

KATE WATSON

*Seeking
Mansfield*

CHAPTER ONE

~F~

Finley Price was a fool.

She stared at her computer screen with a dry mouth, absentmindedly rubbing one of the small, circular scars branded into her right shoulder. The words “Mansfield Theater Youth Application” mocked her in bold font, as if they knew she didn’t deserve the spot. As if they knew how ridiculous she was even to apply.

Yet here she was, her free hand hovering over the mouse. Like a fool. Surely, it wouldn’t hurt to just answer another question. It’s not as if she had to submit the application.

So answer something, already. But a highlighter smudge on her computer desk caught her eye. She scrubbed it, trying to get the streak of orange out. Hmm. It was stubborn. She frowned, swiping her thumb across her tongue and trying again.

Success!

She leaned back in her chair and stretched. She started to yawn and her jaw cracked. She winced and sat upright.

How could you apply for this? she asked herself, hearing Nora’s voice in her head. *Is this how you repay the Bertrams for taking you in? By neglecting everything you owe them to chase some childish little dream? Have you forgotten how they saved you?*

Finley massaged her jaw just below her ear. *No*, she thought. *No, I haven’t forgotten.*

She was about to close her laptop when Oliver’s signature knock at her door interrupted her. She exhaled and rolled her chair away from her desk. “Come in.”

The door opened, and her godparents’ son entered wearing a Pac-Man t-shirt, the stretch around each sleeve showcasing the fact that he’d recently started lifting weights. Oliver’s light brown hair was messier than usual. She couldn’t help but smile as he walked in.

“Hey, Fin. I just wanted to—wait, is that your Mansfield application?” He

crossed the room, squinting at her screen. “You still haven’t completed it?”

“It’s not due till the end of May,” she said as Oliver dropped to his knees beside her. He smelled like deodorant and ... was that cologne? Whatever it was, it smelled nice. Manlier than he normally went for, but nice. “I still have weeks to get it in.”

“You mean you have weeks to psych yourself out and convince yourself you don’t deserve it.” He nudged her with his shoulder. “Right?”

A grumble escaped her throat. She pushed off the desk so that she spun in the computer chair, her eyes catching on framed posters and antique movie cameras and the countless playbills lining her bookshelf. When she’d made a full circle, Oliver grabbed her armrest, stopping her. She frowned. “I still haven’t asked your parents, and I don’t know if your mom will be able to spare me, anyway. It’s so time-consuming. I shouldn’t think—”

“Of yourself, for a change? Of your future? Fin, my mom would be the first person to tell you to do it.”

She shook her head. He couldn’t understand what it was like to owe a debt like she owed to his parents. “She’s been so sick lately, Ollie. She relies on me.”

The muscles in Oliver’s jaw tensed, a clear indicator of his annoyance. “Then she relies on you too much. And don’t argue,” he said before she could protest. He leaned down to type over her, his arm bumping her vintage film reel lampshade. “Here, let’s just take this one blank question at a time. ‘Your grade in the fall.’ Really? S-e-n-i-o-r. One down. ‘Ethnicity.’ There’s no button for half-Brazilian, half-Irish. So, should I type in Brazil-ish?”

She pushed his arm. “Ha-ha.”

“Okay, ‘The parts of professional theater you are most curious to learn about.’ Ooh, this is tough. Why don’t they have a ‘nothing’ option, or an ‘I know more about all of this than you’ option? I guess we’ll have to settle on ...”

He clicked on “directing,” “production,” and “play analysis and criticism.”

“How do you know those are the ones I want?”

His eyebrows arched above his sky blue eyes. “Could it be because I’ve seen six-point-four million plays and movies with you in the last two years?”

“Maybe,” she said, smiling. She was nine months younger than Oliver, so

they'd always been friendly growing up. They'd only grown closer since she'd moved in with his family.

"Exactly. I know these things, Fin."

As Oliver kept going through the application, Finley pulled her legs up under her chin. She picked at the frayed hem of her too-long jeans and watched him. He was so casual, so self-assured.

"Finally, an answer you've completed already. 'Why do you think it's important for high school students to experience theater?'" She watched his face light up as he read her answer.

Her heart stopped. He was reading her answer.

"Stop!" she said, trying to grab the laptop from him.

He sprang to his feet, holding the laptop overhead. He stared straight up and continued reading, even as she jumped to grab it from him. "Stop, Fin. This is good stuff! 'Theater allows us to experience a lifetime worth of emotions from a life we have never actually lived. Through *Antigone*, we feel a fierce loyalty to family that transcends reason and self-preservation. Through *Camelot*, we suffer the heartache of a star-crossed love we have never—' Hey, I was reading that!"

Finley climbed onto her swivel chair and grabbed the laptop from him, snapping it closed. "You can't just read my essays, you turd. They're private!"

Oliver grinned and helped her down from the chair before dropping onto her bed. "They're good, Fin. Really good. You're a lock."

She flushed. "I'm not, either. It's the most competitive program in Chicago." Her wavy black hair cascaded in front of her face as she sat cross-legged on the chair. "But it would be amazing. The chance to put on a production with some of the best actors in the business? To be mentored by Tony Award-winning directors?" She sighed.

"Are you going to mention your dad?" he asked. She shook her head. "Don't you think they'll figure it out, Finley *Price*? If the name isn't enough, try to remember you're the chick version of him."

She stared at a movie poster of her dad that hung above her bed. He looked so handsome and vibrant, with his deep, kind eyes. She'd give anything to be

half the person he had been. “I am not,” she said. “Besides, he was going by Peres when he performed there. I doubt they’ll make the connection.”

“Pedeez.” He copied her pronunciation. “It sucks that your dad had to change his last name for Hollywood.”

Her smile faded. “If all he’d lost to Hollywood was his name, he’d have gotten off easy.”

Oliver’s face fell. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and grabbed her hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

She shook her head and tried to keep her hands from trembling. “It’s okay. Besides, I don’t know who pressured him to change his name more, Hollywood or my mom. She liked exotic, not ethnic.” She let go of Oliver’s hand and adjusted the sleeve on her right arm. She hated talking about her mom. Hated thinking about the person she’d become. Hated remembering what she’d done ...

Finley shivered. She looked down at Oliver’s clasped hands. He’d been picking at his cuticles again.

“You know,” she said, “if you can’t leave your hangnails alone, you’re never going to achieve your dream of becoming a hand model.”

His eyes popped and he covered his mouth with both hands in horror. “No!”

She laughed, then squinted. “Hold still. You have an eyelash right under your eye. Right here.” She gestured to her own face as if it were a mirror.

He wiped at his face. “Did I get it?” She shook her head. He wiped again. “Now?” He picked at his cheek.

She giggled. “Are you even trying? I think you pushed it *into* your eye.”

“Get it.”

“I’m not going to get it.”

“Fin, come on, you have to get it before it scratches my cornea and I go blind.”

“Blind? Be serious.”

He started to stand. “Okay, if you really want my impending sightlessness on your hands—”

She pulled his arm and he sat back down on the bed. “Okay, okay. Just stay still.” She breathed in slowly and drew closer to his face. He widened his eyes, but instead of looking up, he looked right at her. When she touched his face, she was surprised by how warm he was. “It’s clinging to your bottom lashes. Don’t blink. Okay ... steady ... got it.”

She leaned back from him and held the eyelash in front of his mouth. Then she noticed his face. He looked ... dazed.

“Ollie, are you okay?”

~O~

Oliver blinked.

“Ollie, are you okay?” Finley repeated.

His eyes flew down to the delicate finger in front of his face, an eyelash resting on it.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine,” he lied.

Her wrinkled brow smoothed. *Of course she believes you*, he thought. *She trusts you.*

“Okay, then make a wish.”

He looked at the twenty-seven freckles dotting her naturally tan face, then stared into her big, dark eyes. He was about to blow on the eyelash when a knock sounded at the door. He leaned back, and Finley’s hand fell. Before she could say anything, the door flew open and in waltzed his younger sister, Juliette, her boyfriend Raleigh lumbering behind her.

Juliette was a sophomore, yet in the last year she’d easily become one of the most popular girls in school. With how much time she spent making her hair the right shade of blonde and her face the right shade of tan, it was easy to forget how brilliant and calculating she was—calculating enough to spread a series of rumors over spring break that made Raleigh break up with his long-term girlfriend just after school started up again. As captain of the baseball team, Raleigh Rushworth already had plenty going for him. But his dad was also a senator, making Raleigh not only one of the richest kids in their already rich school, but also the most famous. So when Juliette sat next to him on the

first day back from break in his one and only AP class (US Government), well, naturally, she got her man.

Too bad he was a mouth-breathing clown.

“Wow, cool room. Kind of freaky clean though, don’t you think?” Raleigh gaped as he glanced over the vintage Broadway and Hollywood posters to look at the more current ones, including the ones of Finley’s dad. “Man, you have a serious thing for that Gabriel Price dude, don’t you? My mom was obsessed with him, too. She made me watch a documentary about him after he died, you know? Um ... what was it called?”

Juliette smirked. “*From Golden Globes to Deep Space Probes: The Gabriel Price Story.*”

Oliver clenched his jaw, wanting to strangle his sister. Or better yet, get her grounded for life. Oliver’s dad was protective of Finley, more protective than affectionate, really. He claimed it was because he and Mr. Price had been best friends almost from their first day at the University of Chicago. Boys from opposite parts of the world, brought together by the luck of the freshman roommate system. But Oliver knew that wasn’t it, not completely. He was pretty sure it was guilt. Guilt for what a horrible wife and mother Mrs. Price turned out to be. After all, when Oliver’s parents had started dating, they’d introduced Finley’s parents to each other. But Mr. Price was supposed to fall for a different roommate: Aunt Nora, not Mrs. Price.

If Mr. Price and Aunt Nora had gotten together, Finley would be his cousin ...

He shuddered. *There’s a cold shower when I need one.*

Raleigh snapped his fingers, pulling Oliver from his thoughts. “That’s the movie! How’d you know, Jules?”

Juliette shrugged. She was the only person who wanted to keep Finley’s dad’s identity a secret as much as Finley did. While Finley didn’t want people treating her differently because of it, Juliette didn’t want her being popular because of it.

Fortunately, Finley wasn’t paying attention to Juliette. She cast Oliver a disbelieving glance, then gestured toward Raleigh. The guy was still talking.

“I mean, I haven’t even heard of most of these. *Raising Arizona. Best in Show.*

Rear Window,” Raleigh was saying. “Oh, that last one’s Alfred Hitchcock, huh? That’s cool.”

Oliver watched Finley, her face an open book. He knew exactly what was going through her mind. She longed to give a sarcastic retort, but by the way her arm was crossed over her body, rubbing her right shoulder, he knew she felt too vulnerable. It probably didn’t help that, at six-foot-five, Raleigh was nearly a foot and a half taller than she was.

“Do you, uh, like Alfred Hitchcock?” she asked.

Raleigh snorted. “I like his name. *Hitchcock*. That’s awesome.”

Oliver caught Finley’s “*Did that just happen?*” look while Juliette told Raleigh to grow up.

“You must really love movies,” Raleigh told Finley.

“It ... it’s complicated.”

Raleigh didn’t hear her. “Juliette, why can’t you have posters of fat old guys like the Godfather in *your* room instead of guys like Harlan Crawford?”

Juliette rolled her eyes. “We aren’t getting into this again, Raleigh. Besides, Harlan Crawford was in two of those Gabriel Price movies that Fin has on her wall.”

“Yeah, as a little kid, not shirtless with, I don’t know, melted butter on his abs.”

Finley looked at Oliver and mouthed, “*Melted butter!*” Oliver stifled a laugh.

“Whatever, Raleigh,” Juliette said. She turned to Oliver, who still couldn’t hide his smirk. She narrowed her eyes and scratched her face with her middle finger. “Listen, dork, I just came up to get you because Aunt Nora’s downstairs. She has some announcement for Dad about the firm or something. So come. You, too, Fin.”

As Juliette and Raleigh left the room, Finley leaned into Oliver. “Do you think Raleigh knows that ‘the Godfather’ isn’t Marlon Brando’s actual name?”

Oliver laughed and stood. Knowing he shouldn’t, he held out a hand to pull her up. His stomach flipped as she took it. “Of course not. But more important, do you think Marlon Brando used butter on his abs?” he asked.

“Skinny Brando or Fat Brando?”

He pretended to consider this. “Both.”

“Of course,” she said, laughing again as she started for the door. Then she stopped and turned to face him, her smile gone and her rich, dark chocolate eyes pleading. “Promise not to leave me alone with Nora?”

“I promise. But remember, she can’t make you feel small if you don’t let her.”

“She can’t if you’re around,” she said, squeezing his hand. She turned and exited the room.

Her words stopped him. Her spark had dimmed with Juliette and Raleigh’s intrusion. His aunt’s presence would surely extinguish what remained. He hated how fragile she was with them. She was so much stronger than she knew. He felt proud that he brought that side out in her. That he had earned her trust, not by protecting her, but by encouraging her, by challenging her. And he had almost risked all the trust he’d earned over the years with that stupid eyelash.

CHAPTER TWO

~F~

Finley followed a bickering Raleigh and Juliette downstairs. She almost wished they'd go be blond and obnoxious somewhere else. But Nora was waiting, and Finley planned to use the couple as human shields until the woman was gone.

When they reached the second floor, Finley caught a whiff of the older woman's perfume. Her breath hitched. She wished she could feel pity for Nora, since her husband had passed away and Mrs. Bertram and her family were all Nora had left. They at least shared that isolation in common, considering Finley had only her brother Liam, and he was in college. But she remembered too many of Nora's snide, passive-aggressive remarks, too many cruel comparisons to her mother to feel anything but apprehension. She steeled herself as she followed Juliette and Raleigh into the expansive library.

Nora was sitting in a leather wingback chair, her lips pursed as she read something on her phone. In a gorgeous designer suit and tall heels meant to intimidate, she looked ready for court, as usual. She rose to greet them.

"Juliette—Raleigh, how nice to see you! How are your parents?" she asked, shaking his hand. Finley slipped behind them and crossed to a bookshelf across the room, praying Nora wouldn't notice her.

"Good," Raleigh said.

Juliette swatted Raleigh and bounced up to her aunt, who hugged her. "They're great, Aunt Nora. Senator Rushworth has been talking to me about my Model UN summit. He's already giving me pointers."

Nora smiled, making her look prettier and, well, nicer than usual. They continued their conversation, talking about how Juliette was enjoying her sophomore year, how Raleigh's baseball season was going, and his dad's work.

"Well, how exciting for you both," Nora said. "I've been meaning to talk to the senator for ages, but with how busy our schedules are, we haven't been able to connect. Raleigh, do give your parents my best, won't you?" Raleigh nodded, and he and Juliette sat on a dark leather couch.

Nora turned to Oliver, who had just walked in, and asked him about his volunteering. Finley rubbed her shoulder and watched their exchange. Nora

smiled, asking questions, complimenting her nephew. It was rare, but at times like this, Finley could almost see why her dad had dated Nora in college before falling for her roommate, Finley's mom. And she could almost see the resemblance between Nora and her sister Mariah. The difference was that when Finley's godmother looked at her, she kept smiling.

"Well, I'm not surprised that you're doing so well in all your activities. Just be sure to keep your grades up," Nora was saying to Oliver. "I can hardly believe you'll start college in the fall."

Finley ran a finger down the spine of one of Uncle Thomas's beautiful first edition books when Nora's tone shifted.

Here it comes.

"And Finley," Nora said with a hint of sharpness. Finley turned to face Nora, catching Oliver's encouraging smile from just beyond the woman. "I understand you have a new computer. And I've never seen you wear that sweater. Aren't you fortunate to have such generous godparents?"

Finley looked at her feet, bare except for her Havaianas. The flip-flops, a gift from her brother, were the only new things she had on, and yet Nora made it sound as if she was draped in Chanel on the Bertrams' dime. Finley tucked her exposed feet beneath her wide-leg jeans, hand-me-downs from Juliette. Like the laptop. "Yes, Nora."

Just then, her godfather entered the room in a pinstripe suit that matched his salt-and-pepper hair. "Now, Nora, Finley knows how lucky she is. It was like pulling teeth just to convince her to accept Juliette's old laptop. This girl's too modest," he said, putting a hand on Finley's shoulder. She flinched, and Uncle Thomas dropped his hand.

She wanted to kick herself, especially with Nora flashing her a little sneer. *This Hallmark Moment brought to you by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.*

Uncle Thomas cleared his throat. "Anyway, Nora, what's the news?"

Nora spun on her Jimmy Choos to face him. "I just heard from Aaron's nephew clerking with the Illinois Supreme Court. They're going to hear your case."

"What?" Uncle Thomas's eyes popped. "Nora, you know what this means?"

She grinned. "You have a hell of a lot of work to do?"

“I have a hell of a lot of work to do!” He beamed, already striding from the library. “Let’s go tell Mariah.”

Over the fading rap of Nora’s stilettos, Raleigh asked Juliette, “What was that about?”

“Some human rights case of Daddy’s.”

Oliver frowned. “Have some compassion, Jules. Juana deserves justice.”

“Why? What happened?” Raleigh asked.

“She was a pregnant, undocumented immigrant stopped for rolling through a stop sign a couple of years ago,” Oliver said. “She told the officer she was going into labor. Instead of believing her, he said she was resisting arrest, threw her in his squad car, and denied her access to a hospital. She ended up delivering in a holding cell, handcuffed to the bench, and the ambulance didn’t make it until after she delivered.” Oliver paused. “Fin, I don’t remember the rest. Will you tell him?”

Finley turned from the bookshelf. “Me?”

Oliver leaned against a table. “Yeah, remind me what happened after she delivered.”

She gave him a mutinous glare. He was always doing stuff like this, asking her questions he knew the answer to just to force her to talk. If he weren’t her second favorite person in the world—after Liam, of course—she’d hate him for it. Instead, she just wanted to pinch him.

She cleared her throat and looked at Oliver, not Raleigh. “The, uh, cord was wrapped around the baby’s neck and he wasn’t getting enough oxygen. They were rushed to the hospital, and the doctors did all sorts of tests on the baby. It turned out that he had brain damage from the lack of oxygen.” Finley’s voice caught. She glanced at Raleigh.

He was on his phone, like Juliette next to him. “Yes!” Raleigh mumbled. “Take that, zombie.”

Finley looked back at Oliver, who just shook his head.

Moments later, Uncle Thomas and Nora reentered the room. “Grab your things, kids. I’m taking you to Gino’s to celebrate,” Uncle Thomas said.

They all stood, but Nora gestured to Finley without looking at her. “Finley, I

need to go back to the office to draft a memo about Thomas's case. Why don't you stay with Mariah in case she needs anything." It wasn't a question.

Finley nodded. Of all the things Nora could demand of her, at least she'd picked the one thing Finley wanted to do. "Of course, Nora."

"Come on, Aunt Nora," Oliver said. "Dad, Finley can come, right?"

"It's okay, Ollie. I don't mind," Finley said before Uncle Thomas was put on the spot. "In fact, I insist. I couldn't forgive myself if your mom needed something and I wasn't here to help."

"But Fin—"

"Oliver, it's settled," Uncle Thomas said. "Thank you for helping, Finley. We'll bring you back a pepperoni pizza with extra jalapeños. Now come on, kids, let's go."

The look Oliver gave her was a mix of anger and apology. As gratified as she was by his concern, though, she felt more comfortable staying. Aunt Mariah needed her, liked her, even. Sure, Uncle Thomas knew her favorite pizza and occasionally put his hand on her shoulder, but it was for the memory of her dad more than it was the reality of Finley. And Juliette—well, the girl hadn't murdered her in her sleep, at least.

Soon the celebration party had left, and Finley was downstairs in the kitchen making her godmother a sandwich. She could have heated something that the cook had left, but Finley needed Aunt Mariah to know how grateful she was for her. That she would do anything for her. Besides, with its gleaming stainless steel appliances and white cabinets, the kitchen felt out of place in the otherwise classic, elegant home. Finley knew the feeling.

"Sweetie," Aunt Mariah said, shuffling into the room in her dressing gown, "you know you don't need to make me a meal." She looked tired, even with her makeup and dark blonde hair done for a change.

Finley darted around the kitchen island to help her onto a stool, but her aunt waved her off. "Oh, Finley. I have fibromyalgia. I'm not a . . . oh, I don't know, a Fabergé egg."

Finley laughed, but she still eased her godmother down. "Great. Now I want scrambled eggs instead of a turkey sandwich," she teased. "Thanks a lot, Aunt Mariah."

“If it’s made from Fabergé eggs, I do, too,” Aunt Mariah said, laughing. Then she winced. “Sweetie, I know you’ve been waiting to see *The Snow Queen* with me, but this flare-up just won’t die down. Why don’t you and Ollie go see it without me, and when I’m feeling better, we’ll go to something else?”

Aunt Mariah’s chronic pain kept her from leaving the house for most outings, let alone for luxuries like plays or even pedicures. Yet, that pain hadn’t stopped her from being by Finley’s hospital bed two years ago. When Finley was laid up with a broken jaw and a side of trauma—courtesy of her mother—her godmother stayed by her for two days straight, holding her hand, watching TV with her and Liam, and texting her oldest son, Tate, to bring them chocolate shakes at all hours of the night. She drove Finley and Liam home from the hospital herself the day they moved in with the Bertrams. Finley had loved her ever since.

“No, I can wait,” Finley said, slicing Havarti cheese. “If we miss it this year, we’ll see it next year when Cadillac Theater puts it on again.” She smiled at her aunt. She’d wait for a decade’s worth of flare-ups to pass if it meant getting to see it with Aunt Mariah. “You just take it easy.”

She put the finishing touches on her aunt’s sandwich and slid it across the counter. “Thank you, dear.” Aunt Mariah smiled before adjusting herself carefully. “Oh, and I meant to ask you a favor. Meghan Grant loaned me that book last month, and I simply can’t make myself get interested in werewolves. Could you return it to her along with an excuse about, oh, how about you tell her that reading is giving me headaches?”

“And if she offers to give you the audiobook?”

“She wouldn’t do that, would she? You know what? Better to tell her I thought it was interesting, and let her read between the lines. Do you mind?”

Finley chuckled. “Not at all, Aunt Mariah.”

After finding the book in question, Finley walked into the grand foyer, where she pulled a jacket from the coat closet before opening the door and stepping out into the cool spring air.

She was down the Bertrams’ stairs and up the Grants’ in a matter of seconds. She rang the doorbell and waited outside of the neighbors’ stately brownstone, standing on the edges of her sandaled feet. Ten seconds went by. Twenty. She tried the doorbell again, and this time, she heard voices.

“You have to stop doing everything he says. He’s just using us, like he always does!” a girl’s muffled voice said.

“This isn’t like last time,” a boy was saying. Their voices were getting closer. “It’s not like he’s asking me to date some vapid costar or get a bunch of speeding tickets. He’s worried I’ll get cut from the play.”

“Like they’re going to cut you from the play,” the girl was saying, just as the door opened. “You’re Harlan Crawford.”

Harlan Crawford.

Harland Crawford—in all his dimpled glory—and his also-famous sister, Emma, were standing two feet from Finley.

She fell speechless.

“Can I help you?” Harlan asked, his light green eyes just as piercing as they were on Juliette’s posters. “Do you work for my aunt, or something?”

Finley blinked.

“Excuse my little brother,” the boy’s beautiful, smiling sister said. Her curled chestnut hair was pulled back into a low, wide ponytail, but a single, neon pink braid framed her face. She was nearly the same height as Harlan, who was short for a boy, even with his tall, beachy brown hair. Of course, they were both taller than Finley. “Were you looking for Mrs. Grant? She and our uncle are at dinner, but can we leave them a message, or ... ?”

“Um,” Finley said. She looked down at the book clenched in her hands and realized she was still wearing that ridiculous apron. She wanted to slink back home and curl up beneath her bed.

Then Harlan huffed. “Look at her, Emma. She probably doesn’t even speak English. *¿Tú hablas inglés?*” he asked, belaboring the words. Condescension oozed from his tone, snapping Finley from her daze.

“Yes, and Portuguese,” she answered coolly. Then she looked at Emma. “I’m Finley Price. I live next door with the Bertrams. My aunt asked me to return this book to, well, to your aunt.” She dropped it in Emma’s hands. “Could you thank her for Mariah Bertram?”

Emma hissed at Harlan and stepped in front of him. “You have to forgive my baby brother. He left his manners in Hollywood and, well, I clearly got all the

class in the family.” She took the book, then reached out a long, thin hand with a silver knuckle ring on her index finger. “Emma Crawford. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Harlan edged his sister out of the way and leaned toward Finley in the doorway. His grin was unapologetic. Predatory. “Yes, it’s a pleasure.”

Finley backed up at his nearness. Something about his smile made her want to run, to shrink down and not be seen. And yet ...

“So, it was Emma and ... I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name,” she said with a mix of nerves and spite.

His eyebrows jumped, and a small leer played on his face. He looked her over. “What rock have you been living under?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m Harlan Crawford.”

Finley shook his hand. “Nice to meet you. Are you new to the area?”

An incredulous Harlan looked at Emma, then back at Finley. But still, he smiled. Slyly. “Yes. You see, I’m an actor ...”

“Wait, weren’t you in that talking dog movie?”

Harlan’s expression turned dark, and Finley fought the urge to snort. Emma grabbed her brother’s arm and started pulling him back from the door. “Thanks, Finley. We’ll make sure our aunt gets the message. See you around.”

Emma closed the door, leaving Finley laughing and trembling. When she returned to the house, Aunt Maria had finished her sandwich.

“Did Meghan ask how I liked the book?”

Finley wiped off the counter, her hand still shaking. “She wasn’t home. Her niece and nephew are visiting, though.”

“Oh, that’s nice.”

Harlan’s grin flashed in Finley’s mind. *Hardly.*

CHAPTER THREE

~F~

When the Bertrams heard that Harlan and Emma Crawford were staying next door, a fervor overtook the home. Yes, they were wealthy and brushed up against the upper crust of Chicago society. But Hollywood society was a different matter altogether, particularly as they'd known Finley's dad before he got famous and her mom before she'd become Ms. Illinois. The Crawfords represented all the glitz and glamour that her dad had tried to shield his family from; the Bertrams didn't know better than to be drawn in.

While Uncle Thomas and Aunt Mariah wanted to send over a welcome basket, Nora wanted to invite them all over for dinner, along with Senator and Mrs. Rushworth, of course. Oliver had taken to looking out the windows for a glimpse of either of the Crawfords, and Finley thought he'd even made an effort with his hair.

Juliette bought a new wardrobe, got a facial and manicure, and had her stylist "reimagine" her whole look. Which, Finley thought, was almost exactly like her old look, but with more makeup and a lot more bounce, in both her hair and her bra. And, in typical Juliette fashion, she'd found an in with the Crawfords before they'd even unpacked their bags. She told her family all about it when she joined them in the breakfast nook on Saturday morning.

"I ran into Harlan outside the other night," Juliette said, as if she'd really just bumped into him rather than stalking him like prey. Finley had gotten home from work at the same time that Harlan's driver had pulled into their street that night, no doubt returning the boy from some sordid outing. Juliette had shoved past Finley without even a hello just as Harlan had stepped out of the car.

What a coincidence.

"Harley was so sweet," Juliette continued. "And so genuine, you know? Anyway, I invited them all to come to the street fair with us today. He said yes." She flipped her hair into Finley's face.

"You should have mentioned it before now, Jules," Oliver said, on Finley's other side.

"That would have been nice," his dad agreed, "but their company is welcome

all the same. That was very thoughtful of you, Juliette.”

Juliette smiled prettily. “Thank you, Daddy. I was just trying to act the way you and Mom have always taught me.”

“Laying it on thicker than the butter on Brando’s abs,” Oliver murmured on Finley’s other side.

She hid her smile behind her hair.

A few hours later, Finley waited on the sidewalk with Oliver and Raleigh while Juliette and her dad knocked on the Grants’ door. Oliver shifted from side to side.

“What’s going on with you?” Finley asked before gasping dramatically. “Why, Oliver Bertram, are you *starstruck*?”

“What? No,” he said, though his fidgeting told a different story. “It’s not like I’ve never met someone famous before.”

“Who is that?” Raleigh asked.

Finley opened her eyes wide at Oliver.

He gestured to Raleigh. “Uh, your dad, for starters.”

“Yeah,” Finley said, hoping Raleigh believed them. “It’s not like the Crawfords are a bigger deal than he is.”

Raleigh puffed his chest out like a peacock. “You know, you’re right.”

The door to the Grants’ home opened, and Mr. and Mrs. Grant came out with their niece and nephew, who were decked out in typical star camouflage—trendy hats, scarves, and big sunglasses. Before the door closed, two hulking bodyguards followed them out.

So much for discretion.

The group came down the stairs, and Juliette made introductions. She placed her hand on Harlan’s shoulder.

“Harley, Emma, this is my dad, Thomas Bertram, my brother, Oliver—”

Raleigh bumped Oliver and Finley out of the way, his arm extended. “I’m Juliette’s boyfriend, Raleigh. Raleigh *Rushworth*,” he said meaningfully, shaking their hands with his meaty paw.

Emma and Harlan met each other's eyes. "Oh. Wow," Emma said, the corners of her mouth twitching. Oliver groaned quietly beside Finley.

"Yeah, wow. It's just ... what an honor to meet you," Harlan said, looking up at the far bigger boy.

Raleigh gave him a kingly smile.

Juliette looked as if she wanted to shrink Raleigh to ant size and squash him underfoot. "Sorry," she told the Crawfords. "Raleigh's father is a senator—"

"Jules, they know. Duh," Raleigh said.

"Of course," Emma said, somehow sounding gracious and teasing at the same time. "Raleigh, it's good to meet you." Then she peeked past Raleigh right to Finley. "Hey, it's Finley, right? Good to see you again. And this is ... Oliver, was it?"

Finley didn't have to nod; Oliver answered for her. "Yeah, um, good to meet you. I forgot you met Fin already."

The group started walking, and Emma stayed with Oliver and, by extension, Finley.

The beautiful girl's smile was effortless. "I'm not surprised. I'm not actually sure she knows who we are beyond our relation to our aunt and uncle."

Oliver's eyebrows practically reached the sky. He gave Fin a curious glance before turning back to Emma. "Um ..."

"Unless ... were you messing with my brother?" Emma asked, narrowing her eyes at Finley.

Finley sank into the ground. "Guilty."

To her surprise, Emma laughed. "Ooh, I think I'm going to like you, Finley." She looked at Oliver. "And you, too. If you're lucky."

Oliver tripped. Emma laughed again and pulled him along. With a small frown, Finley followed.

The air was filled with the savory smells of salt and meat as they neared the bustling fair. Booths lined the crowded streets, selling everything from imported cheeses and wines to hipster t-shirts featuring bacon mustaches. Finley had somehow been pushed into the middle of their large group, with

Oliver and Emma to one side, and Harlan, Juliette, and Raleigh to her other. Uncle Thomas was just ahead with the Grants outside of a little tavern, where they were getting a couple of large charcuterie plates for everyone to share. The group stopped and waited for the adults.

“This is all so delightfully quaint,” Emma said, gesturing grandly around them. A fellow festival-goer bumped into her arm.

Quaint? Finley held back a smirk. *It’s an artisan food festival, not a quilt convention.*

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool,” Oliver said, snacking on a cheese plate, utterly oblivious to Emma’s implication. “But you should see the annual art fair. It’s amazing.”

“Is that what you want to be when you grow up? An artist?” Emma put her hand on Oliver’s arm.

“Not unless stick figure art is making a comeback,” Ollie joked, his cheeks looking hot despite the cool afternoon.

“Will you join the family business, then, and go to law school one day? Put the system on trial?” She teased and smiled at him easily, like they were old friends.

“My brother Tate is following that path, like my dad did. Everyone figures I will, too.”

“Why do I get the feeling that isn’t what you want to do? What does your heart of hearts yearn for, Oliver Bertram?”

“I don’t know. Isn’t that what college is for? Figuring yourself out? Maybe I want to study philosophy or archaeology.” He cleared his throat. “Or social work.”

Emma’s laugh tinkled. “Social work! I can see that now. You laboring in obscurity while your dad and older brother make headlines fighting evil and injustice. You couldn’t be content with that.” Her hazel eyes fixed on him, and suddenly her playful mood was gone. “Could you?”

“The world needs people who care about other people. I could be content with that.” Oliver looked down at his plate, and Finley glanced away before he caught her eavesdropping.

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