PROLOGUE

The knife burns cold in my trembling hand.

I lock Blaine's door with a soft click so no one can follow me into his bedroom. The others are busy getting dressed for cocktail hour, but it would be unforgivable to take any risks now that I've come this far.

The antique shower plumbing whistles and bangs as loudly as the rusty boiler in Marian Academy's basement. Even so, I hold my breath as I creep toward the bathroom. I hide behind the cracked door and peer through the gap. Blaine is standing in the canary-yellow tub, a sheer shower curtain drawn around him, his head and chest barely visible through the swirling steam. The vintage wool bathing suit he'd worn to the beach is in a heap on the mosaic tile.

Each bathroom in Ashwood Manor has been meticulously preserved, and Blaine's is decorated with golden art deco mirrors.

I look at the gold blade of my knife.

They match.

If I were the kind of person who believed in signs, I might think the universe approved of the crime I was about to commit.

But I'm not that kind of person. That person would have spilled their secret to Kassidy weeks ago, hoping the universe

would repay their good deed. I'm more of a don't-fuck-with-my-future-if-you-don't-want-to-meet-my-knife kind of girl. At least I want to be. My shaking hands tell a different story.

Blaine's eyes are closed, his head tipped up to the water as it cascades down with the delicate patter typical of old houses, a quiet contrast to the thumping plumbing in the walls. It's a soothing sound, like spring rain, and I briefly flash back to the day before prom, when Blaine danced in my apartment building's courtyard during a storm while my family and I laughed from the sidewalk.

He looked vulnerable and young then, just as he does now, standing naked and defenseless in the shower. I've been waiting for this moment. Obsessing over the details in my head for days. But as Blaine runs his hands through his ginger hair, slowly pushing a stream of water off his forehead and down his freckled back, a burning guilt spreads through my arms, almost making me drop the knife.

Blaine doesn't deserve this—not really. But neither do I. And I can't sit back and let him destroy my life.

I grip the knife tighter and step through the doorway.

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A glass shatters. Someone screams below deck as the *Blood Rose* hits a patch of choppy sea. Kassidy ignores the noise and keeps talking. "Chloe may be super smart or whatever, but even Dean Halliwell nodded off during her valedictorian speech, and he's the most boring person I've ever met."

Kassidy doesn't seem to care that Chloe could climb the stairs at any minute and hear us talking about her. I adjust my seasickness wristbands and take a steadying breath. The loungers on Kassidy's yacht are plush, but I can't get comfortable. Maybe I'm uneasy because of the rocking waves. Or maybe because I know what's buried inside the backpack resting at my feet. Either way, I keep hoping to see Sparrow Island on the horizon.

It's a cool day for June, but the sun shines brightly above the dark water. Seabirds coo and caw overhead, occasionally dipping their bills into the cold sea for fish. Kassidy has pulled her graduation dress above her thighs so her long legs don't get tan lines. If she were less wealthy, her skin would be ivory from living through winters in Maine. But when you spend your school breaks in places like Seychelles, you end up with a honey glow year-round. I don't need to travel to look tan—my last name's Morales.

The telltale pop of a cork reaches our ears.

"They've opened the champagne!" says Kassidy, jumping off her lounger and running to the metal railing. The *Blood Rose* has tiered levels, so from each deck you can see the edge of the next. "Bring me a glass, babe," she calls to Blaine, leaning so far over the railing her head disappears from view. "And one for Izzy too."

I reluctantly slide off my lounger and join Kassidy. Blaine is no longer wearing his cap and gown, or even his shirt. His broad back is bent over a table where he's filling glasses from a magnum bottle of something that probably costs more than I've made at Pegasus Books all semester.

The smile he flashes at Kassidy falters when he sees me. I hurry away from the railing and return to my lounger.

Kassidy pops back up and ties her glossy blond waves into a messy bun. "Anyway," she says obliviously, "I think students should vote for the valedictorian. Otherwise, you end up with drippy geniuses reciting tortured clichés about their hopes and dreams."

I nod, only half listening. *Stupid Blaine,* I think. *He's going to ruin everything if he keeps looking at me with those guilty eyes.*

I respond a few beats too late. "At least you didn't have to watch the other parents treat your mom like a pariah at the reception."

Kassidy rolls her eyes sympathetically. "Like, how dare she give their precious babies tough math grades." She flops onto her lounger and smiles. "My parents couldn't believe she gave me a C in calculus. They thought I'd get the best-friend grade boost."

A stiff breeze lifts my curls into the air. The cool spray of water and the buzzing hum of the engine make me feel a million miles away from my family's apartment in Harker.

I wonder what my mom and sister are doing at home without

me. It's hard to believe only three hours ago we were stuck in a stuffy auditorium listening to Chloe's address: *Though our time at Marian Academy is over, the lessons we've learned here will never fade. As you go into the world and confront its challenges, always remember the school motto: Fortis Fortuna adiuvat!*

Fortune favors the bold.

I think about my backpack again. I felt like a budding sociopath when I packed the knife, wrapping it carefully in a pair of jeans and shoving it to the bottom of my bag. Now I wonder: Will I have the strength to be bold?

Footsteps sound on the stairs. "Your butler has arrived," says a sarcastic voice. I turn to see Fergus balancing three glasses of champagne between his fingers. He's dressed in what he calls Euro chic but his critics at school have deemed Euro geek: snug olive slacks, brown loafers, and a button-down shirt with sleeves rolled up to his pasty elbows. His dirty-blond hair is styled with a swirl, like a 1950s greaser, and his small brown eyes are scrunched with his ever-present smirk.

He nods at Kassidy, who flashes him a tight-lipped smile. Fergus is Blaine's best friend from childhood, and he and Kassidy have been locked in a battle for Blaine's attention for years.

"Blaine's too busy to serve you," says Fergus. "He's begging Ellison for details about next year's Olympic rowing trials."

Kassidy and I each grab a glass. Fergus clinks his against ours. "To never setting foot in that prison full of backstabbing prima donnas again," he says.

"Gus, what are you talking about?" I laugh. "You loved Marian."

"And you're the *top* backstabbing prima donna," adds Kassidy. "Prince of the theater."

Fergus's face turns sour. "I suppose you think Blaine is the king."

"More like a god." Kassidy playfully fans her face as she says it, but I know she's not joking. It was Blaine's performance in *Almost, Maine* that brought them together. When she saw him onstage our freshman year, she fell into his blue-eyed smolder and never returned.

"Gross," says Fergus. "The only reason so many students came to our productions is that Ms. Kepler invited all the Hollywood B-listers her dad works with. And if I *occasionally* dropped hints about gossip to include in the school paper," he says, turning to me, "that doesn't make me a backstabber."

I laugh again. "Never change, Gus."

My friends had bloomed like flowers at Marian Academy; I'd been more like an invasive weed. Kassidy cried when we walked out of Marian for the last time, but I felt only relief. Relief that I'd never again have to wave at my mom in the halls, or see the other students smirk at my faded uniform, or stand by Kassidy's side looking like a short, curvy letter S next to her perfect T. Relief and hope that things might be different in college.

"I want in on the toast," says a deep voice from the staircase.

A few seconds later, Ellison finishes the climb from middeck and slams his glass against ours with such enthusiasm I can't believe they don't break.

"Sorry." He laughs. "Guess I don't know my own strength."

Fergus rolls his eyes so hard they look like boiled eggs.

Ellison props himself against the railing, which comes only to the top of his thighs. The stubble usually dotting his dark-brown skin has been shaved for the graduation ceremony.

Every inch of him looks like a future Olympic athlete. I'm half-surprised he didn't row himself to Sparrow Island.

Ellison yells to the deck below. "Blaine, you coming?"

Heavy footsteps bang up the stairs. Blaine barrels into sight, still holding the magnum of champagne. The black T-shirt he's put on over his dark jeans contrasts sharply with the big white sneakers hugging his feet. Blaine's always decked out in the kind of hypercasual look popular among the rich kids who can spend thousands of dollars on the latest kicks.

"Looks like I found the party," he says. He puts down the champagne and connects his phone to a little Bluetooth speaker he pulls out of his back pocket. When he presses PLAY, loud rap drowns out the jet-engine sound of the wind. Blaine's giant watch sparkles in the sun as he grabs the champagne again and chugs straight from the bottle.

"Your girlfriend is worshipping your godlike feats of acting," says Fergus, his voice dripping with derision. "Might want to take advantage of her good mood."

Blaine squeezes himself onto Kassidy's lounger and pulls her into his lap with his free hand. "My girl's always in a good mood," he says, earning a laugh from the rest of us, who have all been on the receiving end of one of Kassidy's sulks. She leans against him, and they indulge in the kind of kiss most of us would hide behind closed doors.

"I wondered where you went," says the lilting voice of Marian's valedictorian.

Kassidy and Blaine tense and break apart. Ellison stands a little straighter and runs a smoothing palm over his short brown hair.

Chloe Li mounts the final stair and walks hesitantly over to the group with a still-full glass of champagne. Like Blaine, she's dressed casually: high-waisted jeans, a sporty crop top, and red trainers. She recently chopped her straight black hair to her chin, and some evil stylist cut her bangs too short, like a sadistic child might do to a Bratz doll. It's not a good look.

Kassidy scowls at Chloe, then rolls off Blaine and walks to the other side of the deck. Blaine sets down the champagne bottle and follows her with a barely audible groan. Chloe frowns at them, not used to their fireworks.

Ellison breaks the awkward silence. "Loved the graduation issue of the school paper," he says to me, smiling warmly. "Especially the retrospective you did on old Calloway."

"Kassidy helped me on that one," I say. "Dr. Calloway used to work as a model in New York. She loves Kassidy's fashion column."

"I can't believe she's taught at Marian for fifty years," adds Chloe, clearly relieved to have something to say. "It's weird to think I might never have met any of you if she hadn't pushed the administration to let girls apply."

Ellison holds his glass out to her. "That would be a loss for all of us," he says.

Chloe flushes pink as she clinks his glass. I turn away to hide my grin. Although it's been a while since Ellison set off butterflies in my stomach, I remember how pleasant the sensation is. It's a good thing Nestor couldn't come on the trip; he wouldn't like watching Chloe get swept up in a new flirtation so soon after dumping her.

Fergus, who's been watching Ellison and Chloe with stormy eyes, interrupts their conversation. "Where's Marlowe?" he asks.

"Inside, on one of the couches," says Chloe. "He told me he'd rather finish his book than get slapped by the wind."

"Typical," mutters Fergus. "He probably gets seasick and doesn't want to admit it."

"Or maybe he's not used to being on a yacht this small," jokes Ellison.

Kassidy and Blaine return arm in arm a few minutes later, smiling happily. Whatever she was pissed about, she's over it. That's one of the best things about Kassidy: She doesn't hold a grudge.

Just as I start to debate joining Marlowe, Kassidy squeals and begins to dance on her tiptoes. "There's Sparrow Island!" she says, pointing at a fast-approaching rock covered with wild grasses and thick pine groves. It looks like someone dropped a crescent of forest into the middle of the ocean. "You can't see Ashwood Manor because it's on the other side of the hill."

"I told you I should have sent my Jag over on the ferry," grumbles Blaine. "You packed like ten suitcases. We'll never be able to lug them up that hill."

"Relax," says Kassidy. "We have drivers waiting for us." I can tell she's trying not to look too pleased with herself, which makes me suspicious. She'd told me about the surprise graduation trip to Ashwood Manor only a few days before. And she hadn't said anything about cars.

After what feels like another queasy hour but is really only ten minutes, the yacht pulls into port. Crewmen jump off the boat and use lines to maneuver us close to a long dock surrounded by bright-green ferns. Once we're tied up, they attach a ladder to the side so we can climb off without falling. A crew member tries to shoo away the gulls scavenging

crumbs on the dock, but they scurry around him like he's part of the scenery.

I grab my backpack and strap it on firmly. It's no mystery why the nerves rolling through my stomach won't settle: It's how I always feel when I'm about to talk to Marlowe.

Before I can not-so-secretly rush to meet him as we disembark, Kassidy grabs my arm and holds me back while the others clamber down the stairs to collect their bags. She's bouncing on her feet as if she might dive overboard.

For a minute, I forget about Marlowe. "I've seen this look," I say. "You have another surprise."

She smiles. "You know me too well."

"Please tell me it's not strippers again."

She laughs so loudly the gulls screech with displeasure and launch themselves into the sky. "Not strippers," she assures me. Then her face turns serious. "My surprise involves everyone, but I want you to know that everything I did, I did for the two of us." She drags me toward the staircase. "I can't wait to see your face. This is going to be the best week ever."