CHAPTER 1

Tell me again about the first time the two of you played chess in the park." Jameson's face was candlelit, but even in the scant light, I could see the gleam in his dark green eyes.

There was nothing—and no one—that set Jameson Hawthorne's blood pumping like a mystery.

"It was right after my mother's funeral," I said. "A few days, maybe a week."

The two of us were in the tunnels beneath Hawthorne House—alone, where no one else could hear us. It had been less than a month since I'd first stepped into the palatial Texas mansion and a week since we'd solved the mystery of why I'd been brought there.

If we'd truly solved that mystery.

"My mom and I used to go for walks in the park." I shut my eyes so that I could concentrate on the facts and not the intensity with which Jameson locked on to my every word. "She called it the Strolling Aimlessly Game." I steeled myself against the memory, letting my eyelids open. "A few days after her funeral, I went to the park without her for the first time. When I got near the pond, I saw a crowd gathered. A man was lying on the sidewalk, eyes closed, covered in tattered blankets."

"Homeless." Jameson had heard all of this before, but his laser focus on me never wavered.

"People thought he was dead—or passed out drunk. Then he sat up. I saw a police officer making his way through the crowd."

"But you got to the man first," Jameson finished, his eyes on mine, his lips crooking upward. "And you asked him to play chess."

I hadn't expected Harry to take me up on the offer, let alone win.

"We played every week after that," I said. "Sometimes twice a week, three times. He never told me more than his name."

His name wasn't really Harry. He lied. And that was why I was in these tunnels with Jameson Hawthorne. That was why he'd started looking at me like I was a mystery again, a puzzle that he, and only he, could solve.

It couldn't be a coincidence that billionaire Tobias Hawthorne had left his fortune to a stranger who knew his "dead" son.

"You're sure that it was Toby?" Jameson asked, the air between us charged.

These days, I was sure of little else. Three weeks earlier, I'd been a normal girl, scraping by, desperately trying to survive high school, get a scholarship, and get out. Then out of the blue, I'd received word that one of the richest men in the country had died and named me in his will. Tobias Hawthorne had left me billions, very nearly his entire fortune—and I'd had no idea why. Jameson and I had spent two weeks unraveling the puzzles and clues the old man had left behind. *Why me?* Because of my name. Because of the day I was born. Because Tobias Hawthorne had bet everything on the long shot that somehow I could bring his splintered family back together.

Or at least that was what the conclusion of the old man's last game had led us to believe.

"I'm sure," I told Jameson fiercely. "Toby's alive. And if your

grandfather knew that—and I know that's a big *if*—but if he did know, then we have to assume that either he chose me because I knew Toby, or he somehow masterminded bringing us together in the first place."

If there was one thing I'd learned about deceased billionaire Tobias Hawthorne, it was that he was capable of orchestrating nearly anything, manipulating nearly anyone. He'd loved puzzles and riddles and games.

Just like Jameson.

"What if that day in the park wasn't the first time you met my uncle?" Jameson took a step toward me, an unholy energy rolling off him. "Think about it, Heiress. You said that the one time my grandfather met you, you were six years old, and he saw you in the diner where your mother was a waitress. He heard your full name."

Avery Kylie Grambs, rearranged, became A Very Risky Gamble. The kind of name a man like Tobias Hawthorne would remember.

"That's right," I said. Jameson was close to me now. Too close. Every one of the Hawthorne boys was magnetic. Larger than life. They had an effect on people—and Jameson was very good at using that to get what he wanted. *He wants something from me now.*

"Why was my grandfather, a Texas billionaire with a whole host of private chefs on call, eating at a hole-in-the-wall diner in a small Connecticut town that no one's ever heard of?"

My mind raced. "You think he was looking for something?"

Jameson smiled deviously. "Or someone. What if the old man went there looking for Toby and found *you*?"

There was something about the way he said the word *you*. Like I was someone. Like I mattered. But Jameson and I had been down that road before. "And everything else is a distraction?" I asked, looking away from him. "My name. The fact that Emily died on my birthday. The puzzle your grandfather left us—it was all just a lie?"

Jameson didn't react to the sound of Emily's name. In the throes

of a mystery, nothing could distract him—not even her. "A lie," Jameson repeated. "Or misdirection."

He reached to brush a strand of hair out of my face, and every nerve in my body went on high alert. I jerked back. "Stop looking at me like that," I told him sternly.

"Like what?" he countered.

I folded my arms and stared him down. "You turn on the charm when you want something."

"Heiress, you wound me." Jameson looked better smirking than anyone had a right to look. "All I want is for you to rifle through your memory banks a little. My grandfather was a person who thought in four dimensions. He might have had more than one reason for choosing you. Why kill two birds with one stone, he always said, when you could kill twelve?"

There was something about his voice, about the way he was still looking at me, that would have made it easy to get caught up in it all. The possibilities. The mystery. *Him*.

But I wasn't the kind of person who made the same mistake twice. "Maybe you've got it wrong." I turned away from him. "What if your grandfather didn't know that Toby was alive? What if *Toby* was the one who realized that the old man was watching me? Considering leaving the entire fortune to me?"

Harry, as I'd known him, had been one hell of a chess player. Maybe that day in the park wasn't a coincidence. Maybe he'd sought me out.

"We're missing something," Jameson said, coming up to stand close behind me. "Or maybe," he murmured, directly into the back of my head, "you're holding something back."

He wasn't entirely wrong. I wasn't built to lay all my cards on the table—and Jameson Winchester Hawthorne didn't even pretend to be trustworthy.

"I see how it is, Heiress." I could practically *hear* his crooked little grin. "If that's how you want to play it, why don't we make this interesting?"

I turned back to face him. Eye to eye, it was hard not to remember that when Jameson kissed a girl, it wasn't tentative. It wasn't gentle. *It wasn't real*, I reminded myself. I'd been a part of the puzzle to him, a tool to be used. I was still a part of the puzzle.

"Not everything is a game," I said.

"And maybe," Jameson countered, eyes alight, "that's the problem. Maybe that's why we're spinning our wheels in these tunnels day after day, rehashing this and getting nowhere. Because this isn't a game. *Yet*. A game has rules. A game has a winner. Maybe, Heiress, what you and I need to solve the mystery of Toby Hawthorne is a little motivation."

"What kind of motivation?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"How about a wager?" Jameson arched an eyebrow. "If I figure all of this out first, then you have to forgive and forget my little lapse of judgment after we decoded the Black Wood."

The Black Wood was where we'd figured out that his dead ex-girlfriend had died on my birthday. That was the moment when it had first become clear that Tobias Hawthorne hadn't chosen me because I was special. He'd chosen me for what it would do to them.

Immediately afterward, Jameson had dropped me cold.

"And if I win," I countered, staring into those green eyes of his, "then you have to forget that we ever kissed—and never try to charm me into kissing you again."

I didn't trust him, but I also didn't trust myself with him.

"Well then, Heiress." Jameson stepped forward. Standing directly to my side, he brought his lips down to my ear and whispered, "Game on."

CHAPTER 2

Our wager struck, Jameson took off in one direction in the tunnels, and I went in another. Hawthorne House was massive, sprawling, big enough that, even after three weeks, I still hadn't seen it all. A person could spend years exploring this place and still not know all the ins and outs, all the secret passageways and hidden compartments—and that wasn't even counting the underground tunnels.

Lucky for me, I was a quick learner. I cut from underneath the gymnasium wing to a tunnel that went below the music room. I passed beneath the solarium, then climbed a hidden staircase into the Great Room, where I found Nash Hawthorne leaning casually against a stone fireplace. Waiting.

"Hey, kid." Nash didn't bat an eye at the fact that I'd just appeared seemingly out of nowhere. In fact, the oldest Hawthorne brother gave the impression that the whole mansion could come crashing down around him and he'd just keep leaning against that fireplace. Nash Hawthorne would probably tip his cowboy hat to Death herself.

"Hey," I replied.

"I don't suppose you've seen Grayson?" Nash asked, his Texas drawl making the question sound almost lazy.

That did nothing to soften the impact of what he'd just said. "Nope." I kept my answer short and my face blank. Grayson Hawthorne and I had been keeping our distance.

"And I don't suppose you know anything about a chat Gray had with our mother, right before she moved out?"

Skye Hawthorne, Tobias Hawthorne's younger daughter and the mother of all four Hawthorne grandsons, had tried to have me killed. The person who'd actually pulled the trigger was the one in a jail cell, but Skye had been forced to leave Hawthorne House. By Grayson. *I will always protect you*, he'd told me. *But this . . . us . . . It can't happen, Avery.*

"No clue," I said flatly.

"Didn't think so." Nash gave me a little wink. "Your sister and your lawyer are looking for you. East Wing." That was a loaded statement if I'd ever heard one. My lawyer was his ex-fiancée, and my sister was . . .

I didn't know what Libby and Nash Hawthorne were.

"Thanks," I told him, but when I made my way up the winding staircase to the East Wing of Hawthorne House, I didn't go looking for Libby. Or Alisa. I'd made a bet with Jameson, and I intended to win. First stop: Tobias Hawthorne's office.

In the office, there was a mahogany desk, and behind the desk was a wall of trophies and patents and books with the name *Hawthorne* on the spine—a breathtaking visual reminder that there was nothing ordinary whatsoever about the Hawthorne brothers. They had been given every opportunity, and the old man had expected them to be extraordinary. But I hadn't come here to gawk at trophies.

Instead, I took a seat behind the desk and released the hidden compartment I'd discovered not long ago. It held a folder. Inside the folder, there were pictures of me. Countless photographs, stretching back years. After that fateful meeting in the diner, Tobias Hawthorne had kept tabs on me. *All because of my name? Or did he have another motive?*

I thumbed through the photos and pulled out two. Jameson had been right, back in the tunnels. I was holding out on him. I'd been photographed with Toby twice, but both times, all the photographer had captured of the man beside me was the back of his head.

Had Tobias Hawthorne recognized Toby from behind? Had "Harry" realized we were being photographed and turned his head away from the camera on purpose?

As far as clues went, this wasn't much to go on. All the file really proved was that Tobias Hawthorne had been keeping tabs on me for years before "Harry" had shown up. I thumbed past the photographs to a copy of my birth certificate. My mother's signature was neat, my father's an odd mix of cursive and print. Tobias Hawthorne had highlighted my father's signature, as well as my date of birth.

10/18. I knew the significance there. Both Grayson and Jameson had loved a girl named Emily Laughlin. Her death—on October 18—had torn them apart. Somehow, the old man had intended for me to bring them back together. But why would Tobias Hawthorne have highlighted my father's signature? Ricky Grambs was a deadbeat. He hadn't even cared enough to pick up the phone when my mother died. If it had been left up to him, I would have gone into foster care. Staring at Ricky's signature, I willed Tobias Hawthorne's reasoning in highlighting it to become clear.

Nothing.

In the back of my mind, I heard my mother's voice. *I have a secret*, she'd told me, long before Tobias Hawthorne had written me into his will, *about the day you were born*.

Whatever she'd been referring to, I was never going to guess it now that she was gone. The one thing I knew for certain was that I wasn't a Hawthorne. If my father's name on that birth certificate weren't proof enough, a DNA test had already confirmed that I had no Hawthorne blood.

Why did Toby seek me out? Did *he seek me out?* I thought about what Jameson had said about his grandfather killing twelve birds with one stone. Going back through the folder again, I tried to find some shred of meaning. What wasn't I seeing? There had to be *something*—

A rap at the door was the only warning I got before the doorknob began to twist. Moving quickly, I gathered the photographs and slipped the file back into the hidden compartment.

"There you are." Alisa Ortega, attorney-at-law, was a model of professionalism. She arched her brows into what I had mentally termed the Alisa Look. "Would I be correct in assuming you've forgotten about the game?"

"The game," I repeated, unsure *which* game she was talking about. I felt like I'd been playing since the moment I'd first stepped through the door of Hawthorne House.

"The football game," Alisa clarified, with another Alisa Look. "Part two of your debut into Texas society. With Skye's exit from Hawthorne House, appearances are more important than ever. We need to control the narrative. This is a Cinderella story, not a scandal—and that means that *you* need to play Cinderella. In public. As frequently and convincingly as possible, starting with making use of your owner's box tonight."

Owner's box. That clicked. "The game," I repeated again, comprehension dawning. "As in, an NFL game. Because I own a football team."

That was still so absolutely mind-blowing that I almost succeeded in distracting myself from the other part of what Alisa had said—the bit about Skye. Per the deal I'd struck with Grayson, I couldn't tell anyone about his mother's part in my attempted murder. In exchange, he'd handled it.

Just like he'd promised he would.

"There are forty-eight seats in the owner's suite," Alisa said, going into lecture mode. "A general seat map is created months in advance. VIPs only. This isn't just football; it's a way of buying a seat at a dozen different tables. Invites are highly sought after by just about everyone—politicians, celebrities, CEOs. I've had Oren vet everyone on the list for tonight, and we'll have a professional photographer on hand for some strategic photo opportunities. Landon has crafted a press release that will go out an hour before the game. All that's left to worry about is . . ."

Alisa trailed off delicately.

I snorted. "Me?"

"This is a Cinderella story," Alisa reminded me. "What do you think Cinderella would wear to her first NFL game?"

That had to be a trick question.

"Something like this?" Libby popped into the doorway. She was wearing a Lone Stars jersey with a matching scarf, matching gloves, and matching boots. Her blue hair was tied into pigtails with a thick bunch of blue and gold ribbons.

Alisa forced a smile. "Yes," she told me. "Something like that—minus the black lipstick, the black nail polish, and the choker." Libby was pretty much the world's most cheerful goth, and Alisa was not a fan of my sister's sense of fashion. "As I was saying," Alisa

continued emphatically, "tonight is important. While Avery plays Cinderella for the cameras, I'll circulate among our guests and get a better sense of where they stand."

"Where they stand on what?" I asked. I'd been told again and again that Tobias Hawthorne's will was ironclad. As far as I knew, the Hawthorne family had given up on trying to challenge it.

"It never hurts to have a few extra power players in your corner," Alisa said. "And we want our allies breathing easy."

"Hope I'm not interrupting." Nash acted like he'd just happened upon the three of us—like he wasn't the one who'd warned me that Alisa and Libby were looking for me. "Go on, Lee-Lee," he told my lawyer. "You were sayin' something about breathing easy?"

"We need people to know that Avery isn't here to shake things up." Alisa avoided looking directly at Nash, like a person avoiding looking into the sun. "Your grandfather had investments, business partners, political relationships—these things require a careful balance."

"What she means when she says that," Nash told me, "is that she needs people to think that McNamara, Ortega, and Jones has the situation entirely under control."

The situation? I thought. *Or me?* I didn't relish the idea of being anyone's puppet. In theory, at least, the firm was supposed to work for me.

That gave me an idea. "Alisa? Do you remember when I asked you to get money to a friend of mine?"

"Harry, wasn't it?" Alisa replied, but I got the distinct feeling that her attention was divided three ways: between my question, her grand plans for the night, and the way Nash's lips ticked upward on the ends when he saw Libby's outfit.

The last thing I needed my lawyer focused on was the way that her ex was looking at my sister. "Yes. Were you able to get the

money to him?" I asked. The simplest way to get answers would be to track down Toby—before Jameson did.

Alisa tore her eyes away from Libby and Nash. "Unfortunately," she said briskly, "my people have been unable to find a trace of your Harry."

I rolled the implication of that over in my mind. Toby Hawthorne had appeared in the park days after my mother's death, and less than a month after I left, he was gone.

"Now," Alisa said, clasping her hands in front of her body, "about your wardrobe . . ."

CHAPTER 3

I had never seen a game of football in my life, but as the new owner of the Texas Lone Stars, I couldn't exactly say that to the crowd of reporters who mobbed the SUV when we pulled up to the stadium, any more than I could have admitted that the off-the-shoulder jersey and metallic-blue cowboy boots I was wearing felt about as authentic as a Halloween costume.

"Lower the window," Alisa told me, "smile, and yell, 'Go, Lone Stars!'"

I didn't want to lower the window. I didn't want to smile. I didn't want to yell anything—but I did it. Because this was a Cinderella story, and I was the star.

"Avery!"

"Avery, look over here!"

"How are you feeling about your first game as the new owner?"

"Do you have any comments about reports that you assaulted Skye Hawthorne?"

I hadn't had much media training, but I'd had enough to know the cardinal rule of having reporters shout questions at you rapid-fire: Don't answer. Pretty much the only thing I was allowed to say

was that I was excited, grateful, awed, and overwhelmed in the *most incredible* possible way.

So I did my best to channel excitement, gratitude, and awe. Nearly a hundred thousand people would attend the game tonight. Millions would watch it around the world, cheering for the team. *My* team.

"Go, Lone Stars!" I yelled. I went to roll up my window, but just as my finger brushed the button, a figure pulled away from the crowd. Not a reporter.

My father.

Ricky Grambs had spent a lifetime treating me like an afterthought, if that. I hadn't seen him in more than a year. But now that I'd inherited billions?

There he was.

Turning away from him—and the paparazzi—I rolled my window up.

"Ave?" Libby's voice was hesitant as our bulletproof SUV disappeared into a private parking garage beneath the stadium. My sister was an optimist. She believed the best of people—including a man who'd never done a damn thing for either one of us.

"Did you know he'd be here?" I asked her, my voice low.

"No!" Libby said. "I swear!" She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, smudging her black lipstick. "But he just wants to talk."

I bet he does.

Up in the driver's seat, Oren, my head of security, parked the SUV and spoke calmly into his earpiece. "We have a situation near the north entrance. Eyes only, but I want a full report."

The nice thing about being a billionaire with a security team brimming with retired Special Forces was that the chances of my being ambushed again were next to none. I shoved down the feelings that seeing Ricky had dredged up and stepped out of the car

into the bowels of one of the biggest stadiums in the world. "Let's do this," I said.

"For the record," Alisa told me as she exited the car, "the firm is more than capable of handling your father."

And *that* was the nice thing about being the sole client of a multi-billion-dollar law firm.

"Are you okay?" Alisa pressed. She wasn't exactly the touchy-feely type. More likely she was trying to assess whether I would be a liability tonight.

"I'm fine," I said.

"Why wouldn't she be?"

That voice—low and smooth—came from an elevator behind me. For the first time in seven days, I turned to look directly at Grayson Hawthorne. He had pale hair and ice-gray eyes and cheekbones sharp enough to count as weapons. Two weeks ago, I would have said that he was the most self-assured, self-righteous, arrogant jerk I'd ever met.

I wasn't sure what to say about Grayson Hawthorne now.

"Why," he repeated crisply, stepping out of the elevator, "would Avery be anything other than fine?"

"Deadbeat dad made an appearance outside," I muttered. "It's fine."

Grayson stared at me, his eyes piercing mine, then turned to Oren. "Is he a threat?"

I'll always protect you, he'd sworn. *But this . . . us . . . It can't happen, Avery.*

"I don't need you to protect me," I told Grayson sharply. "When it comes to Ricky, I'm an expert at protecting myself." I stalked past Grayson, into the elevator he'd stepped out of a moment earlier.

The trick to being abandoned was to never let yourself long for anyone who left.

A minute later, when the elevator doors opened into the owner's suite, I stepped out, Alisa to one side and Oren to the other, and I didn't so much as look back at Grayson. Since he'd taken the elevator down to meet me, he'd obviously already been up here, probably schmoozing. Without me.

"Avery. You made it." Zara Hawthorne-Calligaris wore a string of delicate pearls around her neck. There was something about her sharp-edged smile that made me feel like she could probably kill a man with those pearls if she were so inclined. "I wasn't sure you would be putting in an appearance tonight."

And you were ready to hold court in my absence, I concluded. I thought about what Alisa had said—about allies and power players and the influence that could be bought with a ticket to this suite.

As Jameson would say, *Game on*.