I can't help but wonder how far the man who just died was from his.

The stranger holds the door open for me at the coffee shop. A woman with two coffees tries to squeeze past me, then recoils when she sees my shirt, scurrying back to let us enter. I head for the women's restroom, but it's locked. The man pushes open the door to the men's room and motions for me to go in.

He leaves the door unlocked as he walks to the sink and turns on the water. I look in the mirror, relieved that my face isn't as bad as I'd imagined. There are a few dark, drying specks on my cheeks and a small spray of red above my eyebrows. My shirt took the worst of it.

He hands me a wet paper towel, and I begin to wipe my face. The metallic tang of blood now fills the air, and for a moment, I'm ten years old again, overwhelmed by a smell I haven't forgotten in all these years. Nausea rises in my throat. I need to get this shirt off me. Now.

With trembling fingers, I unbutton it and hold it under the running water. While the faucet runs, I use another wet towel to clean the blood from my chest.

The stranger moves toward the door, but not to leave. He locks it, giving me privacy while I stand there in my worn-out bra. The gesture is so disturbingly chivalrous that it puts me on edge. I watch his reflection in the mirror, tense.

Someone knocks.

"Be right out," he calls.

I relax slightly, knowing someone is just outside the door.

I focus on my task, washing away every last trace of blood from my neck and chest. I check my hair next, but there's nothing but an inch of dark roots showing through my faded caramel color.

"Here," the man says, unfastening the last button on his own crisp, white shirt. "Put this on."

He has already taken off his suit jacket and hung it on the doorknob. He shrugs off his button-up, revealing a white undershirt. He's tall and muscular; his shirt will swallow me whole. It's a ridiculous outfit for the meeting I'm late for, but I have no other choice. I take the shirt, pat my skin dry with a paper towel, and pull it on. It looks absurd, but at least it wasn't my skull that exploded onto a stranger's clothes. Silver lining.

I wring out my ruined shirt and toss it in the trash. Gripping the edge of the sink, I stare at my reflection. Two tired, empty eyes stare back, the hazel darkened to a murky brown by the horror they've just seen. I look like death.

Leaning against the wall, I turn away from the mirror. The man is rolling up his tie and stuffing it into his jacket pocket. He studies me for a moment. "I can't tell if you're calm or in shock."

"I'm not sure," I admit. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he says. "Unfortunately, I've seen worse."

I tilt my head, trying to understand his cryptic remark. He avoids my gaze, which only makes me more curious. What could be worse than watching a man's head get crushed by a truck? Maybe he's a native New Yorker after all. Or a doctor. He has an air of competence, the kind that comes with being in charge.

"Are you a doctor?"

He shakes his head. "Real estate. Or I was." He steps closer and brushes something off the shoulder of his shirt—my new shirt. As he drops his arm, his eyes linger on my face for a moment before he steps back.

His eyes are the same chartreuse green as the tie he just put away. He's handsome, but in a way that seems to inconvenience him, as if he wants to hide that part of himself. He wants to be invisible in this city. Just like me.

Most people move to New York to be seen. The rest of us come here to disappear.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Lowen."

He pauses for a fraction of a second after I say my name. "Jeremy," he replies, turning back to the sink to wash his hands. My curiosity gets the better of me.

"What did you mean, you've seen worse?" I ask his reflection.

He turns off the water, dries his hands, and faces me. "You really want to know?"

I nod.

He tosses the paper towel in the trash and shoves his hands in his pockets. His expression darkens even more. He's looking at me, but he seems disconnected from the moment. "Five months ago, I pulled my eight-year-old daughter's body out of a lake."

The air rushes out of my lungs. I press my hand to my throat. It wasn't gloom in his eyes; it was despair. "I'm so sorry," I whisper, ashamed of my curiosity.

"What about you?" he asks. He leans against the counter, as if this is a conversation he's been waiting for, a chance to find someone whose tragedy might lessen his own. It's what people do when they've hit rock bottom—they look for others who are worse off to feel better about their own suffering.

I swallow hard. My tragedies feel insignificant compared to his. "My mother died last week."

He doesn't react the way I did. He shows no emotion at all, and I wonder if he was hoping my story was worse. It isn't. He wins.

"How?" he asks.

"Cancer. I spent the last year taking care of her in my apartment." The words hang in the air; it's the first time I've said it out loud to anyone. I feel my

pulse throb in my wrist and clamp my other hand around it. "Today is my first day out in weeks."

We stand in silence for a moment. I want the conversation to end, but I don't know how to stop it. Where do you possibly go from here?

It turns out, you go nowhere. He turns back to the mirror, pushes a stray lock of dark hair into place, and says, "I have a meeting to get to. Are you sure you'll be okay?"

"Yes. I'm alright."

"Alright?" he repeats the word as a question, as if it isn't quite the reassurance he was looking for.

"I'll be alright," I say again. "Thank you for your help."

I wish he would smile, but the moment doesn't call for it. He gives a small shrug. "Alright, then." He unlocks the door and holds it open, but I hesitate, not quite ready to face the world again. I want to thank him properly, maybe offer to buy him a coffee or return his shirt. I find myself drawn to his kindness, a rare quality these days. But then I see the flash of a wedding ring on his left hand, and it propels me forward, out of the bathroom and back onto the crowded street.

An ambulance has arrived, blocking traffic. I walk back toward the scene and give my statement to a police officer, though I'm not sure how helpful it is since I didn't see the actual impact. I was just close enough to hear it, to be painted by it.

I glance back and see Jeremy leaving the coffee shop with a fresh cup in his hand. He crosses the street, his mind already somewhere else, far away from me. He's probably thinking about his wife and how he'll explain his missing shirt when he gets home.

I pull out my phone. I still have fifteen minutes before my meeting at Pantem Press. My hands are shaking worse now that the distraction is gone. Coffee might help. Morphine would be better, but hospice cleared out all my mother's medication last week. It's a shame I was too distraught to think of hiding some. I could really use it right now.

## Chapter 2

When Corey's text came through last night, it was the first I'd heard from him in months. I was at my computer, staring at a lone ant as it navigated the landscape of my big toe.

The ant moved in frantic, uncertain bursts, searching for food or maybe friends. It seemed confused by its solitude—or perhaps thrilled by its newfound freedom. I couldn't help but wonder why it was alone; ants are supposed to travel in armies. The fact that I was this invested in an ant's social life was a clear sign I needed to get out of my apartment. I worried that after being cooped up with my mother for so long, I'd be just as lost once I stepped into the world again. *Left, right, inside, outside... where are my friends? Where is the food?*

Just as the ant disappeared into a crack in the floorboards, Corey's messages lit up my screen.

*Meet me tomorrow morning at nine at the Pantem Press building, floor 14. I think we might have an offer.*

Months ago, I'd drawn a line: since we no longer slept together, the proper way for an agent to contact his author was through email. He hadn't gotten the memo. He also didn't ask about my mom, which didn't surprise me. His lack of interest in anything beyond his job and himself was why we were no longer together. Still, his indifference sparked an unreasonable irritation. He owed me nothing, but he could have at least pretended to care.

I didn't text him back. Instead, I watched the crack in the wall where the ant had vanished. I wondered if it would find its colony inside, or if it was a born loner, like me.

It's hard to pinpoint the source of my crippling aversion to other people, but if I had to guess, I'd say it stems from my own mother being terrified of me. "Terrified" might be too strong, but she certainly didn't trust me as a child. She kept me isolated, afraid of what I might do during one of my sleepwalking episodes. That fear seeped into my adult life, and by then, the damage was done. I was a loner with few friends and a nonexistent social life. Which is why this was the first time I'd left my apartment in weeks.

I always imagined my first trip back into the world would be to somewhere I missed, like Central Park or a quiet bookstore. I never thought I'd be standing in the lobby of a publishing house, praying that whatever offer this was would be enough to cover my rent and keep me from getting evicted. But here I am, one meeting away from homelessness or a lifeline.

I smooth down the front of the white shirt Jeremy lent me, hoping I don't look completely ridiculous. Maybe I can pass it off as some new, oversized fashion statement.

"Nice shirt," a voice says from behind me.

I turn, startled to see Jeremy. *Is he following me?*

It's my turn, so I hand my license to the security guard before looking back at him, noting he's in a fresh shirt. "Do you carry spares in your pocket?" It hasn't been that long since he gave me his.

"My hotel is a block away," he explains. "I walked back to change."

A hotel. That's a good sign. It means he probably doesn't work in this building, and if he doesn't work here, maybe he isn't in publishing. For some reason, I hope he isn't. After the morning we've had, I want this meeting to have nothing to do with him.

"So you don't work here?" I ask as he hands his own ID to the guard.

"No. I have a meeting on the fourteenth floor."

Of course he does.

"So do I," I say.

A faint smile touches his lips before vanishing, as if he's just remembered the morning's horror and realizes it's too soon for levity. "What are the chances we're heading to the same one?" he asks as we walk toward the elevators.

"I wouldn't know. They haven't told me why I'm here yet."

We step inside, and he presses the button for our floor. As the doors close, he pulls his tie from his pocket and begins looping it around his neck. I can't stop staring at his wedding ring.

"Are you a writer?" he asks.

I nod. "Are you?"

"No. My wife is." He tightens the knot on his tie. "Have you written anything I might know?"

"I doubt it. No one reads my books."

His lips curve up again. "There can't be that many authors named Lowen. I'm sure I could figure it out." He pulls out his phone and starts typing.

"I never said I write under my real name."

He doesn't look up until the elevator dings and the doors slide open. He steps into the doorway and turns, holding up his phone with a full, genuine smile. "You don't use a pen name. You write as Lowen Ashleigh. And funnily enough, that's the author I have a meeting with at nine-thirty."

There's the smile I was curious about, and as stunning as it is, I don't want it anymore. He just Googled me. And while my meeting was for nine, it seems he knows more about it than I do. Our encounter on the street suddenly feels less coincidental, though I suppose it's not impossible we'd witness the same accident on our way to the same building.

Jeremy steps aside to let me pass. "See you in a few," he says, already walking backward down the hall.

Despite knowing nothing about him, I can't help but like the man who literally gave me the shirt off his back. I manage a small smile before he turns the corner. "Alright. See you in a few."

He returns the smile. "Alright."

The moment he's gone, I lean against the wall, the tension of the morning finally hitting me. A man's death, a stranger's kindness, and now this. What the hell is happening?

"You're on time," Corey says, startling me. He walks up from the opposite direction and leans in to kiss my cheek. I stiffen. "You're never on time."



"I would have been here sooner, but—" I stop myself. He looks completely disinterested as he starts walking down the same hall Jeremy just took.

"The meeting isn't until nine-thirty," he says. "I told you nine because I figured you'd be late."

I freeze, staring at the back of his head. If he had told me the correct time, I wouldn't have been across the street. I wouldn't be covered in a dead man's blood. I swallow my irritation. With Corey, that's a familiar reflex.

He leads me into an empty conference room, and I take a seat at the long table. He sits beside me, turning to face me. He looks the same as he always has—clean-cut, tailored, wearing a tie and a confident smile. A stark contrast to me.

"You look terrible," I say, because he looks perfect and he knows it.

"And you look refreshed and ravishing," he replies, because I always look tired and perpetually bored. I've heard of Resting Bitch Face; I have Resting Bored Face.

"How's your mother?"

"She died last week."

That throws him. He leans back, tilting his head. "Why didn't you tell me?"

*Why didn't you bother to ask?* "Still processing," I shrug. My mother had been living with me for the nine months since her diagnosis. She passed last Wednesday. For the last few months, she needed me for everything, and I couldn't leave the apartment. It's funny how one of the most populated cities on earth can also be a paradise for agoraphobics; thanks to Wi-Fi and a credit card, you never have to leave your home.

"You okay?" Corey asks, his concern feeling like a formality.

"I'm fine," I lie. "It helps that it was expected." The truth is, I'm relieved she's gone. My mother brought nothing but guilt into my life.

Corey gets up and gestures to a counter lined with pastries and coffee. "Water's fine," I say. He brings two bottles over. "Do you need help with the will? Edward can handle it."

Edward is the agency's lawyer. "Not necessary. All she left me was debt."

Corey purses his lips. He knows my financial situation better than anyone. "You have a foreign royalty check coming soon," he says, as if I haven't already budgeted every penny of it.

"I know. I'll be fine."

He straightens his tie, unconvinced. "Well, hopefully this offer will be good for both of us."

"Why are we meeting in person?" I ask, relieved to change the subject. "You know I hate this."

"They insisted. Said they have a job offer but wouldn't give details over the phone. We have to sign an NDA first."

"I thought you were getting me another contract with my last publisher."

"Your sales aren't cutting it anymore," he says bluntly. "To get another contract, you'd have to engage on social media, go on tour, build a fan base. You refuse to do any of that."

This was my biggest fear. The royalty checks have been dwindling, and I haven't written anything new in a year. "I have no idea what this is about," Corey continues, "but the secrecy has me intrigued. We need this." He says *we* because he gets fifteen percent.

Corey starts sweating, a sure sign he's nervous, which in turn makes me more nervous. "Let me do the talking," he says, clicking his pen. I was planning on it.

"What are you wearing?" he asks, finally noticing my clothes.

"Spilled coffee on my shirt," I lie. "This was in my closet. Probably yours."

"You left the house in that? It doesn't look very high fashion."

"No?" I ask sarcastically. "Is it supposed to?"

Before he can answer, the door opens. A woman with short black hair and jarringly red lipstick walks in, followed so closely by an older man that he bumps into her when she stops. "Goddammit, Barron," she mutters under her breath.

Jeremy enters last, giving me a subtle nod.

"Amanda Thomas," the woman says, shaking our hands. "I'm an editor here. This is Barron Stephens, our lawyer, and Jeremy Crawford, our client."

Jeremy and I shake hands, expertly pretending we're strangers. He takes the seat across from me, and I find my eyes drawn to him, my curiosity about his presence overriding my interest in the meeting itself.

"I'll cut to the chase," Amanda says. "One of our authors is medically unable to fulfill her contract. We're looking for a writer in the same genre to complete the three remaining books in her series."

I glance at Jeremy. His expression is unreadable.

"Who's the author?" Corey asks. After we sign the NDAs, Amanda tells us.

"Verity Crawford."

Corey goes still. Everyone knows Verity Crawford. I look at Jeremy again. His wife. He said his wife was a writer.

"Verity has a very successful series we would hate to see go unfinished," Amanda says. "Our goal is to bring in a co-writer to finish the books and handle all the required press tours and publicity."

*Book tours? Press releases?*

Corey glances at me, knowing that's a deal-breaker. I'm so awkward with people that I'm convinced meeting me in person would make my readers swear off my books forever.

"What is Mrs. Crawford's compensation?" Goddammit Barron cuts in. "All royalties will go to Verity. However, my client, Jeremy Crawford, is prepared to offer a flat payment of seventy-five thousand dollars per book."

My stomach flips. That's more money than I've ever seen. But the excitement dies as the reality of it sinks in. Going from a nobody to the co-author of a literary phenomenon is too big of a leap.

Corey leans forward. "I'm assuming the pay is negotiable."

I try to signal to him that it doesn't matter, but he ignores me. The conversation continues pointlessly until I finally clear my throat. "I appreciate the offer,"

I say, looking directly at Jeremy. "I really do. But if you need someone to be the new face of this series, I'm not the right person."

I stand, ready to go home.

"I'd like a moment with my client," Corey says quickly. Amanda and Barron agree to step out, promising to wait for our decision. Jeremy, however, remains seated, his gaze fixed on me. He hasn't said a word this whole time.

"Could we have a word in private?" he asks me, his tone a polite dismissal of Corey.

Corey shoots me a look that says, *Can you believe this guy?* But what he doesn't understand is that I'm desperate to be alone in this room with Jeremy. I have so many questions for him.

"It's fine," I tell Corey. His jaw tightens, but he leaves.

It's just Jeremy and me. Again.

"Jesus," he mutters, running a hand down his face. "Are meetings with publishers always this stiff?"

I laugh quietly. "I wouldn't know. I do everything over email."

"I can see why." He stands and gets a bottle of water, and suddenly I feel small in his presence. "You okay? You didn't have much time to adjust after what happened."

"Neither did you."

"I'm alright," he says. "I'm sure you have questions."

"A ton," I admit. "Why can't your wife finish the series?"

"She was in a car accident," he says, his voice detached and mechanical. "I had hoped she would fully recover, but... here we are."

Now his quiet grief makes sense. It's not just from the accident; it's from his daughter's death, too. This man is drowning. "I'm so sorry."

He just nods. "I appreciate the offer, Jeremy, but I'm not comfortable with the publicity. I don't even know why I was considered."

"Open Ended," he says, naming one of my books. "It was one of Verity's favorites. She said your writing styles were similar. I'm the one who gave your name to her editor. If anyone is going to take over this series, I want it to be someone whose work she respected."

I shake my head, stunned. "Wow. I'm flattered, but I can't."

He watches me, his eyes full of curiosity. He stands and walks over to a wall of framed awards, his back to me. He runs his fingers over one of them—one of his wife's.

"Have you ever heard of people being called 'Chronics'?" he asks without turning around. I shake my head. "I think Verity made it up. After our daughters died, she said we were prone to chronic tragedy. One terrible thing after another." He used the plural. *Daughters?*

He turns back to me, his composure cracking. "Yeah. Twins. We lost one six months before we lost the other. Some families are lucky. Others seem to have tragedies waiting on the back burner. What can go wrong, goes wrong. And then gets worse."

He seems to be talking more to himself than to me. It feels like he just wanted everyone else out of the room, and being alone with me feels, to him, like being alone. I find that strangely comforting.

"I grew up next to a man who lost his whole family in two years," I say quietly. "His son in combat, his wife to cancer, then his daughter in a car wreck."

Jeremy looks at me. "Where is he now?"

The truth is, the man killed himself. But saying that to Jeremy would be cruel. "He remarried," I lie. "Has a few stepkids and grandchildren now." He looks at me like he knows I'm lying, but appreciates the gesture.

"You'll need to spend time at our house, in Verity's office," he says, suddenly changing the subject. "She has years of notes, outlines... stuff I can't make sense of."

"Jeremy, I told you, I can't—"

"The lawyer is lowballing you," he cuts in, his voice firm. "Tell your agent to ask for half a million. Tell them you'll do it with no press, under a pen name, with an ironclad non-disclosure. That way, whatever it is you're trying to hide can stay hidden."

Before I can respond, he's at the door. "We live in Vermont. I'll give you the address after you sign. You can stay for as long as it takes." He pauses, his hand on the doorknob.

I open my mouth to object, but the only word that comes out is a shaky, "Alright."

He looks at me for a long moment, then nods. "Alright."

He opens the door and walks out. Corey immediately slips back in, closing it behind him. I stare at the table, my head spinning. Half a million dollars? With no publicity? What just happened?

"I don't like him," Corey says, dropping into his chair. "What did he say?"

"He said they're lowballing me and to ask for half a million with no press."

I turn just in time to see Corey choke on air. He grabs my water bottle and takes a desperate gulp. "Shit."

## Chapter 3

In my early twenties, I had a boyfriend named Amos who liked to be choked.

That's why we broke up—my refusal to do it. But sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I'd given in to his urges. Would we be married? Have children? Would he have graduated to even more dangerous fetishes? In your twenties, I feel like vanilla sex should be enough, at least for a while.

Thinking about Amos is my go-to coping mechanism for when I'm disappointed in the state of my life. As I stare at the pink eviction notice Corey is holding, I remind myself that things could always be worse. I could still be with Amos.

I open my apartment door wider to let Corey inside. If I'd known he was coming, I would have intercepted the notice first. It's the third one this week. I snatch it from his hand and shove it in a drawer.

He holds up a bottle of champagne. "Thought we could celebrate the contract," he says, and I'm grateful he doesn't mention the eviction. It's less of a threat now, with a paycheck on the horizon, but I'm still not sure what I'll do for money until then. I can always pawn what's left of my mother's things.

Corey has already shed his coat and is loosening his tie. This was our old routine, before my mom moved in. He'd show up and start shedding layers of clothing until we were tangled together in my bed. That ended abruptly when I saw on social media that he was dating a girl named Rebecca. I didn't stop sleeping with him out of jealousy; I stopped out of respect for her.

"How's Becca?" I ask, pulling two glasses from the cabinet.

His hand freezes on his tie. "How do you—?"

"I write suspense novels, Corey. Don't act so surprised that I know about your girlfriend."

I pop the champagne and pour two glasses, handing one to him as he settles at the bar. We raise them, but I lower mine before he can make a toast. Staring into the bubbles, I realize the only thing to celebrate is the money.

"It feels wrong," I say. "They aren't my characters. The woman who created them is seriously injured. Toasting to this seems predatory."

Corey's glass hangs in the air for a moment before he shrugs, downs the entire flute in one go, and hands it back to me. "Don't focus on why you're in the game. Just focus on the finish line."

I roll my eyes and start washing the dishes piled in the sink. I have forty-eight hours to get out of this apartment, and my plates are coming with me. "Have you ever even read one of her books?" I ask.

He laughs. "No. She's not my style." He catches himself a second too late, realizing he's just insulted my writing, since Verity's husband hired me precisely because our styles are supposedly so similar. "That's not what I meant," he says, moving to stand beside me. He takes a plate I've just scrubbed and starts rinsing it. "You haven't packed. Have you found a new place?"

"I have a storage unit for my stuff. I've applied for a place in Brooklyn, but it won't be ready for two weeks."

"The notice says you have two days."

"I'm aware."

"So, a hotel?"

"Eventually. I'm leaving for Vermont on Sunday. Jeremy—Mr. Crawford—says I'll need to go through his wife's office before I can start writing."

Corey stops rinsing, and I can feel his eyes on me. "You're staying at their house?"

"How else am I supposed to get her notes?"

"Have him mail them."

"There are thirteen years' worth of outlines and research. He said he wouldn't know where to begin sorting through it all."

He's quiet, but I can practically hear him biting his tongue. "What is it?" I ask.

He sets a knife in the drying rack and grips the edge of the sink, turning to face me. "The man lost two daughters. Now his wife is in a catastrophic accident. I'm not exactly comfortable with you staying in his house."

The water suddenly feels ice-cold, and a chill runs down my arms. I turn it off and lean back against the counter. "Are you suggesting he was involved?"

Corey shrugs. "I don't know enough to suggest anything. But the thought hasn't crossed your mind? That maybe it isn't safe? You don't know these people."

The thought had, of course, crossed my mind. I'd spent the afternoon digging into their history. The first daughter died from an allergic reaction at a sleepover fifteen miles away; Jeremy and Verity weren't there. The second drowned in the lake behind their house, but Jeremy didn't get home until after the search was underway. Both deaths were ruled tragic, unrelated accidents.

"And Verity's car wreck?" Corey presses.

"She hit a tree."

"I read there were no skid marks," he says, his expression grim. "Which means she either fell asleep at the wheel or she did it on purpose."

"Can you blame her?" I snap, irritated by his armchair detective work. "She lost both of her children. Anyone would want a way out after that."

He grabs his jacket from the barstool. "Accident or not, that family has shit luck and a world of emotional damage. Be careful. Get in, get what you need, and get out."

"You worry about the contract, Corey. I'll handle the research."

"I'm just looking out for you."

He's not looking out for me. He's a spurned ex-boyfriend who thought he was going to get laid tonight, only to be politely rejected before finding out I'm going to be staying in another man's home. He's masking jealousy as concern.

I walk him to the door, relieved he's leaving. I want out of this apartment as badly as he does; it's been suffocating ever since my mother moved in.

"For what it's worth," he says, pausing in the doorway, "congratulations. Your writing got you this opportunity. You should be proud."

I hate when he's nice right when I'm most annoyed with him. "Thank you."

"Text me when you get there Sunday."

"I will."

"And let me know if you need help moving."

"I won't."

He laughs softly. "Okay, then." He gives me an awkward salute as he backs away, and I close the door, feeling like our relationship has finally settled where it should have been all along: agent and author. Nothing more.